Stars hide your fires

by boleyn13

Summary

"I look at our son and I believe that Thor is going to be a good king. Then I see our youngest and I know that Loki would be brilliant."

Long live the King. But the King is old, his politics unpopular and shared by the Crown Prince. The whispers that demand his youngest son should sit on the throne turn into screams. As the nation descends into chaos America takes advantage of the opportunity to expand their influence on Asgard.

In the midst of everything are Thor and Loki, two princes who try to not end up as a pawn in someone else's game. Steve, an American DS agent struggling with culture shock and his strange feelings for his colleague James. Tony Stark, genius, billionaire, playboy philanthropist and weapons manufacturer just wants to get his business deal done and maybe see if his charms also work on real royalty
Hello everybody,

This is going to be a big piece. It's less a story about one character, but rather the story about an entire country and the people living in it.

There will be a lot of characters. Steve is the focus at the beginning, because he is an outsider, perfect for leading us through the story, but there will be a lot of other characters who share the spotlight.

Also there will be politics, people trying to put different people on the throne of a country to gain influence and power. Betrayal, back stabbing, but also romance

Culture clash will also be a theme since the Asgard I want to create is vastly different from most Western countries. Especially when it comes down to religion, politics and sexuality. Things Steve will have to deal with ;)

There, I hope you are along for the ride :D
Valhalla

“The Asgardian State is composed of several regions that have their own traditions, cultures and sometimes languages: Álheimr, Jotunheim, Mūspellsheimr, Svartálfar...”

Already overcome by frustration Steve lowered the pages and rolled his shoulders. He was tired from sitting all the time, he was longing for a long run or some exercise. The flight from New York to Valhalla had taken nine hours and since then Steve had spent most of his time in cars, only to end up in a waiting room. The procedure wasn’t new and he knew he was almost done, but it was the part of the job that he disliked the most.

Being the new guy. Sure, after one or two weeks routine would have already settled in, but until then Steve was always feeling out of his comfort zone. New colleagues, new boss, new country, new language. It wasn’t going to be like London, that was a certainty. Steve just wanted to be able to begin settling in, meet the ambassador and do his job. First the run though, his legs were itching to move.

Rolling his shoulders Steve tried to turn his attention back to the sheets of papers in his hands. The assignment had been a surprise, normally Steve had a long time to prepare and to get familiar with a new place. This time the call had come in the middle of the night and two days later Steve had been sitting in said plane.

A great honor, Agent Rogers

Yes, it was. Nevertheless Steve had no illusions about how he had ended up in the service of the American ambassador of Asgard. Liver cancer. Suddenly a position was vacant and here was Steve, thanks to the warm words of the London ambassador.

So now he was here, sitting in a comfy chair, waiting for the briefing of the new staff and trying to pass the time by learning one or two things about the country he was going to live in for the next couple of months or even years. First thing he had noticed – the language was going to cause him sleepless nights. How was he supposed to know how to pronounce any of these words?

Raising his head slightly Steve did a quick look around, nobody was paying attention to him. Still, Steve didn’t want to start mumbling seemingly random words. That was a very fast and very weird way to have everybody looking at you. Instead Steve silently mouthed the strange combination of letters that was ‘Svartálfar’ and tried to imagine what it might sound like.

That word already looking like it could break his tongue.

Svar…

Svarta…

“Svartálfar. It’s one of the Southern regions. Beautiful coast, but it’s almost never warm enough to go swimming. Except for a few days during summertime.”

Great, so Steve was completely unable of subtlety. At least somebody here had proved his point – that language was going to give him sleepless nights and then some more nightmares.

The face looking at him was something different though. Steve had scanned the room when he had entered it. 15 minutes ago the guy who was now sitting down next to him hadn’t been here before. People like this never went by unnoticed. It had been part of Steve’s training to instantly focus on
distinctive parts of people’s faces, so he could remember them easily.

Very low eyebrows. There was almost no distance between them and his eyes. They were so bright and clear that they seemed grey. Very thin lips, but nicely shaped. A very soft cleft in his chin.

The training wouldn’t have been necessary. It was the kind of face that burned itself into your memory, whether you wanted it or not. Steve didn’t mind, not with this one.

“Hi, I’m James Barnes. People call me Bucky.” The smile on his lips was open and perfectly matched his bright eyes.

Steve shook his hand, surprised by how easily the other one started the conversation. The thought crossed his mind that he was eager to talk to someone to find friends in this new place. “Steve Rogers. Nice to meet you. Svartálfar? It doesn’t sound very inviting.”

“Oh, it’s nice. The scenery is beautiful and in the cities they sell those great traditional pastries.”

Too much precise information for somebody who had just arrived in Valhalla. “How long have you been here?”

“16 months in the ambassador’s service. Just remembered that I worried about the language too.”

“And?”

His smile turned into a cheeky smirk and it was suddenly obvious why his face was so easy to remember. James was… pretty. It was the first word that came to Steve’s mind and he felt stupid for it. “Oh, Old Norse is a bitch to learn. Nothing funny about it.”

Just like expected. Steve sighed in defeat. “Great, I’m not too good at learning languages anyway.”

“Where was your last assignment?”

“London. Had no trouble learning the language there.”

James softly laughed in response and Steve liked the sound of it. Everything about that man seemed rather cheerful, but not annoyingly overexcited. Steve was fond of people who had a positive attitude, in his mind it made life a lot more comfortable. “Yeah, that’s a clear advantage. You’ve never been to Asgard before?”

“No and I’m afraid I don’t know a lot about it either. Except for… the usual, you know. The King and that everybody goes to Jotunheim if they want to go skiing. I guess they’re going to enlighten me somewhat at the briefing. What are you doing here if you’ve been working at the embassy for over a year?”

“The Chief of Security wants me take part in it. I’ll give you guys a tour around later on.”

That sounded good and Steve found himself already looking forward to this. “Great.”

“See you then.” Just as casually as he had sat down next to Steve James got up again and left. Not without sending Steve another smile.

It was reassuring to know that he’d be able to quickly make friends here. That wasn’t something Steve had ever had problems with, but he really despised not being friends with his colleagues.

After another five minutes of struggling to remember the major regions of Asgard the door was opened and a man indicated them to come in. “Gentlemen.”
Finally. Getting up brought some relief to his muscles, but when the 10 of them entered the adjoining room Steve got to sit down again. A regular conference room, a round table.

“You don’t mind, do you?” Despite asking the guy was already sitting down next to Steve.

“No, not at all. Go ahead.”

“Thanks. Sam Wilson, nice to meet you. You’re from Brooklyn?”

“What? The accent’s so thick?”

“Yeah, but I’ve spent so much time in France that I’m always happy to hear something that sounds American. What’s more American than a Brooklyn accent?” Sam had a somewhat crooked smile and Steve decided that he liked him. “France sounds nice though. It’s been years since I’ve been to Paris.”

Shrugging softly Sam leaned back in his chair. “It’s loud and unpleasant. At least after some time. I’m curious what this place is going to be like. I barely know anything about Asgard.”

“Me neither… guess we’re going to learn one or two things now.” Sam indicated him to look forward and Steve did just that. It was always easy to notice when a superior entered the room. It didn’t need a uniform, decorations or medals to show off your rang. The way they moved was very telling. No need to look around to scan the room, they knew what to expect. Quick steps, self-assured. The man was of rather small built, compared to the other agents in the room who were at their athletic peak. That didn’t mean that their superior wasn’t in shape, they all were. Stopping in front of the first row the agent turned to them and watched them with rather small but attentive eyes. His forehead was high, his hairline seemed to be decreasing.

Steve was trained to remember faces.

“Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Agent Coulson, I am the head of the security of the embassy. Since every single one of you has already spent time overseas I’m going to spare you the speech. Welcome to Asgard.”

His voice was firm and easy to listen to. “Like I’ve said this isn’t your first time, but don’t get overexcited and think you have an idea what your job here is going to be like. You don’t. Thanks to the recent changes in the diplomatic relations between the US and Asgard the ambassador will spend a lot of time at the royal court. Appointments, diners and playing golf with the ministers and with the king. Some of you have England on their resume, don’t let yourself be fooled into thinking that you know how to act around royalty. You don’t. Asgard is quite different from other European nations and most of it you’re going to have to figure out yourselves. For decades our relationship with Asgard has been… very cold to say it nicely. Now important deals are about to be made between our two nations and since some of you are going to be around the ambassador 24/7, you will know how to act at court and around the royal family.”

Inwardly Steve sighed. He was always polite and treated every person with respect, his parents had raised him like that. It felt weird to him that there should be a code on how to address certain people, just because they were born with higher social status. A minister or a politician had earned his position, they had worked for it. That was something different. All men were equal. Steve couldn’t agree more with the constitution.

“First things first.” Somebody had switched on the beamer in the room which was now projecting images on the wall behind Coulson. It showed the royal insignia of Asgard. Or was it the insignia of the royal family? Steve wasn’t sure. A golden tree, a huge red snake wrapped around it. Or a
dragon? “The Asgardian king is not the queen of England. If he wants to, he can shut down parliament and replace ministers any second. Very few of his powers are restricted, there are some things he needs the approval of the Lords for. What I am trying to tell you is – just because this is a 1st world country, don’t get fooled into thinking that the monarchy is just a pretty ornament like in Sweden, Denmark, Spain or Great Britain. The king is the government. Oh and another piece of advice, the Asgardians take the monarchy very seriously. So if you feel inclined to lecture a waiter or a bus driver on the advantages of democracy – don’t. They hate that.”

A soft chuckle went through the crowd, but then everybody when instantly silent again when Coulson’s face remained cold. “Let’s get to the point. His grace, King Odin IV. If you should ever be asked to address him personally, you call him ‘Your grace’. It’s quite simple. Asgardian traditions are not very up-tight about these kinds of situations. It’s always ‘Your grace’. Since that term is ridiculous complicated in Old Norse and almost impossible to pronounce for non-natives. They are perfectly fine with us using the English forms.”

A course on how to properly address a royal. Steve didn’t want to make any mistakes and cause a faux-pas, but he nevertheless thought that this was excessive. The picture on the wall wasn’t the first one he had seen of the King. A public figure, every now and then you saw him on the news. An old man, in his seventies probably. His face seemed to be rather kind.

“This important detail that the international press likes to get wrong. They address the King’s wife as Queen of Asgard. She has no actual political power, but of course she is an influential person. You don’t address her as queen though. Her actual title is Frigga, Duchess of Frensalir or ‘Your highness’. It’s unlikely though that you’ll have a lot to do with her. Let’s go to the main person. The crown prince.”

The image changed once again and Steve thought that they were all nicely done, but so clearly staged. Pictures for their Wikipedia entry. Always sitting. Not really smiling, but looking friendly. The men wearing uniforms, their chest decorated with medals and Steve wondered if the crown prince actually had a military rank.

“Like everybody who has read a newspaper or watched TV during the last couple of months you should know that it’s only a question of time until Thor takes over the throne. So naturally he will be very involved in the negotiation processes with the ambassador. His Highness, Thor, Duke of Bilskirnir, future King of Asgard. Until now his attitude has turned out to be very American friendly. We don’t want that to change.”

Steve glanced at Sam sitting next to him who attentively listened to Coulson’s words. Was all of this really necessary? It wasn’t like any of them would end up talking to the royal family, they were responsible for the ambassador’s safety.

“And… the Duke of Glæsisvellir.”

No, Steve wasn’t going to get a grasp of this language anytime soon. The sound which had just left Coulson’s mouth couldn’t be an actual word. Consonants and vowels weren’t supposed to be in that order. It didn’t sound bad, but so unfamiliar that it evoked distrust instead of interest.

The princes didn’t look much alike. One blonde, one dark-haired. One bulky, the other one rather slim. Steve couldn’t help but think that the younger one bore a stronger resemblance to their mother than the crown prince. Something about him just looked… softer. Although those cheekbones might cut paper.

“His Highness Loki, the Asgardian version of an enfant terrible. No parties, no scandals, but he openly opposes most of the King’s decision and politics. Nevertheless he is very involved in them
and he loves to give the ambassador a hard time. Most of you will get to know him, he likes to
interrupt very important meetings to ask the security staff about their opinion on the newest taxes.”
Coulson made a pause and his intonation caused Steve to think that maybe that wasn’t an
exaggeration.

“I know people who are constantly repeating themselves are incredibly annoying, but at this moment
we can’t afford any misunderstandings. There haven’t been any diplomatic relations between the
United States and Asgard in years. A highly advanced and powerful nation. Now we are negotiating
about free-trade agreements and arms deals. The president is very keen on these deals coming to
fruition. That is everything the ambassador is working on and therefore you are all part of it. Don’t
make us look stupid. This is Asgard. It’s no Christian nation, it’s no democracy. Those are the two
major things you have to keep in mind if you want to get around here. The people are nice and
polite, but the anti-American sentiment is still raging. Therefore it is all the more important to respect
the different traditions and values. You are all expected to study your portfolios, they will help you a
great deal.”

Steve glanced at the folder that was lying on the table in front of him. Probably more words and
places that he wasn’t able to pronounce. Not that he minded, life was all about learning new things,
right? Also Steve liked to understand the country he was working in, it helped him to do a better job.

Coulson made a little gesture to indicate somebody to come over and Steve spotted James. He wasn’t
smiling like before, but his face was still friendly. There was a likability to it that was impossible to
deny.

“Gentlemen, this Agent Barnes. He has been in the ambassador’s service for over 16 months and I
consider him my right-hand man. He’s going to give the tour, show you around and you listen
carefully to everything he’s going to tell you. Welcome to Asgard.”

Clearly not a fan of long speeches, but Steve couldn’t say that he minded. For some reason he was
looking forward to whatever James was going to tell them. Sometimes it didn’t matter so much what
a person was saying, but who was saying the words.

“Let’s get started.”

Chairs were being pushed back and they spent the next hour wandering around the embassy, getting
to know their new place of work. Steve tried to instantly remember as much information as possible,
he wanted to a be functioning member of this team the second he was doing his first service. James
was very calm and clear while he was explaining things, but until now it didn’t look like their daily
routine would be much different than from his job in London.

Judging from Coulson’s speech the embassy wasn’t going to give them the culture shock, but the rest
of this unknown nation and its outdated form of government. Despite his scepticism Steve couldn’t
deny a bit of curiosity.

Office rooms, gym, security system, the ambassador’s residence…

“That’s about it. Any more questions?” James looked around and Steve wanted to ask about the
court, how many times he had been there and if the walls were really made of gold. The words died
on his lips when James’s gaze landed on him and stayed there for over a second. Steve’s mind was
wiped clean and he was only able to grasp another thought when a guy to the left was speaking up
and James looked at him.

In that moment Steve noticed that his hair seemed a bit too long for somebody in their line of work.
James answered the question that Steve had never even heard.
“Great, now that we’re done with the check-list, I’d like to go over the more relaxed part of the evening. I know most of you have to get up early and only want to head to your quarters, but for those who want to get a taste of what your service is going to be like – me and two other agents are going to have a drink at a pub where we like to hang out after particularly long shifts. Feel free to come along.”

Steve’s first thought was that this could some kind of test. Who was ready to get drunk before their first day at work? Two seconds later he became aware of how ridiculous that was. They were all seasoned agents, it wasn’t the first tour overseas for anybody. Working for the American ambassador in Asgard was a prestige job. It was too late to test them now. What James proposed a bonding exercise. In their line of work it was absolutely necessary that you could trust your colleagues, they didn’t have to become your friends, but you needed to get along. It was vital.

As expected everybody came along and the pub turned out to be literally down the street. Introductions were made and then everybody was instantly completely lost when they took a look at the menu and it was written in something that could only be the scribbling of a child. Of course he knew that this was Old Norse, but that knowledge didn’t make it look any different.

“Uhm… does anybody has an idea which one of these signs means ‘beer’?”

Everybody smiled and nodded in agreement with Sam and James laughed, pulling up a chair and sitting down. It was impossible to notice that his laugh was also pretty and Steve couldn’t help thinking that he didn’t actually look like an agent. Sadly he had no idea where these stupid thoughts were coming from.

The waitress came to their table. A young, blonde girl, wearing a charming smile on her lips. James seemed to know her, Steve could tell by the way he was talking to her. It sounded so strange, sounds a human tongue shouldn’t be able to make and Steve wasn’t the only one who thought so. The second the waitress left their table one of them asked James “What the hell did you just say? It sounded like you were insulting her.”

“Just ordered a round of beer. Important detail, never drink Asgardian beer or wine. You won’t like it. Every bar or restaurant has another European brand. Stick with that if you don’t want to get poisoned.”

The beer turned out to be quite good, but Steve already knew that he would only be drinking an American brand while being in Asgard. Those were the little things that stopped him from missing home too much. At this moment it was impossible to know or to even guess how Asgard was going to turn out for him. Steve had enjoyed his time in London. The UK was definitely different from the US, but there was no language barrier and Steve as familiar with English culture like an average American would be. He knew nothing about Asgard and his attempts to prepare himself didn’t turn out to be very successful. Too much information and too little time. Also Steve couldn’t stop stumbling over every single syllable.

This pub didn’t look or feel too alien to him, but Steve thought that bars all over the world looked the same. As long as there was no prohibition. Looking around Steve had a good feeling about his new colleagues. The first impression was nice and Steve always trusted his gut feeling. The conversation was easy, but it consisted mostly of questions about life in Asgard. James did most of the talking, constantly wearing that easy smile on his lips which didn’t look forced and it didn’t become obnoxious.

“I’ve never been to a royal court and I get that the protocol is different, but not one person here is doing this job for the first time. We should be prepared, alright, but it’s not like we’re actually going to talk to a member of the court. That’s not our job. We’re not even in the same room when the
ambassador talks to a representative.” It was Sam who pointed that out and everybody nodded in agreement. Naturally, they had all ended up in their line of work because they were patriots, they wanted to serve their country and they believed in its values. Equality. Competition. Progress. Democracy.

Coulson had said it himself – Asgard wasn’t England. The King could do whatever he wanted and all of them were alienated by that. Sure, such a form of government could be expected from a poor African nation or a country in the Middle East. But right here in Northern Europe? A rich, industrial and clearly Western country? It was crazy.

James had a habit of rubbing with his thumb over the label of the bottle in his hand. Steve had been unable to not notice his long and slim fingers. Whenever he liked to draw people Steve had to find out that the hands were the hardest part. “You’d be surprised… The court is not as conservative as you might think. The King… perhaps, but due to his age the Crown Prince is getting more and more involved in politics and the Duke of Glæsisvellir…” James trailed off and the corners of his mouth twitched as if he was trying to suppress a smile. “… he likes to burst into meetings or leave the door wide open and when he talks, he talks loudly. Asgardian culture doesn’t appreciate secrets or whispered words. Also they are very informal with the staff and guests. Security personal doesn’t get ignored when they enter a room. They will know your name, they will ask you how you are doing. The Crown Prince likes to make friends with every person he meets and the Duke of Glæsisvellir wants to know everything about every person that hears what he says… So yes, Agent Coulson has good reason to emphasise how important our relations to the Royal family are. They will talk to you, don’t be surprised when that happens.”

James had the experience, but Steve would still be surprised if a member of the Royal family would even look into his direction.

A guy to his right chuckled lightly. “As long as the prince is not getting too friendly with me I don’t mind being greeted personally.”

Steve knew how to keep his reactions small and barely visible, but inwardly he gasped. The comment made him instantly feel uncomfortable and he thought it was way out of line to say something like that. Technically James didn’t outrank them, but he had been working here for almost over two years and Coulson had referred to him as his right-hand man. No tension whatsoever between somebody connected to the embassy and the Asgardian government. The ambassador clearly wouldn’t appreciate such comments, even less so in a public space. Insinuating that a prince was gay on your very first day couldn’t be a good idea. That was just asking for trouble and Steve was shifting in his seat, wishing that comment had never been made.

Taken aback Steve noticed how James laughed amusedly and shrugged. “The rumors about Thor being in a relationship won’t go away, so his little brother just became the most wanted bachelor in this country. I doubt that he is going to hit on the security personal.”

They were chuckling about it and Steve was confused. Shouldn’t this be a big thing? Feeling unsure Steve leaned over to Sam who was sitting next to him, whispering softly “Does that mean the prince is queer?”

“You’re not reading the tabloids?”

No, that was something Steve had never done and he wouldn’t start doing that any time soon. It felt strange to him that such a big issue was discussed in such a casual manner. For the Royal family this had to be some kind of scandal. Monarchies weren’t known to be very progressive.

“Gentlemen, it’s getting late and you have an important day ahead of you. We should get going.”
A simple statement and everybody was getting up from their chairs. Outside of the pub Steve sucked in the cool night air and it smelled new, unknown but it was a lovely night and the next morning would be very interesting.

“So, was hearing the actual language encouraging or disheartening?”

James was walking next to him and thanks to the soft streetlights Steve could make out his constant smile. “It didn’t really sound like a language… Probably because I’m not used to it. I guess I’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

“There is more than just the language strangers have to get used to in Asgard.” The smile turned into a more serious expression and Steve was sad to see it go. It was sweet and so easy to look at. “I noticed you feeling uncomfortable while we were talking about the Duke of Glæsisvellir.”

Avoiding James’ gaze Steve looked straight ahead. “I have no fondness for gossip, that’s all.”

“I see, alright… because Agent Coulson was right when he said that Asgard is different. Feeling uncomfortable with the Duke’s preferences would make your stay here… very awkward. The Duke preferring men over women is not a big deal. It is no small deal either. It’s not a thing. Nothing any Asgardian would ever have a conversation about like we did. I guess you’ll see soon enough.” Then the smile was back before James sped up his steps and Steve fell behind.

For some reason that Steve couldn’t name his heart was beating slightly faster than it should. It was a piece of advice and Steve would gladly take it. Whatever it was supposed to mean. Like James had said – Steve would probably see soon enough.
Day two

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Steve is still trying to settle in and we're getting closer to meet the royal family

Have fun and tell me what you think, feedback is always amazing :)

The first morning Steve woke up in Asgard, he was full of expectations and anticipation. Steve felt always better when he was working, when there was a task for him. Luckily today there would be an entire list of points for him to tick off. A lot of driving around across Valhalla, getting familiar with the geography, visiting the places where the ambassador frequently had meetings. Steve and his colleagues had to know their way around the city, main routes, shortcuts and it was important to get familiar with their surroundings. After all it was their job to instantly know when something was off. This was an important part of their work and it also allowed him to contemplate his new home.

Steve definitely needed to find a route for his daily run, until then he would hit the gym of the Marine House. He was actually surprised when he wasn’t the first one here. Sam was already on the treadmill, giving a little sign with his hand when he noticed Steve entering the room. “Morning. Did I beat you to it?”

“Good morning. I’m not used to not being the first one in the gym.”

“Yeah? You sound a little bit competitive, Rogers. You wanna have a little race?” Sam’s smirk was challenging and Steve knew that they were going to get along great.

“Sure, another time. Outside. Not on the treadmill. You slept alright?” Steve was stepping on the treadmill next to Sam, falling into an easy rhythm.

“Yes, although it took a while until I fell asleep. Jetlag. It’s always the same. How about you?”

Steve shrugged softly. “Kind of the same, but not because of the jetlag. That has never been a problem for me. I was just wondering what today was going to be like. I’m curious about the town.”

Sam glanced at him, smiling cheekily. “Not about the ambassador?”

“Sure, but… one person is not going to be as interesting as an entire country. Especially when you get told over and over again that it’s so completely different and not what we're used to.”

“Right… To be honest, I thought that was a little bit weird. Sure, this is about diplomacy and the ambassador has to know how to deal with a foreign culture, but that’s not our job. We’re there to make sure nobody gets shot. Is it really so important that I know the exact wording of every title of every member of the Royal family?”

Steve was tempted to agree.

“Well, James said that they might actually end up talking to us… who knows. I can’t imagine it either, but we’ll see. I’m more interested in the actual job and today’s the first day.”
They finished their work-out together and twenty minutes later the tour around the city began. It was beautiful. Steve had been in Scandinavia before, but the facades of the buildings didn’t remind him of Oslo. The mix between modern and classic seemed to mirror London and was strikingly elegant. Clean streets, a lot of trees and parks. Steve especially liked the black brick houses. Judging by their style they had to be at least 100 years old and were still striking.

The first and most important route to cover was the one to the Royal Palace which took Steve’s breath away for a second. One moment later he began to instantly despise it. They didn’t get past the huge and elegant grey fence, but it revealed a gorgeous and monumental façade. Steve was tempted to cover his eyes with one hand. The palace was huge, a gathering of towers which were all reaching for the sky. A central keep with four immense towers at its corners. The wall surrounding it featured four more towers, smaller but still massive. Not really a defence structure but built to impress. It did impress Steve with its decadence that was almost an attack on his senses. The walls seemed to be made of gold and the reflection of the morning sun made the palace shine like a jewel.

Sure, that palace had probably been built hundreds of years ago, but it was still obvious where all the money to create it had come from. To Steve it wasn’t a sign of royal power, but of wasting tax money. Right, they weren’t supposed to criticise the monarchy.

Every other place they checked out after the palace didn’t feel like something special and yet Steve was admiring the city itself. Clearly European and extraordinary at the same time.

They returned to the embassy to have lunch and Steve was already going over his notes and a map of the city. Studying paths and street names.

“How are you enjoying the tour?”

Startled Steve looked up at James who sat down at their table next to Sam. “It’s a beautiful place, but the streets in the inner city are a nightmare.”

“Absolutely. You should take a walk sometime. It helps you to find your way around that labyrinth and it’s gorgeous. Anyway… I know Steve doesn’t like gossip, but I thought I’ll show you the kind of gossip that’s going to be part of your job.” James placed a Stark tablet on the table. It showed a news article and to Steve’s great relief it was written in English. Two pictures. A portrait of the crown prince. A young, beautiful woman with long brown hair.

_Crown Prince Thor’s girlfriend Jane Foster in Valhalla – possible engagement?_

“Still looks like complete gossip to me.” Steve shrugged disinterested and Sam cocked his head to get a better look at the picture. “They look like a cute couple to me. Foster? Doesn’t sound very… Old Norse to me. What’s the surname of the Royal Family anyway?”

“Búrison. You’re right, Foster is American.”

Okay, now Steve was beginning to understand. “The future King of a European nation is dating an American? I know I don’t watch TMZ, but shouldn’t this be all over the news?”

Leaning back in his chair James shook his head. “They are hardly any pictures of them and since Asgard and the United States didn’t have any business or trading relations for years… Most Americans don’t know anything about Asgard and this relationship has never been confirmed. There’s still no photograph of them together. She was seen yesterday at the airport. That’s all there is and yet the ambassador is only going to read that article.”

Sam laughed softly. “Because they’re dating?”
“She is an American citizen. We’re hoping that she might inspire the Crown Prince to act in America’s interest. Maybe even an American King’s consort. A dream come true.” James sighed dramatically before taking a sip from his coffee. “Just thought I should show you. There’s always going to be gossip.”

Nodding softly Steve studied the face of the young woman. She was indeed pretty, they would make a quite attractive couple. “So are they together?”

“I don’t know… I think so, but I don’t know. They are very discreet about it.” Eventually James shrugged and changed the topic. “Anyway… I’m going for a run tonight. You wanna join me? I could show you the ambassador’s preferred route and the area around the embassy. You’re in?”

This was perfect, Steve would have wanted to check out the neighbourhood anyway and doing it with somebody who already knew his way around made much more sense. Also spending time with James seemed like something Steve would enjoy. “I’d like that.”

There was this smile again, reaching James’ eyes and Steve thought that it was lovely. “Great.” Expectantly James turned to Sam who shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

“Cool. I’ll see you when you’re off the clock.”

Grabbing the tablet James got up and left their table, not without granting them another smile.

“I’m not sure what to make of him.” Sam pointed out the second James was out of earshot and his downright critical expression was taking Steve aback. “Why? I think he’s very nice.”

Sam shrugged once again and now it was impossible for Steve to not notice his scepticism. “I dunno. He remembers me of some kids I met in school, teacher’s pets. Also, his hair is longer than the code allows.”

That wasn’t a statement to argue about since Steve had already had the same thought. “Yeah, but he knows his way around and is very helpful. You probably just need to get to know him better.”

In response Sam let out a ‘hmm’ sound that seemed to be a mix between ‘I don’t think so’ and ‘I don’t care. It rubbed Steve the wrong way and he couldn’t quite tell why. Perhaps because he had taken an instant liking to James that he wasn’t able to explain. Why should he? Sympathy wasn’t something you could control or influence. James was a sweet person and Steve was surprised that Sam didn’t share that sentiment. Then again, not everybody could instantly get along.

“Oh fuck, my team lost!”

Sam theatrically sighed while staring at his phone and Steve had to smile at that. Sports were a rather uncomplicated thing to talk about.

The day continued like before, getting familiar with the daily routes, learning the names of important people and places and their way around the embassy. It was important for his work, so Steve was attentive and eager to find out everything that he needed to know. Nevertheless he was looking forward to his after-work hours, so he could spend it with James. And Sam of course.

Eventually the sun was already starting to go down and James was stretching his muscles when they met up in front of the embassy. To go on an actual run felt incredibly good and James gladly told them about every little shop, bar or restaurant that they came across. It was blatantly obvious that the embassy was situated in a very elegant, posh part of the town. Which made Steve very curious about other parts of the city.
“Right over there, that’s one of the best places in Valhalla. It’s almost impossible to get a decent burger in this country. You want to grab some food after we’re done?”

Steve was instantly game, but Sam shook his head. “I think I’ll sit this one out. Maybe another time.”

It was half an hour later that James and him were sitting in a little restaurant that really did remind him of home. It felt American and thank god, the menu was in English. Over its edge Steve watched James who was half lying on his chair, studying his own menu. His hair wasn’t long enough to fall into his eyes, but there was no way it was within the rules. Normally Steve didn’t like that kind of thing, but on James it didn’t look too bad.

“Do I have something on my face?”

Feeling caught Steve quickly shook his head, but he felt his cheeks heating up and felt utterly ridiculous. He hadn’t blushed since middle school and it wasn’t like he was doing anything wrong. “Sorry, I was merely wondering about your hair.”

“What about it?”

“It’s… long.” Shouldn’t that be obvious?

Laughing softly James shrugged. “Guess that’s one of the advantages of serving in Asgard. You can grow your hair out.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s a cultural thing.” Putting the menu down James let his fingers run through his hair and Steve wondered what it would feel like. “I’ve read up on it once, I can’t remember the entire thing, but it has to do with nobility. Noble men always wore their hair long. Look around on the street most men don’t have a very short haircut. So the ambassador pretty much allowed the staff to grow their hair out if they wanted to. Don’t look at me like that, I know it’s weird, but I like my hair like that.”

His laugh was sweet and distracted Steve from how hilarious and stupid this little story sounded. Now that he thought about it, both of the princes had longer hair. Another thing that Steve couldn’t wrap his head around. The monarchy having an actual impact on people’s haircuts. Too weird.

“What can I get you?” The waitress seemed to come out of nowhere, but to Steve’s immense relief she was talking in English.

They both ordered their burgers and Steve wanted to change the subject. “So… you’ve been here for 16 months… how long do you plan on staying?”

“I don’t have any plans to apply for a transfer. I’m really content to be here. The people are nice, I like Asgardian food. The weather is quite nice most of the time. I get along with the ambassador and every once in a while I get to play tennis against a prince. You don’t get that everywhere.”

“You play tennis with one of the princes?”

“Only two times. Now he’s kind of pissed that I totally destroyed him.”

“Probably used to people letting him win?”

Making a vague gesture James shook his head. “Oh, he hates that. He’s pretty good actually, but I’m really, really good.”
Suddenly his grin was so cocky and charming at the same time that Steve couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, if you say so. I’m still kind of confused that you play tennis with one of the princes.”

“Like I said… the court is not as formal as you might think. We talked, I mentioned that Rafael Nadal has nothing on me and he took me up on it. That’s all.”

For one second Steve wondered if that story might be made up, but he couldn’t imagine James being the type of guy to invent stories to make himself interesting. It would be so easy to find out that he had been lying. And why should he even try to impress Steve in any kind of way.

“I see… You’re not from New York, right? Sometimes you sound like it, but then again… I can’t put your accent anywhere.”

“That happens all the time. I was born in New York, but my dad got a job in Russia and we moved there when I was 8 years old. I was already 15 when we came back, so that’s probably where the accent went…” Perhaps it was Steve’s imagination, but he thought that James was now looking a bit sheepish and it was somewhat endearing.

Living aboard was something that Steve enjoyed or he wouldn’t have chosen this way to serve his country. But as a teenager? “Growing up in Russia? That must have been…” Steve hesitated and chose the word “different”.

“That’s one way to describe it. I like it, but I was also happy to go back home. I guess I still like to live in different places. Right now I like living here. It’s another kind of different. A good kind.” Judging by the smile on his lips James meant every word that he said, making Steve even more curious what his stay here would be like.

They fell silent for a moment and it didn’t feel awkward, there was no instant urge to cast the silence away with some silly comment. It didn’t last anyway. Steve’s phone, lying on the table, came to life with soft vibrations and Steve’s heart seemed to leap into his throat when the name ‘Peggy’ appeared on the screen.

Quickly grabbing the phone Steve made a helpless gesture. “I gotta…”

“Sure, go ahead.” Leaning back in his chair James indicated Steve to leave if he wanted to. The last thing Steve wanted to do was having this conversation in front of James. Getting up to his feet Steve made his way through the restaurant which suddenly seemed to terribly loud, too loud. Sliding out of the main door Steve took the call, releasing a long, deep breath. “Peggy?”

“Hello Steve.” Her voice still had that instantly soothing effect on him. Soft and caring. “I just wanted to know how your first day went down. You didn’t call so…”

She left the sentence open, waiting for him to say something and Steve was already feeling out of his depth. “I thought you didn’t want me to call.”

“Why wouldn’t I want that? I always want to know how you are doing…”

Of course and Steve knew that very well, but he had figured that it would be easier to get some distance between the two of them. With Peggy in London and him in Valhalla, distance shouldn’t have been the problem. Until she called…

“I’m fine. Long flight, then directly to the embassy. We got a crash course on how not to screw up around royalty… I got told again and again that Asgard isn’t England.” Steve regretted telling her this, because how could Asgard end up being like England? Downright impossible and they both knew that.
“I see… You’ll get by, you always do.”

“Peggy, I don’t worry about getting by. This is my job and I’m good at my job. That has never been a problem. I appreciate you calling to make sure that I’m fine, but don’t say that you worry about me. You know there is no reason to.” It wasn’t like Steve wasn’t glad that she had called, but it would be nice if Peggy could just admit that she wanted to talk to him.

There didn’t have to be a reason.

Her laugh was warm and Steve knew her well enough to tell that she felt a little embarrassed. “You are right, there is no reason to worry about you. Maybe I just wanted to check up on you. I’m still getting used to you not being here. I’m not trying to make you feel bad, I swear… I guess I shouldn’t have called.”

“No. No, I’m glad to hear from you. Everything’s new and it’s… nice to hear a familiar voice.” Steve sighed, knowing very well that this wasn’t a good idea. “How are you doing?”

“Good, thank you. Still trying to turn at least one private into a useful soldier. Same old, same old. You’ve met the King yet?”

“No, strangely enough he didn’t come to pick me up at the airport.”

“Now that’s just… neglectful. The Queen would have never made that kind of mistake.”

Steve laughed in response, but he could hear that it only sounded half-hearted. There was no point in having this conversation. The second it would be over Steve would have to ponder about what had been said, what hadn’t been said and what he probably should have said. They had been here before and Steve had wanted to leave this behind in England. “Listen, Peggy… I’m actually out with one of my colleagues and I really have to get back, so…”

Now it was him who didn’t finish his sentences, because it was so much easier to make her end the call instead of telling her that he didn’t want to keep talking.

“Oh, right. Sorry… I didn’t want to bother you. I guess we’ll talk some other time?”

Some other time was vague enough for Steve and he agreed despite himself. “Sure. I’ll call you back. Take care.”

“You too, Steve.”

Hanging up Steve closed his eyes for a second and he felt the urge instantly go home and slip beneath the covers of his bed. A childish reaction and nothing that Steve would ever do, but it was a tempting thought.

James was still waiting for him and they hadn’t even had their burgers yet. Turning off his phone Steve slipped it into the pocket of his jeans and walked back into the restaurant. Making his way towards their table Steve almost bumped into a young woman who was just getting up from her chair.

One phone call and Steve wasn’t able anymore to look where he was going?

“Sorry.” He shot the woman an apologetic glance and she smiled at him, muttering words that Steve didn’t understand. Back at their table Steve sat down, feeling James’ questioning gaze on him. “Sorry, my phone stays switched off now.”
“Don’t worry, I didn’t mind.” James trailed off and for a moment Steve thought that he would remained silent. Not quite. “Your girlfriend?”

Steve could have had so many different reactions to that question, but he eventually decided to laugh although it didn’t sound happy nor amused. “No… that’s a long story and needlessly complicated. I wouldn’t be able to explain it, because I don’t understand it myself.”

That should have been it. Against Steve’s expectations James kept looking expectantly at him, his soft eyes encouraging him to talk. Steve didn’t want to tell a stranger about Peggy and him and at the same time he felt a desire to explain the situation to James. Was he even a stranger?

“She is a friend and at some time it wasn’t sure if… we should stay just friends, but that was months ago. She called to make sure I was fine. New assignment and all…” At the moment Steve didn’t feel up to tell any more than that and James seemed content, nodding softly. “I see… I guess I went through something similar when…”

Looking up James abruptly stopped and Steve wanted to ask him to continue when he realised that the waitress was back with their orders. After they began eating James commented on how good his Burger was and didn’t bother to elaborate on what he had said earlier. Although Steve was curious he decided against asking any further.

James hadn’t exaggerated, the burgers were tasty and they reminded Steve of food that he might get at home. The rest of their dinner turned out rather nice, they were talking about James’ years in Russia, Steve’s time in London and how both of them had a soft spot for movies from the 40ies and 50ies. “This is awesome. I’ve never met anybody who didn’t tell me that I either had no taste or that I was a film snob.”

“Are you kidding? Citizen Kane, Casablanca, It’s a wonderful life… people can gladly call me a snob, that just means that I have good taste. Back then people still had to know how to act unlike today…” James rolled his eyes and it caused Steve to smile. “That’s so true… maybe sometime we could…” Steve stopped himself from actually voicing the proposal. It sounded too weird in his head. Suggesting they could meet up and watch a movie together? That was something you’d do with a girl.

Luckily James didn’t ask what he had meant and they finished their dinner talking about how ridiculous today’s action films were. Eventually it was getting late and they were asking for their check. “Thanks for showing me this place. If I ever get homesick, I know where I’ll have to hang out.”

“Yeah, it’s not like you have many options. Asgard really isn’t a prime example of Americanisation… 5 million people live in this city and there is one single McDonald’s… and last time I checked business wasn’t going so well…”

Obviously there was still a lot Steve had to find out about Asgard. Just how much he still needed to get used to Steve had to find out 30 seconds later when they got up and made their way towards the exit. Passing the table right next to them Steve stopped, feeling slightly bewildered. The young woman who he had nearly bumped into was still here, holding hands and locking lips with the person sitting right next to her. Another woman.

It wasn’t like Steve had never seen a gay couple, but he definitely wasn’t used to this public display of affection. Completely unbothered and nobody but Steve seemed to take notice. A hand was put between his shoulder blades and gently pushed, while Steve could hear James whispering into his ear “You are staring.”
For the second time Steve felt the blood rushing to his cheeks and he heard James chuckling. Fortunately life slipped back into Steve’s body at that exact moment and he continued to head towards the door, ignoring the shivers that were running down his spine.

James easily caught up with him, still snickering and Steve was torn between telling him to cut it out and wanting to find a hole he could crawl into and die. “Are there no lesbians in Brooklyn?”

“Sure… but it’s not West Hollywood. I guess there wasn’t a lot of… gay PDA?” That had to be the stupidest thing Steve had ever said and James still wasn’t able to stop chuckling. Well, at least he was amused and didn’t think that Steve was some thick-headed, narrow-minded idiot.

“Well… that’s about to change.” James patted him on the shoulder, making Steve realise that the shivers had turned into goose bumps. What a way to make a fool out of himself. Hopefully James hadn’t noticed.

Steve was still mentally scolding himself when he was lying in his bed and felt way too awake to close his eyes. The situation resulted in him watching the news. Thankfully there was a channel that delivered Asgardian news in English or Steve would have been completely lost. The news presenter was talking about some tragic car accident that had happened this afternoon. His English sounded flawless but kind of British, making Steve think of the waitress in the American themed restaurant. Absently Steve looked at the side bar on the screen which probably featured some key words describing topics that hadn’t been presented yet.

Tony Stark – visit rescheduled

Heldúrson receives literature award

New protests in Jotunheim

Investigation against CEO of Karlsson industries

Uninterested Steve switched off the TV, rolled over and closed his eyes. Tomorrow he’d meet the ambassador, time to stop making a fool out of himself.
Hello everybody,

Argh, I think I've had a chapter with no comment :( You guys still interested?

This time we're visiting parts of the royal family for the first time.

Some vocabulary to make things easier:

Duke of Bilskirnir = title of the Asgardian crown prince (Thor)

Duke of Glæsisvellir = title of the second son of the king (Loki)

Útgarðar = capital of Jotunheim

The second the maid put the newspaper on the tablet next to the coffee and the breakfast, she knew that it was going to be a very long day. A fleeting moment she thought about turning it around, so the King wouldn’t instantly see the headlines, but what was the use?

After the first knocking she received permission to enter the salon. It was the same sight as every morning, the king was standing by the window, enjoying the view over the garden while the Duchess was resting in a chair, reading a book. The king only turned around when he heard the tablet being placed on the table. “Thank you, Asta.”

“Your grace.” Asta bowed her head before leaving the room, the Duchess smiling warmly at her.

Odin slowly made his way to the table, the picture on the front page of the newspaper was already greeting him. Displeased he sat down but refused to instantly reach out for paper, instead he poured two cups of coffee. One without milk that he picked up and carried over to his wife. “Frigga.”

Looking back up from her book Frigga smiled gratefully and took the cup. “Thank you. It’s too early this morning to be already frowning.”

“It’s on the front page of the Morgenrot. It seems our most respected newspaper has turned into a gossip rag.”

Another one of these moments when Odin almost painfully missed the times when no reporter would not have published one single word about a member of his family without knowing 100 percent that the story was true. Or maybe that wasn’t what put Odin in a sour mood this early. No father could be happy to read about something in the newspaper that his son should have told him personally.

“Will you join me at the table?”

Putting her book away Frigga slowly nodded and stood up without any haste. Odin was torn between not wanting to read the article at all and rushing back to the table to devour it. Taking his time Odin took a sip from his coffee, then reached for a slice of bread before unfolding the newspaper. He was only halfway through the article when Frigga spoke up. “So?”
Her interest was reassuring him. Sometimes he feared he was getting paranoid with age. “Nothing new. Speculation. At least it’s written in a very neutral way, it’s made clear that they don’t know anything for sure… but of course, they’re mentioning a possible engagement.”

“Who’s the author?”

“Andulrson.”

“That’s good. He is very fair. He’s the one we’d want to write an article about this subject.”

“I would prefer it if nobody wrote about it…” Uttering an almost silent sigh Odin put the newspaper down and took a bite from the bread. At this time other things should captivate his attention. Thor had never given him reason to worry, not once and Odin refused to believe that this shouldn’t be the case now. Frigga didn’t seem to be upset, she was eating her breakfast with her usual appetite and grace. Nothing could startle her and Odin was grateful for a constant source of peace and advice in his life. “What do you think? Is it true? Is our son planning an engagement?”

“Isn’t that a question that we should ask Thor?” Frigga was smiling and Odin couldn’t quite share the sentiment.

“It can’t be the case. We haven’t met this woman. No official, no unofficial introduction.”

“You cannot say that Thor didn’t make an attempt. I remember him proposing to invite her to dine with us.” Frigga pointed that out while slightly raising one eyebrow like she always did when correcting Thor.

“Yes, to the court. After knowing her for two months. It was out of the question and he was well aware of that. Inviting her would have made the relationship official and it was way too soon to do that. Giving Thor’s record there was no way to know if the relationship would last longer than summertime.”

Frigga’s chuckle gave away her amusement. “He is still seeing her and now she is in Asgard. I do believe that we might a good reason to assume that things are serious.”

Odin has been ruling this for over 40 years, he could put two and two together, if he had to, but that didn’t mean that he had to like it. Putting down the slice of bread Odin grumbled. “Thor can’t be serious. She is an American.”

Mirroring his actions Frigga placed her cup back on the table, not shying away from putting up a counter-argument. Her displeasure was obvious and not a surprise, Odin was well aware of her political opinions. “Isn’t the main point of your new policy to overcome the difference between our two nations? Why is her nationality of any importance if Thor has fallen for a certain lady?”

“Frigga, I don’t appreciate it when people ask questions that they already know the answer to. I don’t like it when my ministers do that and I like it even less when you do it.”

“Oh, I may know what you think is the answer and I want you to answer the question, so you say it out loud and you realise that it doesn’t make much sense.” Frigga was smiling, obviously thinking like a mother in that matter and not like a member of the family that was reigning this country.

Fine, Odin was willing to play along. “An Asgardian King cannot have a consort who isn’t Asgardian.”

“I can’t remember the passage in the law of succession that says that, Odin. Sure, it’s unorthodox, but I fail to see the problem.”
Again, thinking like a mother. Odin didn’t believe that she didn’t see the real issue, his wife had merely decided to completely dismiss it. “In 500 years there hasn’t been one single king who wasn’t had an Asgardian consort. You are right, it is no written law, but it is tradition and tradition sometimes weighs even heavier than law. Don’t you agree that it would weaken Thor’s position if he chose a Midgardian as his spouse?”

Eventually Frigga gave up on her almost playful mood and her lips formed a thin line. Now she was looking just as displeased as Odin was feeling. “I don’t think the origin of his wife would weaken any king’s position, but I admit that people could be… upset. Which they shouldn’t be. Thor is crown prince of Asgard, that shouldn’t keep him from marrying whoever he wants to marry…”

A pretty little thought but entirely unrealistic. Their position in the history of Europe was one of a kind. Not a single king had married somebody who wasn’t of Asgardian offspring. Unlike the great houses of Austria, France or Spain Asgard had never used marriage as a way to enlarge its realm. Admittedly, not quite voluntarily.

Over hundreds of years the Asgardian people had never seen somebody at the court who wasn’t born within Asgardian borders. Odin knew that they didn’t like foreigners in a position of power and neither did he. Maybe, with a lot of goodwill, they would be ready to accept a Danish or Norwegian consort, but Odin highly doubted it.

An American? Unthinkable…

A king with no support from the public wasn’t able to support his own position for very long. Thor would manipulate his own rise to the throne.

“An American… with no knowledge of our culture or traditions… who doesn’t speak our language… the people wouldn’t love her. They are already critical of the new policies, an American at the court would probably erase all the support we’ve gathered for them.”

“Thor is going to rule Asgard. Not tomorrow, not next week. It’s an enormous responsibility. He should be free to marry whoever he wants to. May I add… we are only speculating. We don’t know if Thor intends to propose to her. You complain about gossip and yet we’re both guilty of it.”

Now another reconciling smile and Odin had to admit that his wife was right. There was only one way to find out what was going on. Grabbing the cell phone lying on the table Odin pressed the number 1.

“Your grace.”

“Heimdall, would you please let the crown prince know that his parents are expecting him for lunch.”

“I am sorry, your grace, but the Duke of Bilskimir’s schedule is very tight today. He visits his foundation for homeless children and is having lunch with the associates. Afterwards he has several other appointments in the city.”

Several other appointments. Way too vague. Heimdall was explicitly trying not to say anything specific which meant that Thor was meeting this woman. The appointment with the foundation was too important, Odin wasn’t going to intervene with Thor’s schedule. Nevertheless there was no way he was going to wait until late afternoon to gather more information. “Then I will have to talk with the one who knows everything.”

Odin could hear Frigga chuckling.
“Has the Duke of Glæsisvellir returned from his fencing lesson yet?”

“Yes, he is just heading back to his chambers.”

“Excellent. Please, let him know that his parents want to see him.”

“I will instantly do so, your grace.”

“Thank you, Heimdall.”

Hanging up Odin picked back up his slice of bread, trying not to laugh at Frigga’s amused and definitely content expression. They continued the breakfast in silence until the soft knock at the door, about five minutes later. “Go ahead, enter.”

“Now what is so important that I couldn’t even shower after my training?” Loki was still wearing his entire fencing gear, except for his mask and at least he had left the épée behind.

“You parents wish to share a meal with you. Sit down. Would you like a cup of coffee?” No need to immediately give everything away and Loki already knew what was going on anyway. “Good that I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

Pulling up a chair Loki sat down between them, quickly kissing his mother on the cheek. “Good morning, mother.”

“Good morning, Loki. Should we call the maid to bring you another cover?”

“Thank you, I’m perfectly happy with a croissant.” Saying that Loki was already reaching out for said pastry. Odin could see how his eyes shortly lingered on the newspaper lying on the table. Now they were all on the same page. “Loki, I want to hear your opinion on something.”

“I wonder what that might be.” Showing off his smirk Loki took a big bite from his croissant, looking expectantly at his father.

His son’s amusement could be taken for granted, no matter what they were talking about. “The young woman your brother is seeing… what do you think of her?”

Leaning back Loki met his gaze. “Jane… she is very nice.”

“I would have gone for charming, but she is too clumsy for that. Sweet. A sweet young lady. As much as I am flattered that you want to hear my opinion, why don’t you meet her yourself if you want to find out what she is like?”

“Loki makes a very good point.” Frigga agreed with him and Odin was well aware that this meeting would probably happen very soon. Nonetheless Odin wanted to have this conversation with Loki first. He was the person Thor would discuss these things with and Loki was excellent at reading people. Looking right through them, analysing their intentions.

“You know why we haven’t met her yet. A meeting would have made the liaison official in the eyes of the public. Giving Thor’s history in romantic affairs you can’t fault me for waiting a few months before taking this relationship seriously. You’ve met her, so I ask you – is it a serious relationship?”

“Thor is head over heels for her although she isn’t his usual type. From what I can tell Jane is in love with him too. They make a handsome couple and yes, before that question comes up too, I can easily
imagine that Thor is planning to propose to her. He didn’t say anything, but I think he is playing the
thought.”

Not surprising and yet Odin wished that it would be different. Thor was sabotaging his own future. Odin’s had his advisors analyse the reactions to the articles that talked about Thor and his supposed relationship to the American. The public wasn’t thrilled. Sure, they hadn’t met this woman yet, but Asgardians weren’t fickle. Hard to impress.

“I want to hear what you think, son. About her character. What does she know about Asgard?”

Loki responded with a soft smile. “I’ve maybe met her three times. She is smart, she works as an
astrophysicist. Granted, she is not familiar with our culture… or with politics.”

“Things that can be learned and studied.” Frigga commented. “You said that she is a sweet girl. The
people would see that… again we shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves. We haven’t met her yet. Your
brother invited her to Valhalla, that’s why she is here. Am I right?”

Chewing on his croissant Loki nodded.

“Then I say we invite her to court. Let’s wine and dine and get to know the girl that seems to have
charmed our son. It’s not an affair of the state yet but a family matter.” Frigga’s suggestion made
sense and was probably the most reasonable thing to do, but Odin wouldn’t pretend that he liked it.

“All right, we will have dinner with her… but let’s not act like this relationship isn’t going to cause
trouble…”

This was normally the part when Loki started disagreeing with him, but his son remained quiet. Why
not? Loki was intelligent, he knew that an engagement to a Midgardian would destabilize Thor’s
position.

„Loki, your opinion? On the political consequences.”

His son looked at him, straight, his green eyes calm and calculating. There was never a moment
when Loki wasn’t thinking. Weighing the words on his tongue and choosing exactly what to say. In
front of a minister or a common Loki would make it look more natural, he would pretend to not be
thinking at all, hiding his thoughtful, almost deceitful nature. With his father, he didn't bother. Odin
knew him well enough, there was never a moment when Loki didn’t analyse the possible
consequences of his words or acts.

“It’s going to be a disaster. You should start the ad campaign right now to sell her to the people. I
have unlimited trust in our people, but I know that they are not ready for a king’s consort that isn’t
Asgardian. Sure, they could get used to it, but at the beginning… they wouldn’t be happy… The
Jotuns would be very upset.”

Even after a whole life of dealing with this ignorant and narrow-minded part of his country it took all
of Odin’s will power to not let out an annoyed groan. For Frigga’s sake. “The Jotuns get upset about
everything and it’s none of their business who Thor wants to marry.”

“One minute ago you declared this possible engagement to a matter of state. The Jotuns are a big part
of this nation. If someone even has the tiniest bit of a reason to be displeased, it’s them.”

Odin would never understand how a woman so clever, so sophisticated would stand up again and
again for the same people who would gladly chase them all across the border.

“What reason? Because no member of our family ever married a Jotun? That’s ridiculous…”
“Not when you consider that over 500 years kings have chosen spouses from each part of the country but from Jotunheim.”

Odin refused to comment that in any kind of way. The best he could do was to utter an ignorant huff.

“It’s not like that fact has any kind of importance, but nonetheless… that’s something they’re definitely going to notice and they are going to point it out.” Loki mumbled absently and Odin was having enough of this.

“Even if Thor were to marry a Jotun tomorrow… it could be one of Laufey’s sons, they would say that such a union was a disgrace and meant to insult them. The Jotuns always need something to complain about to make themselves look special. That’s what they’ve been doing for centuries. It’s definitely not their opinion that concerns me. It’s everybody else’s. We will let Thor know about the invitation to dinner…”

They’d better be done with this conversation now and luckily Frigga’s smile told him that they were. “And who are you going to bring to this dinner, Loki?”

Their son put on his mischievous grin and Odin knew what that was supposed to mean. “Does that mean my presence alone isn’t enough for you, mother? I am deeply upset…”

“If Thor really is going to propose to a girl that I’ve never met then I at least want to know what my youngest is up to.”

The way Loki raised his shoulders told Odin that he was about to get annoyed and it wasn’t like he couldn’t understand it. Like every mother Frigga wished for her sons to get married and have children of their own. Naturally Odin agreed with her, it was necessary to secure the line of succession. The sooner the better. Yet Odin didn’t feel the need to pressure any of them. Both of them were still under 30 and perfectly healthy. Frigga’s wish for grandchildren seemed to be something entirely different. Sometimes Odin got the impression that she especially wished for Loki to settle down as soon as possible. In principle Odin agreed, but he knew his son. Loki couldn’t be pressured into anything. All he would end up doing was putting up resistance.

“He is up to nothing. At least in that department.” Ever so casually Loki ate the rest of his croissant and licked his fingers. Since he was only doing that to annoy them Odin didn’t say anything.

“All right…” Frigga gave him a little glance that said ‘That boy is hopeless’. “What about your schedule today?”

“Oh, I’m merely planning on crashing the meeting with the secretary of trade.” Loki grinned at him and Odin shook his head at him. “It’s not crashing when you’re invited. Which you are.”

“I know, but crashing is much more fun. Anything else? Because I’d really like to hit the showers now.”

“Go ahead, but we expect you to dinner with your brother and… his girlfriend.”

“Sure and you’ll see me at your meeting with the American ambassador.”

“You’re not invited to that.”

“Crashing.” Getting up from his chair Loki winked at Odin before kissing Frigga on her cheek and strolling out of the room.

So Odin had at least been right about one thing, Loki always knew what was going on, but Odin
didn’t really like what he had told them. “An American… does he really have to make his own life so much harder?”

Judging by Frigga’s expression she didn’t think that this was the case. “If he is in love… Thor has the right to marry whoever he wants. There is no rule that he doesn’t.”

“Just because something isn’t a rule that doesn’t mean that people don’t expect you to do it. The people expect a King’s consort who understands their culture, needs and traditions. Like you. Not a person who has never heard of our country before.”

“She is our son’s girlfriend and he is the crown prince of this country. I’m sure, he has told her a thing or two. We shouldn’t worry too much about it yet, we will meet her tonight… which is kind of a shame. When Loki enters his next relationship we shouldn’t wait that long to meet the new man at his side.”

Now this was an entirely different issue. “Loki isn’t heir to the throne. It’s not that much of a public statement if we meet somebody he is dating. You should give him a break though, he might think you’re trying to marry him off.”

“Because I am and I know I am not the only one who wants grandchildren.”

No, definitely not.

“Yes, but Loki doesn’t like to be… Excuse me.” The phone on the table had started vibrating which meant that breakfast was over. Having the Home Secretary call at this time of the day was never a good sign. “Mr. Rindal, good morning. What do I owe the pleasure to?”

It was no pleasure and Frigga could instantly tell from looking at his face. There were never good news coming from Jotunheim. Nothing good had ever come from that block of ice.

“What is going on?”

“The Secretary just received a message from the major of Útgarðar. They officially refuse to organize the festivities for the 500 year anniversary. They rejected the festivities and according to the major, they have the support of the Lord of Jotunheim… Laufey is just taking advantage of every possible opportunity to revolt against the crown…”

“Wasn’t that to be expected? Jotunheim was never going to celebrate the anniversary of the Búrison reign. Perhaps it might be for the best to give them some leeway…”

“Support them in their belief that they aren’t like the rest of the country and that they need special treatment? That’s never going to happen. Not as long as I or another Búrison is King of Asgard. Everyday protests in the streets and now this. I will have Laufey summoned to the court and I’ll make sure he’ll impose order among his people…”
Hello everybody,
Thank you for all the comments, I'm really glad that you're enjoying the story so far :)
You'll still have to wait a bit until you see Tony, but we'll get there :)
Have fun

“Rogers? From England, right?”

That was all Steve got from the ambassador, but that was enough. It would be pretentious to assume that Steve would immediately form a friendship with the ambassador like he had done in England. At least Steve had now an idea who he was dealing with. Fury seemed like a man who didn’t appreciate smiles but mistrusted them. Strict, stern and very focused. Not a fan of laughter.

Steve didn’t mind, he wasn’t here to make friends with his boss. A work-orientated attitude was something Steve could appreciate. Very much so. Sam thought that Fury looked like the Grinch and they had a good laugh about it. Yesterday.

Today Fury had an appointment with the king himself. They were going to discuss the new trade union and Steve was part of the team that would escort the ambassador. So Steve was going to see the palace from the inside.

“If it’s just as… golden as on the outside I’m going to become nauseous…”

What Steve got to see was rather surprising and maybe Steve had been a bit quick to judge. The architect had probably used all the gold of the realm for the façade of the palace. Wood panellings and intarsia everywhere. It was all very bright and Steve was ready to call it classy and tasteful. Looking at the palace from the outside was atrocious, but living inside of it should be rather nice.

They entered through one of the side gates and two guards and the chief of security. He instantly caught Steve’s eyes, because he was the first black guy he had seen in this country. Tall, broad shoulder, obviously very fit and a handsome face that was almost as stoic as the ambassador’s.

“Ambassador Fury.”

“Heimdall, good to see you.” Steve was somewhat taken aback by Fury’s smile. It looked open and nice. Nevertheless Steve was sure that it was only business, he perfectly remembered agent Coulson’s words. Do nothing that might upset the royal family in any kind of way. That naturally had to include sucking up to them and the staff.

The chief of security nodded ever so slightly and his eyes attentively glanced at the agents behind the ambassador. Steve tried to stay perfectly still, not shifting around when Heimdall looked at him. A shiver was running down Steve’s spine and he felt like those almost unnaturally bright eyes were piercing through him. Seeing things that they shouldn’t be able to see. Steve was well aware that he was being put into a category right now.
“Your new agents are aware of the code of conduct?”

“Everybody has been briefed.”

“Good. Let me repeat the most important issues though.” Steve felt a strange relief when Heimdall wasn’t focusing on him anymore. “When a member of the royal family enters the room, you bow your head. You’ll address the King with ‘your grace’ and the other members of the royal family with ‘your highness’. You don’t talk to them unless they let you know that they are interested in what you have to say. You are allowed to carry your weapons within the palace. A privilege that can immediately be revoked. You are guests here, you will be treated as such.”

A smooth voice that perfectly fitted his face. His English sounded almost like Peggy’s, without a doubt British. Was he an immigrant?

“You may follow me.”

Staircases, big halls and Steve did his best to not look around in amazement. The palace was gorgeous and not as terribly ritzy as on the outside. Of course it was still elegant and unbelievable amounts of money had been put into the décor. Steve was somewhat overwhelmed, he had no idea where they had been going until there standing at the end of a hall, in front of big, wooden wing doors. While Steve and the other agents had to wait outside, the chief of security and the ambassador walked into the room.

During the briefing Steve had learned that the King would join the meeting, he wasn’t waiting in the conference room. Steve was taking his position, observing the hall. It took only about two minutes until Steve could hear steps and three men came around the corner. Seeing the King for the very first time wasn’t very spectacular. The picture Steve had seen before had flattered him. In real life it became obvious that the King was an old man. Life had left traces on his face, but he wasn’t frail. Walking with a firm step, a straight posture. A shock of white hair and a perfectly trimmed beard.

Steve was so busy examining him that he almost forgot bowing his head. Just like expected him and the other agents weren’t even glanced at. The King and his two guards entered the conference room and it was over. Very unexciting, which was always a good thing in this job.

Now all they had to do was waiting. What was going to happen in the middle of the palace, so highly guarded and protected?

Steve was concentrating on his surroundings, getting familiar with the sounds of this place. Surprisingly silent.

It was an odd thing to wonder about, but Steve noticed that the parquet floor was shining so brightly that he could almost see his reflection in it. Somebody had had to spend days on their knees to polish it like this. Daily care had to be put into it. How many hundreds of people had walked over this floor? Right in front of the conference room of the leader of this nation. Delegates? Presidents? Soldiers? Assassins?

Part of the job, it always made you think about the worst possible things. Perhaps Steve should do a little reading. About the kings of Asgard and the history of the palace. Steve wasn’t a history buff, but he was educated enough to know that two hundred years ago revolutions had swiped over Europe, putting an end to some of the monarchies which had ruled this continent for centuries. If the people hadn’t abolished the reign of a single man, they had least cut his power. What must have happened in Asgard for these revolutions and reforms to never even take place? Something must have happened to stop that natural process.
New footsteps. Three persons. No heels. Too heavy to be women.

Cocking his head Steve saw three men turning around the hall. One royal more. It took him a moment or two to recognize the prince. Unlike the King he wasn’t wearing a uniform like on the photograph.

A tight blazer was showing off the prince’s slim waist. Steve didn’t have an eye for fashion, but he had attended enough fancy dinners to know that everything that the prince was wearing had to cost a little fortune. The shoes were just as shiny as the floor. Looking at him Steve couldn’t help but notice that the prince had also long hair. It didn’t reach his shoulders, brushed back behind his ears. Pitch black, emphasising his pale skin.

“Agent Barnes! What a feast for my sore eyes.”

Steve blinked in surprise while the prince was coming closer, a welcoming smile on his lips. While bowing his head James was also smiling and it was easy to tell that he wasn’t doing it out of mere courtesy. “Your highness.”

The prince stopped and with him his guards. “You’ve made your presence at the court quiet rare. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“Oh, I counted on it.”

“Naturally, your companions are always so dull.” Steve couldn’t believe what he was seeing when the prince was actually rolling his eyes.

James seemed so honestly amused and open, almost like he was talking to a friend. “That’s sad to hear.”

“Call my secretary the next time you have a day off and in the mood for tennis. I need someone who puts up an actual challenge.”

“Challenge? I completely destroyed you every single time.”

That wasn’t happening right now, was it?

The smile on the prince’s face turned into a grin. “That’s the only way I can get better. Call my secretary, we’ll find an appointment. Will you excuse me? I have to make sure that your ambassador isn’t trying to fuck us over.”

That… definitely wasn’t the kind of diplomatic talk Steve was used to.

“Next week will be a good time, your highness.”

“Excellent.” Now the grin was once again a smile. “Until next time, agent Barnes.” The prince gave a slight indication with his head and one of his guards opened the door to the conference room. Not missing a beat the prince walked right through it, more or less bursting in a diplomatic meeting.

“Good morning, Ambassador Fury. How are you trying to make fools of us today?”

The door fell closed and this time there was no silence. James was chuckling and Steve felt a knot forming in his stomach. Thad definitely hadn’t been what he had expected.

***

Pretending to be a tourist was something Steve enjoyed, even though he felt a little lost at the same
time. At first he had thought about asking James to show him around or to help him with some information. Steve couldn’t tell why he had ultimately decided against it.

Steve took a sip from his coffee, while reading in the travel guide he had bought. Asgard, not just Valhalla. Definitely a mistake, that book was enormous and a huge part of it was dedicated to Jotunheim. That was for another time. Only scanning over the pages Steve realised that they didn’t really contain the information he was searching for.

The trip advisor gave him the advice to check out the numerous art galleries, museums and parks. Asgardian treasures and artworks are described as one of a kind. Since the country had stayed completely untouched by the expansion of Christianity, Asgard had developed unique styles of architecture, painting and sculpting.

Steve’s eyebrows went up when he found out that only 1% percent of the population of this country were Christian. Even less Jewish or Muslim. The overwhelming majority believed in something called… Trúa.

According to the guide theologians were still debating if Trúa should be referred to as a religion or philosophy. Several pages were explaining the concept, but Steve decided that that would be a lecture for another day. What he already knew was that there were no churches to be found in this city.

Temples, yes…

Steve had seen one during his walk through the inner city. Surprisingly beautiful in its simplicity. White walls, a red roof, a red gate that probably led into an inner courtyard. There was no way to be sure, Steve didn’t know if he was allowed to enter the building.

A religion that only existed in this one country, a 500 year old monarchy that was still in place and an openly gay prince that flirted with an American agent. Steve couldn’t even pretend that he understood any of this.

After paying for his coffee and putting the travel guide into his pocket Steve continued his little stroll through the city. Right now he wasn’t looking at the buildings or monuments, but he was observing the people.

It didn’t take longer than three minutes until Steve saw two men in front of a store who looked close enough that Steve thought they might be a couple. James had said that it was different here, that it wasn’t a big deal. Sure, Steve agreed with that, but he was still irritated that it appeared to be something so casual.

Although it made him feel slightly awkward Steve watched the two men. He was well aware that he was thinking about stereotypes, but neither of them looked especially feminine. Their gestures, their clothing, nothing stood out or remembered Steve of the parades or events that he knew from home.

One of them looked at him and Steve continued to walk down the street. This was going to end in a case of voyeurism. If Steve wanted to stare at something, he should do that in one of the museums. Ultimately Steve decided against that option and went to check out the biggest park of the city which was world famous for the fountain that could be found in its centre.

It took Steve over an hour to get there, the park turned out to be much bigger than Steve had expected. Beautiful, well-tended and some parts of it almost resembled a real forest. A little sombre, all different kinds of green which mingled together perfectly. The sun was almost blinding Steve when he stepped out of the covert onto a neat meadow. A path made of pebbles was leading towards
the fountain which was already surrounded by numerous people.

Urðarbrunnr – the trip advisor called it like that. Nothing about this language made any kind of sense. What made perfect sense was the reference of the fountain as a must-see. The design was breath taking and the details were the stuff which nightmares were made of. A dragon that wasn’t spewing fire but water. Stepping closer Steve let his eyes travel across the tail, over every scale, the sharp claws and eventually the teeth. The dragon’s jaw was wide open, ready to devour anyone and anything that was insane enough to stand in its way.

Steve was lucky enough to find a still empty bench that he could sit down on. Even while doing so he wasn’t quite able to stop looking at the dragon’s head. The artist’s intention seemed obvious. This was the portray of a monster. No warmth to be found in these eyes made of marble, a penetrating gaze that made Steve’s skin.

Nothing about it was real and yet it was enough to make Steve uncomfortable. Haunting and yet beautiful. Or maybe the horror was the very thing that made it beautiful.

A shrill sound abruptly ended Steve’s concentration and he felt like being pulled from a dream without having been asleep. The reason for the shrill sound was a young woman, feverishly shouting into a megaphone. At the same time she was wildly gesticulating with her free hand. Whatever she was saying, she was clearly passionate about it.

Not only her, a few other people, all very young were definitely part of her little… protest? Maybe they were students? The tourists seemed just as confused as Steve when two young men were starting to hand out flyers and the girl kept shouting. More words that sounded like nothing that Steve had ever heard.

Steve also received one of the flyers and it brought some light into the darkness. Only to raise a lot more of new questions. As far as Steve could tell the text on the paper was written in three different languages. Or just two? A lot of runes, that was for sure.

*Freedom for Jotunheim!*

***

Jane was pulling at the seam of her dress, trying to make the garment fall nicely over her hips, without creating any wrinkles. She was going to meet the king of a nation and she looked like a girl from a small town who had no idea how to dress. No matter what she was going to do, Jane kind of looked like a yokel who belonged on a farm, not at the table of a royal dinner.

“Stop doing that. The dress is fine. You are lovely.”

A strong hand closed around Joan’s wrist and she released a long breath, instantly feeling a little bit lighter. At least Thor liked it. “I am going to make a complete fool out of myself.”

The ever present smile on Thor’s face wasn’t enough to make her worries fade away. Slowly Thor entwined his fingers with hers and it reassured Jane that he seemed completely unbothered. That he was sure everything would go down just fine. Meeting your boyfriend’s parents. Piece of cake.

Unfortunately the parents of her boyfriend were royals…

Jane found it again difficult to breathe which was embarrassing, right next to Thor. “Darling, you need to calm down. It’s just dinner. You have already won them over.”

Confused Jane looked at him, the smile still right there. “How so? They’ve never met me before…”
“This is how things work. If they weren’t already approving our relationship they wouldn’t have invited you.”

Jane frowned at him and Thor sighed softly, then shrugged with a light-hearted laugh. “Okay… I know the invitation came as a surprise and very… fast… but it means that they are interested and already accepting that you’re my girlfriend. If they weren’t they would ignore you. I know that sounds terrible, but that’s the way things work. It has a lot to do with image and keeping appearances…”

“God, Thor, I really don’t think I can do this. I feel like I’m going to be put up to the test… by the king himself.” Jane was looking for help, because right now she was ready to jump out of the moving car to avoid meeting Thor’s parents.

“You’re looking at this all wrong.” Thor was still using his calm, smoothening tone, making Jane believe that he was really this convinced that everything was going to be alright. “This isn’t a reception or a banquet. We’re just having dinner. You’re not meeting the King and the Duchess but my parents. Of course it’s hard to put that aside, but it’s true.”

Nodding Jane closed her eyes for a second, cursing her nerves and urging them to calm down. “Okay… that means we don’t have to follow some weird etiquette and I don’t have to kneel down?”

This was the first time the smile faltered and Thor looked the slightest bit uncomfortable. “About that… you’ll have to address them with their titles the first time… then it’s going to be more… casual.”

“Right, because he is still the king. Nobody how you try to spin it.”

“So what. I am a prince, that doesn’t bother you.”

“That’s different. Somehow…”

These were the things Jane had never thought about. How on earth should she be prepared for this? Jane considered herself a very self-aware person. Had somebody told her that she would have dinner with a king somebody, there was a good chance she would have said “Fine by me. I’m not going to act any differently than usual. A head with a crown on top of it was just a normal head. The only difference was the crown. Such a nice and useful thing, the conjunctive. It made it so easy to present yourself in the best light possible. Jane was a scholar, smart and knew how to make a good impression. She wasn’t going to become nervous because of a title. A professor was more likely to evoke awe than a king.

Or at least she had thought so.

Now Jane couldn’t rule it out that she would fall over her own feet. Every little girl dreamed about Prince Charming, but after a certain time they stopped expecting him to be a real prince. A nice, handsome guy would be more than enough. Jane had that covered and even more than that. The real prince of a real nation. Heir to the throne. Enough to make a small-town girl faint.

The car slowed down which meant they had already arrived at the palace. At least Thor had prepared her for that sight. Photographs weren’t quite the same, but like this Jane wasn’t rubbing her eyes to be sure that she was really seeing walls made of gold. Sometime she would have to ask Thor about it, no kingdom, no matter how wealthy, could afford to build something like this. She would do it now if her nerves weren’t terribly thin already.

Eventually they pulled up next to a side entrance, a man in a uniform was already waiting there and
opened the door when the car had stopped. After granting her another smile Thor got out and then helped her to do the same. The guard, Jane supposed he was a guard, bowed his head in front of Thor. “Your highness.”

Jane tried to ignore the awkwardness of the situation. She had seen Thor interacting with other people before. They were acknowledging that he was a prince all the time. A foreign concept. This was Asgard and this man was Thor’s subject…

Thor took hold of her hand and softly pulled her along. It wasn’t the main entrance to the palace, so there was no big hall or elegant staircase. Yet the corridor was beautifully decorated. A red carpet and Jane wasn’t going to be able to do that.

“Your brother is going to be there, right?”

“Sure.”

“Good… one person who’s on my side.”

“Hey, I’m on your side. There are no sides… It’s just dinner. Come on.” Thor pressed a little kiss on her temple and stopped for a moment to put one arm around her. Next to him Jane always felt tiny and before meeting Thor she would have never thought that she would be okay with a man so strong and tall. It was nice to lean against him, feeling small and protected at the same time. “It’s going to be okay. They’ll like you.”

The next minutes went by like a dream. Thor led her past guards and servants into a marvellous salon. Jane asked herself how somebody could live in a place like this. She would be afraid to touch anything, to cause wrinkles on a cushion or to somehow destroy this perfect image.

“Sit down and…”

Before Thor could finish his phrase the second door to the room was being opened and Jane was trembling.

“Thor.”

Jane had also seen photographs of Thor’s parents. His mother was a gorgeous, blonde woman with a kind smile and she instantly walked over to her son to greet him with a kiss on his cheek.

“Mother.” Thor smiled at her and then reached for Jane. “This is Jane Foster. Thank you for having us for dinner.”

“It’s our pleasure.” Thor’s mother turned to her and Jane knew that she was already blushing.

“Miss Foster, I’m glad to finally meet you.”

For a moment Jane forgot what she had to do, so she bowed her head and dropped a curtsey. “Your Highness.”

“Miss Foster, thank you for accepting our invitation.”

The King was standing next to his wife and Jane was studying his face, trying to see an older version of Thor. “Your grace… I am very grateful that you… invited me into your house.”

Every word sounded and felt awkward. Thor’s father wasn’t smiling, but his gaze wasn’t unkind either.
“Is this the first visit in Asgard?” The duchess casually started the conversation and Jane’s head was already swimming. “Yes, mam…”

“I hope you’re enjoying it so far.”

“Of course. Unfortunately I haven’t seen much of the city yet, but it’s very beautiful.”

“Why don’t we sit down? Would you like a drink before dinner?”

Until now everything seemed to work out alright. Inwardly Jane was shaking, but nobody was acting like she had already committed a faux-pas. Maybe she was doing fine. Jane sat down next to Thor, shocked to see that the duchess herself poured them two glasses of wine.

The king was watching her, Jane was well aware and slightly afraid to meet his eyes, so she concentrated on Thor. Was there anything in the world that could make him lose his calm?

“I am curious, Miss Foster. How did you and Thor meet? I must admit you haven’t been the topic of our conversations yet.”

Hearing the father of your boyfriend saying something like that would normally be devastating, but the King had definitely more important things to do than talking about his son’s girlfriend. “I was… giving a lecture at a congress in Copenhagen. I am an astrophysicist. I was talking about this theory that I... Well, that would be too complicated. Afterwards Thor approached me and told me that he found it quite interesting.”

“I never knew Thor had an interest in astrophysics…” There was no amusement in the king’s voice. Not really reproaching anything, but his tone made clear that he didn’t believe Thor hadn’t had ulterior motives. Which was the truth. Thor had admitted months ago that he had had no clue what Jane had been talking about. Not that it mattered…

“It’s never too late to learn something new. The lecture was fascinating. In many ways.” Thor replied smoothly. He obviously didn’t care too much about what his father thought of the whole deal.

The King didn’t comment on it any further, instead he turned to Jane. His intense gaze making her think of herself as just a small, unimportant thing. “You work in a demanding field, Miss Foster. Do you teach at university or do you work in the field?”

“At the moment I work for a research institute in California.” Jane took a sip from her wine to calm down her nerves, only to regret it a second later. Getting drunk wouldn’t help her a bit with her mission to not make an idiot out of herself. Until now things were working out fine, weren’t they?

“Loki is not here yet?”

The duchess smiled at Thor’s question. “I’ve lost all track of your brother’s schedule. I think he has a meeting with one of ministers.”

Ministers… royalty… Jane felt like she was about to throw up.

Luckily Thor’s mother turned out to be just as kind as he had always described her. They went easy on her, asking her questions about her work and her studies, things Jane was at ease with. Nevertheless she felt like she was sitting on needles until somebody showed up who she was familiar with.

“Excuse me, the minister of education can gnaw your ear off.” Loki closed the door behind him, then smiled at them. “Thor, you’ve made yourself rare.”
“Didn’t see me for one day and you already start missing me?”

“Naturally. Jane, lovely to see you.” When Loki walked over to her, Jane got up and let him kiss her on the cheek. “Hello Loki.”

It was nice to see somebody that she already knew, but Jane’s heart immediately sank when she noticed the King’s clearly displeased expression. What had she done wrong? She had merely greeted Thor’s brother…

“It’s alright, father. I told Jane the last time that she could skip the formalities. Let’s have dinner. The minister might have gnawed off my ear, but I didn’t get anything to eat. I’m dying of hunger.”
Hello everybody,

Today we have a father-son conversation and we look into what's going on with Jotunheim... also somebody might come and visit soon ;)

Have fun ;)

Thor would have loved to tell Jane that she could spend the night at the palace, but that really would have been the end of all etiquette and Thor didn’t want to test his father’s patience any more. The dinner had gone over quiet well, thanks to Loki who had of course had to talk about their father’s new politics. So there hadn’t been that much time to interrogate Jane about everything that had ever happened in her life.

After bringing Jane to the car and kissing her good night Thor returned to the salon. He was ready for the conversation that was about to happen right now. There were few things in his life that he had always been completely sure of.

Jane was one of them.

Now Thor only had to explain that to his father. Loki and his mother had already left, but his father was sitting in his favourite armchair, a glass of met in his hand. “Sit down with me, son.”

Thor did, after getting himself a glass of the met. “It was a nice evening.”

“It was indeed. Your Miss Foster is a very sweet person. I think she is quite charming. Her fylgja could easily be a roe deer.” His father took a sip from his drink and Thor felt a smile spreading on his face. “I know. I’m glad you see it this way.”

More than glad, his father had just made Jane a huge compliment and it was so important that Odin would…

“It saddens me that I cannot approve of your relationship.”

His father liked to come straight to the point, but that didn’t soften the blow. Thor had expected some resistance, maybe even some bargaining, but not clear rejection. How could anyone reject Jane? She was gorgeous, intelligent and good natured. Odin had seen that, he was a good judge of character. This was just the beginning of this conversation.

“Why? You’ve only just met her and you like her. I also want to add that I didn’t ask for your approval.”

“Not yet.” Putting his glass aside Odin leaned slightly forward and intently looked at Thor. “I admit that I can see what pulls you towards that woman. If the circumstances were different we wouldn’t have this conversation.”

“What circumstances?”
His father’s face darkened, the lines becoming deeper. “If you really have to ask this question I have to doubt your intelligence, Thor.”

A low blow, but Thor knew that his father meant every word. Thor had hoped that he could make a non-issue out of Jane’s nationality. “The fact that Jane is American shouldn’t be of any importance. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“But it matters to everyone else. Especially to the people.”

Did it? They had no say in that. Nobody but Thor and Jane. “It’s nobody’s business. There is no law that says that my girlfriend can’t be American.”

“No, you are right. There is no law, but there are expectations and traditions. Also there is the way you look at her.”

Thor frowned, leaning back, just waiting for the next blow.

“How long have you been seeing Miss Foster?”

“Eight months now.”

“Am I right in the assumption that you are serious about this relationship?”

Thor had never been a patient person. One of his many faults that his father always liked to criticize. Whatever patience he had, it was running thin. Extremely quickly. “That was the entire point of this evening, wasn’t it?”

“There would be no problem if this was just a short liaison. You can date whoever you want, that’s true. Marriage is a more complicated matter. Are you planning on marrying her, Thor?”

“It’s way too soon to think about that.”

“Thor, you were raised to immediately start thinking about these matters. Don’t pretend to be a fool, you’re trying to wear me out.”

Odin’s hard gaze was drilling through him and Thor held his head up high. There was nothing to be ashamed of, he hadn’t made any kind of mistake. His father had also taught him to stand up for himself and his opinions. For what’s important. “At the moment it’s too soon to propose to her, but yes. I will definitely ask her to marry me.”

The reaction was what Thor had expected. His father almost growled, pinching the bridge of his nose. “She is lovely and I am sorry that the circumstances don’t allow that union to happen.”

“There is no written word in the law of succession that forbids me to marry a Midgardian. Somebody has to be the first, right?”

“As king you need the support of the people to maintain your position. The people love your mother, because she is the perfect King’s consort. She knows this country, understands the worries and wants of our people. She shares their religion. They feel connected to her. You and me, we both love Asgard. There hardly is any society as homogeneous as ours. An outsider at the side of the king is unthinkable.”

“Asgard isn’t as backwards and racist as you believe it to be.”

“This has nothing to do with racism, son and you know that very well. We have always been proud
of our unique place in history. Our traditions and values that are so different from the rest of Europe. Over 1000 years we stood up against every attempt to conquer our nation. Throughout the Middle Ages other kings and monarchs looked down on us, called our religion barbaric and our people perverted, because we’ve never made a difference between men and women. Married couples couldn’t cross the borders of our nations for centuries, because they would face persecution and death in the rest of the world. This is the history of our nation, Thor”

Gritting his teeth Thor tried not to sigh. “I know, father.”

“That’s what people think about. That’s what they remember and they want to be represented by somebody who understands this sentiment.”

It would be easier to accept if Thor didn’t know that it was true. The Asgardian people wanted somebody like them and Thor wanted Jane. “It’s not fair. Jane is highly educated, a scholar, she has a good heart. She would be perfect. We haven’t talked about it yet, but maybe she would be willing to give up her American citizenship…”

“That’s not the same.”

Thor had been holding on as long as humanly possible. Yes, he was heir to the throne and she shouldn’t be able to marry who he wanted? “With all due respect, father, but that’s not fair. You’ve said yourself that Jane is an extraordinary woman. She is unfit because of her passport? You refused to meet her until tonight. Loki could bring his last boyfriend to the palace after they had been together for two months!”

His father rubbed one hand over his face, not hiding his frustration and Thor instantly felt like he had gone too far. No. This was too important, he had to stand up for himself and the woman he loved. What was his father going to do anyway? Nobody could tell him who to marry…

“Don’t drag your brother into this. He is not the crown prince. His choices in romantic matters do not have the same impact as yours.”

“I have to keep my relationship with Jane a secret, but it’s perfectly fine that Loki had a very public affair with a failed artist?”

“Who is also a highly educated man and a member of one of the oldest noble families in Asgard. That’s not the point. You are right, I don’t have the right to tell you who to marry, but as your father and as the king of this nation, I have to give you the best advice I have. You’re going to be king, but your power lies with the people. Without their support you are nothing and it’s going to be so much harder to win them over if they cannot support your spouse.”

“It’s not fair.”

“Damn it, Thor!”

His father wasn’t able to deny his age, so Thor flinched when Odin suddenly was up on his feet without any visible effort. “How do you want to be king when all I hear from you is ‘it’s not fair’. You were born to rule a country, to lead its people and be a father to every single one of them. With this position come great privileges and even more sacrifices. If you are not willing to make them, then maybe you are not worthy of it. Don’t disappoint me, son.”

Feeling like he had slapped across the face Thor didn’t move. Not once in his life he had heard his father saying something like that. Knowing that he was going to be King was part of Thor’s childhood. Just like the process of being prepared for this position. Thor felt prepared, he felt ready
and it had never occurred to him that his father could be of a different opinion. There was nothing Thor could say. All oxygen had been sucked out of the room, Thor wasn’t able to breathe, nor to voice words.

The tension seemed to leave his father’s shoulder, but that didn’t mean Thor was feeling even the slightest bit better. Slowly Odin walked over to him and put his hand on Thor’s shoulder. He squeezed it gently, but not making Thor feel any better. “That’s not a decision you have to make today or tomorrow, but you have to be aware of the consequences.”

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“So… uhm… I googled the prince last night.” Steve tried to say that as casually as possible, but it didn’t go down as smoothly as he had hoped.

If James had noticed, he didn’t let it show. “Which one?” He asked while doing his final stretch. ‘The queer one’ was lying on Steve’s tongue, but he knew better than that. “The younger one. The one we met in the hall yesterday…”

“Ah…” The ever present smile on James’ face got a little brighter. “Loki. I’m sure you had a lot to read then.”

“Guess so…” Steve noticed that this was the first time James said the prince’s first name. It sounded easy, very natural. Not the first time he was using it. That didn’t exactly surprise Steve, not after the way they had been talking to each other.

“Found something interesting?”

“His degrees are quite impressive.”

Laughing softly Bucky sat down on the bench, tilting his head back to let the sun shine on his face. “Really? That’s what you focused on? I scanned over his Wikipedia page once. There is way more intriguing stuff on there.”

“He didn’t really tell the minister of finances to go and fuck himself during a live press conference, right?” Steve was nagging on his lower lip and James was chuckling, having closed his eyes. “That was an amazing day. Rumours say that the king was yelling so loudly that people could hear him on the street in front of the palace… the press had a field day. They hailed Loki as a god. It was amazing.”

“Because he didn’t know how to behave?”

“The minister was incredibly unpopular and corrupt. Everybody hated him and people were sick of every news reporter being too nice to him. They loved it that Loki sat there, rolling his eyes at every word and ultimately telling him to get the fuck out. Sure, there was also talk about how it wasn’t appropriate, but most of them…”

Steve sat down next to James, shaking his head in confusion. Asgard really was different, wasn’t it? “I’m really having trouble keeping up with all of this…”

“All of what.”

“The entire country… it’s…” Once more language let Steve down. He couldn’t find the right word to describe all the things that were going on here. “… astonishingly liberal.”
Bad choice, definitely a bad choice. James’ eyes flew back open and he raised one eyebrow. “That’s a first one.”

“What?”

“Calling this country liberal.”

“What else would you call it? Their views on homosexuality have to be…”

“Oh, I’ll stop you right there.” James made an abrupt gesture and Steve fell instantly silent. Good, this way he wouldn’t say something stupid. Again. “There are no views on anything here. Asgardians don’t consider homosexuality a thing. Nor heterosexuality. It’s hard to explain… they just don’t care. Nobody talks about it. You date whoever you want. I don’t think there are surveys on this, but I think there is hardly a person in this country who hasn’t had a relationship with a person of either gender. That doesn’t make them liberal, it’s been like this for over hundreds of years. Actually… if you look at the justice system… they’re quite conservative.”

“Wait a second.” Now it was Steve who asked him to slow down. This was something he couldn’t wrap his head around. “That doesn’t really add up, does it? Hundreds of years? Are you trying to tell me that it was okay for two guys to kiss in public in 1600?”

His astonishment was making James laugh. How many times could that happen? “Yes, it okay even before that. That’s not something any Asgardian would think about. Believe me, I once tried to talk about it with some friends I made… they are totally weirded out by our concepts of sexuality. I once told a friend something about anti-discrimination laws… He looked at me as if I was crazy.”

“So uhm…” Why was Steve always struggling with the easiest words when James was around? This country was constantly confusing him, but that shouldn’t steal away his ability to talk. “… everybody is pretty much bisexual?”

This very short explanation seemed to make James think, he moved his head from one side to another and eventually nodded. “I guess you could say so.”

“Huh…” Was all Steve could say to that. He couldn’t decide if that made more sense than a very liberal society where they shoved the gay people in your face. Most probably it was better to just accept that. “I’m still having trouble to keep up with it.”

“That’s perfectly normal. Give it a complete of weeks… or months. You get used to a lot of things.”

Getting up from the bench James shot Steve another one of his smiles. “You wanna grab a coffee before we head back?”

“Sure.”

James had taken the lead during their run through the park and he did the same now. As much as Steve enjoyed exploring the city on his own, it was nice to have somebody how knew where to go and moved around with ease.

“He wasn’t what you expected, right?”

Blinking in confusion Steve thought that he had missed something. “Who?”

“Loki. When you saw him yesterday… you looked a bit shocked. It was hilarious.”

“Hey!”
Steve could take a joke and he didn’t get mad when people were making fun of him. He wasn’t mad now although he felt uncomfortable with what James was insinuating. It wasn’t too bad though, because Steve liked James’ laugh. There was nothing mean about it and it made his eyes shine brightly. “What was wrong with my face?”

“Sorry, but you should have seen your face.”

“A lot. You weren’t able to close your mouth.”

“Now you are exaggerating.”

“Perhaps a little bit, but you were staring. Not surprising though.”

That was something at least. “I know that you said that they might talk to us, but I guess… I didn’t expect it to happen. Especially not in such a casual, personal way.”

The prince was a royal, these people weren’t known for interacting with their staff. Or with the staff of the ambassador they had invited for negotiations.

“I’ve known him for over a year now and he is very easy to talk to. The whole ‘feast for my sore eyes’ is stuff he likes to say when other people are around to make them feel awkward. He instantly saw that a couple of agents were there and he wanted to have some fun.”

“Fun like flirting with an agent?”

“More or less, yeah.” James shrugged and for a moment Steve thought that he was looking kind of sheepish. A moment that passed rather quickly. “That’s another thing you get…”

The words that Steve didn’t get to hear were probably ‘used to’. This time Steve wasn’t surprised when the little group of protesters walked past them. One of them was again shouting into a megaphone, another one was handing out flyers, pressing one into James’ hand who sighed loudly. Gone were the smiles, replaced by annoyance.

“I’ve seen them before. Yesterday when I checked out the park for the first time. You have any idea what this is about?” Steve glanced at the flyer and it was indeed the same that he had received.

“It’s about trouble.” James crumpled out the paper and tossed it into the next trash can. Turning his head Steve glanced at the group of protesters and they didn’t seem like a lot of trouble to him. Young, pretty even. Not the kind of people who would start a fight.

“Which trouble? Come on, you spent the entire afternoon explaining stuff to me. Don’t stop now.” If Steve offered him a smile, maybe James would do the same and Steve really wanted to see that. For some reason.

Instead of smiling James sighed again, but eventually started to talk. “They are Jotuns.”

“Jotuns? Oh, that means they’re from Jotunheim?”

“Exactly. They are separatists… like 99% of the Jotun population.”

Why was he feeding Steve information one piece at a time? Was he supposed to make sense out of this himself? James should know by now that Steve wasn’t good at that. “That means they want to… have their own state?”

“Yeah… they’ve been demanding more independence and liberties for years… centuries. Look, I’m
not an expert. The Jotuns see themselves as oppressed. That has always been the case. The last couple of years things calmed down a bit, but now… This year is the 500 years anniversary of the Búrison reign over Asgard. It’s a huge thing, festivities all over the country are planned. Most Jotuns only grudgingly tolerate Odin as the king, they call the entire Búrison dynasty usurpers and oppressors. There is no way they’re going to take part in the festivities. Instead they are protesting, demanding… all kind of things, like I said, I am no expert and people in Valhalla don’t really want to talk about it. As a conversation topic it’s really a buzz kill.”

It was definitely wrong, but Steve was almost feeling relieved that this country had problems, like the rest of the world. Granted, a part of a nation demanding independence, maybe even trying to form a new country was a political crisis. “Just a buzz kill or… could those protests become violent?”

James shook his head. “That’s been going on for over hundreds of years. There has been violence, but that was a long time ago. This really is a buzz kill. Come on, the café is just right over there.”

Steve didn’t think so, he found the conversation rather intriguing, but he didn’t want to make James uncomfortable. They casually chatted about the difference between New Yorker and Asgardian coffee. To Steve both was equally disgusting, but James was drinking his cup with so much glee that he didn’t want to say that.

Eventually they got interrupted by James’ phone and Steve cursed the caller. Whoever it was.

“Hello, sir.”

Great, Steve had probably just cursed his boss.

“I see. Thank you for the information. I’ll send you a draft before eight o’clock.”

One of the shortest phone conversations that Steve had ever heard and he looked at James expectantly.

“They finally agreed on a date for Tony Stark’s visit. He is going to join the negotiations with the king next week. Before that the embassy has to organize a reception. It’s going to be a security nightmare.”

Talking about buzz kills…

“I thought Stark didn’t bother to actually work for his company. Now he’s coming here personally?”

“An arms deal between the US and Asgard with his weapons? Stark is too much of a showman to miss something this big. He’s already having fun, it took us five tries to find an appointment. Guess it gives him the chills to let a king wait. Anyhow, I gotta sit down now and come up with a security concept.”

That probably meant that the free afternoon was over.
Hello everybody,

A Loki chapter! It was about time, wasn't it? :) Thor is still upset about Odin's reaction to his relationship...

Have fun :)

“As much as I appreciate it that we share opinions on this matter, sir… I cannot help but feeling like I’m fighting a very lonely fight here.” Loki crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, signalling the minister that the ball was now in his court. There was nothing that he hated more than dealing with a coward and until now Loki hadn’t thought that the minister fell into that category. Loki despised it even more to be wrong. Luckily that didn’t happen that often.

“Your highness, you have to see that I have very limited power in my position. Especially since a good part of the parliament is willing to agree with your father’s politics.”

“Whatever people call politics these days. Most members of the parliament are useless kiss-asses. We all know how they got there. Nobody respects the king more than me, but it’s a fact that during the last couple of years he only appointed ministers who were all too willing to agree with him… not to challenge him. You’ve been in your position long enough, you know how this works. Perhaps better than me.”

Loki took a sip from his tea and let the words sink in. Hardly anyone knew that flattery and spite were equally affective. The real art was to know when to use what. There was a right time for everything and people reacted differently to the same words. The minister was a traditional man who believed in the importance of his position, rightly so. It was pretty easy to push that button, but Loki was well aware that the man sitting in front of him was no idiot. Flattery alone wouldn’t do the trick. It was worse, Loki had to appeal to his ideals.

Luckily theirs might be the same. In this case at least.

“You definitely didn’t ask for an appointment to sweet-talk me, your highness. What is your proposal?”

“I want to pull together. I can talk to the king as his son and as the Duke of Glaesisvellir, but if I alone could sway the king’s opinion… we wouldn’t have this conversation. I need some support, from somebody in a meaningful position who isn’t afraid to speak their mind and smart enough to see that this new American policy is ludicrous.”

A soft frown appeared on the minister’s forehead. “Your highness, are you implying that your father isn’t smart?”

Bad choice of words, didn’t happen so often. “No, I called this new policy ludicrous. I am not blind to the advantages that the king sees in it, but the negatives clearly outweigh the positives. Sure, the economy will get a boost, there’ll be new American investors, but what else is going to happen when
that trade agreement goes through?"

Letting somebody else explain the problem was probably the greatest form of flattery.

“We’d have to align most of our regulatory practices… which is problematic, because our stances on a lot of issues are completely different, like genetically modified food. Investors would be able to sue our nation if they are of the opinion that our laws are damaging their investments. Big companies would have influence on new Asgardian laws… which would probably result in a weakening of consumer protection and food safety acts. That’s the tip of the iceberg. But you know all of that, your highness. I’ve heard you speaking up against the agreement before. I am just as concerned as you. Unfortunately the parliament doesn’t have the authority to object to the agreement. It’s ultimately up to the King.”

“Yes, indeed, but it’s your duty to advice and you are obligated to act according to your conscience. That’s all I’m asking. Speak up during the next parliament session and get other members who are actually willing to do their job. My father has always listened to his people, perhaps they need to speak a little louder this time.”

They were fighting a losing battle, but Loki couldn’t deny the excitement he got out of that. What was the point of a game when you already knew that you were going to win? The stakes were a bit too high for Loki’s taste. Whatever the result of the negotiations would be, Asgard’s future would be shaped by it. Loki’s talk about responsibility wasn’t just empty words to appeal to the minister’s belief. Who was going to do the dirty work if not him?

Politics had nothing glorious about them and Loki revelled in that. It allowed him to laugh at people who actually thought that it was a noble field. At least the monarchy didn’t pretend, unlike democracies. Also, it was so much more effective. Loki only needed to convince one person instead of a couple of hundred. He wasn’t going to let Asgard become America’s little playball. They already had half of the globe to mess around with, Loki didn’t intent to let them set a single foot in Asgardian territory. For centuries they had been on their own and they had done perfectly well for themselves. The rest of the country agreed. Sometimes it was that simple.

“Your highness, I must admit I am surprised that you didn’t mention the arms deal with a single word.”

The mere mentioning brought a smile to Loki’s lips and he felt a little chill, he could hardly wait. “The meeting with the military associates and Tony Stark is next Friday. I didn’t get an invitation yet, but I know the venue and the time. I’m sure it’s going to be entertaining.”

That actually got a laugh out of the minister, but Loki caught his slight nervousness. “Do you think a single affront is going to be enough to stop negotiations of such grandeur?”

“What do you think of me? I don’t plan on causing a scene… I’m going to call a thing by its name.”

“That’s not very diplomatic.”

“I am not a diplomat, neither a politician. Just a spoiled prince who cannot keep his mouth shut.” Loki smiled and the minister showed his amusement. “I know about your abilities as an actor, but that’s a role you’re not able to play. At least not for long.”

Too true, but Loki liked to give it a try.

“Thank you for responding to my call, minister. I’m looking forward to our cooperation.”

“Your highness.” After the minister had bowed his head they shook hands and Loki was very
content how this meeting had gone down. There were still sane people left.

Loki didn’t think that he could do enough damage during the conference with Stark and the military to sabotage the arms deal. In the end it was Odin’s decision and his father had proven again and again that he didn’t respond as well to Loki’s manipulations like most other people. Loki could try to piss off the military and Stark, pretty much every single person in the world was willing to do business with somebody they hated. The price had to be right.

Leaving the conference room Loki walked down the hall, humming softly a song that he couldn’t remember the name of. It was from some old movie, he was sure. Tonight he was just going to put his feet on the couch table and watch whatever was on TV. Wear his sweatpants and drink lemonade from a bottle.

Loki was only a few doors away from his rooms when his phone rang. Heimdall. Sighing softly Loki answered the call. “I’m listening.”

“Your highness, your brother wishes to speak to you, but he couldn’t find you in your chambers.”

Really, Thor? You call the chief of security because of that? Ridiculous…

“I guess you’ll have to find me a babysitter then.”

“Your highness, I merely…”

“Yes, I know. I’m just returning to my rooms, I will let Thor know personally. Thank you, Heimdall.”

So it was time again to explain Thor that Loki wasn’t at his disposal 24/7 and that he was perfectly capable of using a phone himself.

What a lovely sight to greet him? Thor was pacing across Loki’s salon and Loki felt instantly sorry for his carpet.

“I didn’t change my phone number, you know.” Loki closed the door behind, casually pulling off his shoes.

Thor spun around, he had clearly been longing to see Loki which was never a good sign. While Thor wasn’t a very patient person, he was always very relaxed. The world had to be about to end to evoke in him a sense of stress. Probably not Loki’s world…

“What?”

Rolling his eyes Loki took off his jacket and draped it over the backrest of a chair. This was going to be a long talk, so Loki could easily sit down. “Call me instead of the chief of security. You know I hate it when I feel tracked in my own home.”

“Yes, sorry, but Heimdall usually knows…”

“No, you think I would know too where I am at the moment?”

Thor uttered a strange noise. It suspiciously sounded like he was trying not to groan in annoyance. No patience whatsoever today, another bad sign. “Alright, I got it. Next time I’ll call you. I need to talk to you.”

“I figured.” Loki made an inviting gesture, but Thor shook his head, refusing to sit down. “Father
forbade me to marry Jane.”

Of course, he did and Thor had known that this would happen. It was a no-brainer. Except that the wordings was all wrong and words were important. They made all the difference. “I’m perfectly sure that he didn’t forbid you anything. You are not a slave.”

“I might as well be one.”

“Oh, shut up, Thor. Nobody likes the ‘Oh, I’m such a poor prince with blue blood’ routine. We live in a palace made of gold and father cannot tell you who to marry. Why are we even talking about marriage? You haven’t even hit the one year mark yet.” Loki wasn’t going to pretend that he didn’t enjoy lecturing his big brother and Thor was too upset to care. No fun this way.

“I’m going to marry her.” Thor stated matter-of-factly and Loki raised an eyebrow. “No, I haven’t proposed yet, but I know that I will and I also know that she’s going to say yes.”

“So what is all the fuss about?”

Thor continued to pace, letting his frustration out in a small growl. “Father doesn’t approve. Is it so hard to believe that I don’t want him to dislike my girlfriend?”

“Again, correct me if I’m wrong, but I think I remember that he was quite fond of her…”

“Loki, you know what I’m trying to say… Father forces me to go directly against his wishes if I want to be with Jane. I don’t understand why. You’ve said it yourself, he likes her, but he firmly advices me against marrying her, because she is American… This is wrong. Totally wrong and you know that too.”

“So you’re just here, because you want me to confirm whatever you’re saying.”

“I’m still angry. Maybe I just want somebody to agree with me.”

Loki was unable to hold back a chuckle. “And you come to me for that?”

“Crazy, I know…” Thor huffed and finally stopped running holes into Loki’s carpet. “I introduced you to Jane, you know her and you said that you liked her.” By the sound of Thor’s voice Loki could tell that he wanted an instant confirmation. Why not? “Sure, I went out with you guys. Did I give you another impression?”

“No, of course not, but then I don’t see why you aren’t on my side.”

“Now there are sides? Come on, Thor, it’s not like you didn’t know yourself that this relationship is problematic. There’s a reason why you’ve been sneaking around so much. You even asked me to cover your back. Maybe your relationship to Jane shouldn’t be problematic, but it is. Nothing to do about that. You have to play with the hand you’ve been dealt.”

There was no immediate answer, instead Thor chose to grudgingly mutter under his breath. Loki could exactly see the moment when he decided to pull himself together and do something about it. “Fine. Yes, you’re right, but you have to see where I’m coming from. Jane is intelligent, sophisticated and has a lot of empathy. She would be a great king’s consort… Father is so adamantly sure that the people are going to reject her… just because of her nationality.”

Nagging on his lower lip Loki took his time before giving an answer. His opinion on this matter was quite clear and Thor wouldn’t like it. On the other hand it wasn’t like he couldn’t understand his dilemma. Thor didn’t think of his relationship as a matter of state and perhaps he shouldn’t have to.
Like every other person Thor deserved to be with the person he wanted to be with. The Asgardian people deserved a king’s consort they could trust and feel connected with.

The king was the ruler of the country, to lead it to prosperity and to protect it. It was important for any monarch to know that he was a servant. Obligated to do what was best for the people which might not always be what the people wanted. At the same time, it was madness to underestimate the wisdom of your subjects. Or their needs…

“It’s incredible bad timing. The people are already getting riled up over the new policy. They don’t want a closer relationship with the United States. What would they think if you suddenly announced the engagement with an American woman?”

“Father is willing to put an end to animosities that have lasted over hundreds of years. Our people should be open to that too. The Americans are able to put prejudices aside, so why can’t…”

“Oh please…” There was no way Loki was going to let Thor finish that nonsense. “We are a geopolitical point of interest for them. Nothing more. They want access to our harbours and believe me, in a year or two there will be talk about military bases on Asgardian ground. Why? We’re the gateway to Russia. That’s all this new policy is about. Nobody is becoming friends.”

“We’re not talking about policy, we’re talking about Jane!”

“The people won’t separate between her and the policy, so why should I? Look, Thor, I like her. I really do and I’m sure she would be doing her very best to meet expectations, but it would be ridiculously hard. She is Christian, right? She doesn’t have a shrine to talk to her ancestors. The concept of the trias of the soul is completely alien to her. That is going to alienate people…”

Thor crossed his arms in front of his chest, narrowing his eyes at Loki. Now he had clearly hit a soft spot. “So you are telling me that our people reject anything they don’t know? That’s backward and stupid. Maybe they should be forced to get in contact with something new. Welcome to the 21st century.”

“You can’t force a society to change, that always ends up in tragedy and revolution. These things have to happen on their own, naturally. You are looking at this from the wrong point of view. Jane is a single person. There are 30 million Asgardians. Is it fair that 30 million people have to adapt to the needs of one single person? No, it’s not. Everybody in this nation speaks English, so she doesn’t have to learn Old Norse?”

“Of course she would have to learn the language…”

“Finally, a silver lining…” Loki mumbled, shifting in his chair. “… and she’d have to renounce her faith… Is she religious?”

Eventually the weight of the conversation was wearing Thor down and he sank down on the chair opposite of Loki. “No. She is a scientist. Her profession doesn’t mix well with Christianity.”

“That’s not true. Faith and science would easily go hand in hand if either side wasn’t so damned stubborn.”

“Could you stop being a smartass for just one second?”

Unable to hold back a smirk Loki shrugged. “No, not really… but I’ll try to get back to the point. You haven’t even proposed yet and hopefully you won’t do that in the next 12 months. There is still time and Jane will have to be willing to put up quite an effort. There is no law that says you can’t
marry whoever you want to…”

His brother looked at him and Loki could see that he had reached him. Thor still didn’t like what he was being told, but he saw the truth in it. “Is this the part where you finally give a piece of advice?”

Smiling softly Loki nodded. Thor was a hothead and Loki didn’t doubt that he would have figured this out by himself in a couple of days. Unfortunately Thor wanted everything to work out immediately and his first reaction to resistance was the urge to crush it. Destroy an obstacle instead of simply jumping over it. In a moment of silence Loki had confessed to his ancestors that his sympathy for Jane was marginal. Despite her intellect she was a plain, awfully simple woman. The kind to get passionate about books, but quickly put them aside when a pretty young man bestowed her with his attention. Nothing that Loki would ever be interested in. Personal preferences aside, Loki trusted his knowledge of human nature and Jane was fairly easy to read. She was a good person and it was sweet to see Thor’s reaction to being with her. There was no doubt that his brother wanted to be with her and since Jane didn’t seem to show a suspicious interest in wealth or royalty, Loki thought that the affection was mutual. The law of succession didn’t forbid Thor to marry a Midgardian and Loki knew that Thor’s stubbornness didn’t have any limits.

Thor was going to marry the woman he wanted and Loki was going to make sure that the Asgardian people would get the best king’s consort possible. They deserved it and this way Thor wouldn’t have to face trouble the second he would become king.

“Okay, free advice. Make the relationship public. Everybody knows anyway. The people don’t have to like Jane, the American. They need to like Jane. So introduce her to them. Public appearances. Small at first and you have to brief her. If the people get to know her, there is a bigger chance they are going to accept her. The biggest mistake you could make is announcing an engagement tomorrow and present them with a fait accompli. Jane is beautiful and…” No, Loki couldn’t bring himself to use the word ‘charming’. “… lovely. The people will come to like her if they are given the chance.”

Instantly Thor was lightening up, the lines on his forehead slowly disappearing. “That does sound like a good idea… Father won’t be pleased.”

“Father isn’t pleased about a lot of things we do. He will be able to cope. Also you forgot about your most important supporter.”

“Mother, right… Jane liked her too. Even father liked her. There shouldn’t be any problems…”

If Thor was going back to whining, Loki was going to play some games on his phone. “You can’t expect to find simple solutions for complex issues. Our people are smart, give them a chance to prove that.”

When Thor nodded Loki was about to utter a relieved sigh. He found this discussion to be very draining. “Do you want to have dinner tonight? It’s been a while since we’ve done something alone.”

“I was looking forward to do nothing at all tonight…” Cocking his head to the side Loki shot Thor a challenging gaze. “You want to hang out on the couch and watch some movies? We could order a pizza.”

“Okay… but I choose a movie.”

“Only over my cold, dead body.”
“That could be arranged. Your taste in movies is atro… Oh.”

Both of their phones went off simultaneously. They both had a private secretary to take care of their schedules, but they weren’t working together. So the messages were probably from Heimdall or the king’s private secretary.

Bullseye

Reception of Lord Laufey Ymirson

Tomorrow 15:00 o’clock in the crystal hall

Formal protocol, presence of all male members of the royal family required

“Well, so much about my tennis match with the gorgeous DS agent…” Loki put his phone back into his pocket and he could see that Thor looked just as pleased as him. “What appointment do you have to call off?”

“I wanted to show Jane the gardens of the summer residence… Well, meeting the Lord of the Frostgiants is going to be just as romantic and pleasant as an afternoon with my girlfriend.”

Loki huffed, swallowing a hoarse laugh. “Don’t let mother hear you say that. She might rip your head off.”

Thor made a nonchalant gesture. “Nobody but you heard that. It’s not like I’m going to say it to his face… This is going to be awful. Father is going to demand that Laufey establishes order in Jotunheim and Laufey is going to tell him that he doesn’t take orders from a Búrison. I really can’t wait…”

Well, Loki couldn’t deny that he was a little bit more interested. The Jotuns were a constant pain, nothing new about that, but they were absolutely devoted to their Lord. It wasn’t like the rest of the country didn’t support their king, the monarchy was as stable as ever, but it was impossible to deny that nobody respected their banners as much as the Jotuns.

Laufey was going to put up some outrageous demands if Odin wanted him to get his people to take part in the festivities for the 500 year anniversary. It was going to be a good lesson in negotiations. Loki could need some training before taking on the American military and Stark.

It wasn’t going to be fun, but there was no way that Loki was going to be bored.
Hello everybody,

The Lord of Jotunheim shows up... he and the King of Asgard don't like each other very much

Have fun :)

There was a constant buzz in the air. Certainly not a pleasant one. The staff was rushing through the rooms, trying to get everything done as quickly as possible. Thor felt kind of sorry for them. It was a short visit, no great delegation and yet everything had to be prepared to perfection. Everything always had to be different with the Jotuns.

Normally his father didn’t feel the need to show off or to intimidate his subjects or guests with over-the-top displays of his status and power as king. Everything always had to be different when it came down to the Jotuns.

Whenever a diplomatic guest of another nation arrived his father would welcome them in the first patio of the palace. Next to a beautiful fountain, surrounded by the King’s personal guard. It was a symbolic gesture, the King was going to meet you half-way, making you feel important and welcomed.

None of that was going to happen today. The reception was going to take place in what used to be the throne room. There was no explanation needed to understand what that was supposed to mean. Laufey would definitely know. Thor didn’t think highly of the Jotun Lord, but there was no denying the man’s intelligence… and ruthlessness. Like his entire clan. Also, they always felt like they were being treated badly. Not just the noble families situated in Jotunheim, the entire population. By now Thor was almost willing to accept that as part of their heritage. Professional victims. If somebody couldn’t stop complaining about something over and over again, at some point it wasn’t possible anymore to take them seriously.

Everywhere Thor looked he saw red. New banners on the wall, carpet on the floor. It was almost a little too much for his taste, but he could see where his father was going with it. This is was Asgard. The palace of the royal family. You are only our guest. Don’t forget that. So simple.

It shouldn’t be like this. Meetings with the Lord of Jotunheim should be like with anybody else. Unfortunately the Jotuns wouldn’t stop forcing their hand. All of this to put Laufey in his place and Thor already knew that it wouldn’t make the tiniest difference. The Lord of the Jotuns wouldn’t be impressed by any of this. No, Laufey wasn’t going to bat an eyelid.

Another person who wasn’t going to acknowledge any of this was Thor’s little brother. Him and Loki had been walking down the hall when two maids had rushed past them, one of the banners in their hands. A quick nod of their heads, a mumbled apology, but Loki didn’t even really looked at them, he kept talking about a new Italian restaurant that he had discovered.

Loki seemed completely disinterested while Thor couldn’t pretend that he wasn’t affected by the
constant buzz. Something was going to happen today and there was a good chance in might end up in disaster.

An unstoppable force was going to meet an immobile object.

Those were the things that should worry his father. The Jotuns and their stubbornness. Thor’s relationship to Jane was nothing of that sort.

Swallowing a sigh Thor buttoned up his red blazer and opened the jewellery case in his wardrobe. Secured by a code and it contained only a single item. Thor put the bracelet around his wrist and connected the two heads of the dragon with each other. Their ruby eyes were sparkling and the gold felt cold against his skin. It was shining brightly, but Thor nevertheless thought that it was about time to get somebody to polish it.

Checking his appearance in the mirror Thor nodded contently. On days like these every little detail had to be perfect. Time to put all the rules of courtesy on display that they would usually ignore.

Thor’s phone buzzed. A message from Heimdall.

Only ten minutes left, your highness

Another afternoon lost. He hadn’t seen Jane in two days, but now he was supposed to put up with the Lord of the people who would gladly murder his entire family in their sleep. Nonetheless Thor knew better than to show up even one second too late. The grandeur of the crystal hall had always intimidated him as a child. Now it didn’t seem as big anymore, but Thor knew about its history which was way more impressive anyway.

Loki was already there, standing on the left, one hand buried in the pocket of his jacket. There was no doubt that he had his fingers curled around his phone, waiting for some kind of message. His little brother was always waiting for something.

The guards were already lined up next to the door and their father had taken his place at the end of the hall, sitting in the only chair. He was doing his very best to make Laufey immediately understand what was going on her. The King wasn’t asking for anything. Thor felt like pacing. This was already taking way too long when it hadn’t even started yet.

Jane was sitting alone in a hotel room when they could already be miles away, spending a sunny afternoon in the gardens.

Heimdall was walking up to Thor’s father, he could see him whispering something in the King’s ear. That meant Laufey had arrived, finally. Thor wouldn’t have put it past this guy to let them wait for hours. Maybe there was still a chance for Thor to spend the evening with Jane.

Another couple of minutes in which Thor was rubbing his thumb over his bracelet, trying to warm the precious metal. By now Loki had crossed his arms in front of his chest, a flash over silver around his wrist. His face still didn’t give anything away.

The door was being opened and the grand marshal stepped inside. Time to get this over with. “The Lord of Jotunheim, Lord Laufey Ymirson.”

It had been a couple of years since the last time Thor had seen Laufey. Not much had changed about his appearance. Laufey was one of these men who had an almost disturbingly intense charisma. A person who was used to people looking at him to figure out who he was or what he was thinking. Immediately interested in what he had to say although he remained silent.
Today Laufey had to be in his early sixties but his hair was just as pitch-black as it had always been. It was loosely tied together in the back of his neck, keeping it from falling into his face. The elegance Laufey was transmitting so effortlessly rubbed Thor the wrong way. Odin was summoned him, because his people weren’t loyal, they had been disobedient and Laufey didn’t do anything to keep them in check. Quite the opposite, he supported his subject when it was his duty to act out the King’s will.

Now he was strolling in here like he was doing them a courtesy. Walking with firm, assured steps, his eyes not even glancing at any of his surroundings. Thor tried to take in all the details, to see the big picture.

While the staff had put a lot of effort into transforming the hall into one big symbol of the Búrison dynasty, Laufey had done the same with his own appearance. The long frock coat. Dark blue with a pattern of black stripes. At least it looked like a pattern at first glance. Those were runes. Not Old Norse but Jǫtnar. It could mean pretty much anything… but Thor was sure that it was some kind of insult against their family.

Laufey stopped in front of Thor’s father, looking straight at him, not batting an eyelid. Had he already scanned and analysed the situation? Did he already know that nobody was going to offer him a seat?

“My Lord Laufey.” Odin softly tilted his head, that was as much as a sign of respect that Laufey was going to get.

“Your grace.”

Two words and Thor was already on the edge. Technically it was the appropriate way to address the King, but there was something about the way Laufey’s pronunciation. Hard to put his finger on it. No open hostility, he was probably too much of a coward for that, but there was just a hint of sarcasm to it. Or wasn’t there? It was hard to tell.

“I am most sorry that this meeting had to happen at such short notice.”

Laufey’s expression remained completely the same. Stoic and displeased. “If you are so concerned about causing me inconvenience you could have come to me instead of ordering me here.”

Thor was biting his lip to stifle a bitter laugh. At least his words were clear this time. That was the first strike. What else to expect from a Jotun?

Odin didn’t take the bite. “Now that we’re already here… we have to talk about the unacceptable actions of the mayor of Útgarðar and how we are going to deal with it.”

“I will gladly help if you could tell me what unacceptable actions we are talking about. I always keep an eye on my subjects. To my knowledge the mayor hasn’t violated a single law.”

“So you support his protest against the festivities?”

Laufey ever so slightly raised his head. “At the moment… yes.”

This time Thor was unable to hold back an upset huff. He had never been fond of insolence, just like his father.

“You take no issue with the mayor refusing to make the capital of Jotunheim part of a celebration that unites all of Asgard?”
“My people do not think that there is anything to celebrate and I respect their wishes. I would even respect them if I didn’t agree with them. There is nothing to celebrate.”

Thor had heard enough. “You are out of line, Lord Laufey. You are insulting the King”

That got him the Lord’s attention, although it was nothing more than a short glance. He probably didn’t think Thor was worthy of his time. “Am I? I am merely stating facts, your highness. The Duke of Bilskirnir may not see it that way, but I am listening to my people’s concerns. They don’t feel like there is something to celebrate. Who am I to force them to?”

Thor curled his lips and Odin continued the conversation. “Jotunheim demands special treatment, I guess?”

“The Jotuns are not eager to celebrate a reign that has been founded on their oppression.”

Even from a distance Thor could see how his father’s hand tightened around the armrest of his chair. The insolence was beyond words. Yet Odin kept his composure. A warning growl was all he offered. “Laufey…”

“Would your grace prefer it if I lied? Your grace has to be aware of the daily protests in Útgarðar. Of course you could ignore them, force my capital to put up garlands, decorate the main square, play music and sell candy. But… you should also be aware how this night of festivities is going to end. In disaster and probable violence.”

Thor swallowed and Odin leaned slightly forward. “Are you threatening me, my Lord?”

By now Thor almost expected the Jotun to laugh but Laufey merely seemed annoyed. “I’m calling a thing by its name… you can only kick an old dog so many times, sooner or later it will turn around and bite you.”

“This is outrageous!” Thor made a step forward, but his father made a little gesture with his hand, indicating him to stay where he was.

“I have heard this fairy tale of the oppressed and tortured Jotuns so many times that I am an expert on it. Nonetheless… you are their Lord, you claim to be so close to your people. To understand their needs and fears. So what can be done about this situation? What does the poor Jotun soul need to celebrate one single day with the rest of this nation?”

The clear mockery couldn’t go by unnoticed and for once Laufey slipped a little. Thor could see the disdain in his eyes. How much he loathed this place and all the people in this hall.

“A rather simple matter would relief the situation of most of its tension.”

“Go on.”

Laufey tilted his chin up, his voice was calm and determined. “We want Jǫtnar to be taught in schools.”

There was not enough willpower in the world to stop Thor from rolling his eyes. Nothing new. Same old song, same old dance. His father was better at not showing his distaste. “I see. You are not threatening, but blackmailing.”

“None of that. I am merely giving you the reason why the students of Jotunheim, the next generation is calling for independence. For a Jotun state.”
“And you aren’t?”

“No, Asgard and Jotunheim are one.”

“You have always been claiming that we are so very different.”

“Oh, we are.” Laufey stated lowly. “And we have been treated differently for over 500 years although it was my family that build this nation.”

That should have been the last draw. No reasonable discussion was possible with this Frostgiant. Yet Thor’s father was still willing to give it a try. Admirable. “We are not going to discuss history, Laufey. You say your youth is causing uproar and because you are unable to handle it, you want me to give them what they want.”

Thor closely watched the Jotun and he could see Laufey curling one hand into a fist. “It’s also what I want. It’s what every Jotun wants. It’s our right to teach our children in our own language.”

Odin was still being patient. “You have the right to speak Jǫtnar in all private spheres of life. Old Norse is the official language of this country. It is used in administration, education and media.”

“No need to quote the ‘Language Act’, I’m perfectly familiar with it.”

“Then you should also know that it’s the law.”

“It’s discrimination and a pathetic attempt to annihilate Jotun culture and traditions. Your family has been trying for centuries to banish and destroy the Jǫtnar language. Despite your best attempts it’s not going anywhere. It’s every single Jotun’s mother tongue.” This strange and exaggerated pride was something Thor was never going to understand.

“Then why do you still need it to be taught in school?”

That question caused Laufey to release a long breath. Was he trying to keep himself in check when he was the one who couldn’t stop provoking the king? “It’s our language. Our heritage. Part of our identity. No king has the right to tell us we cannot use it inside the walls of a school. Your grace…”

This time the sarcasm wasn’t lost on anyone. “… this is all you need to offer calm down the masses. You know very well that we could demand so much more, that there are so many things that you took away from us. You or one of your predecessors. Today we only want our right to teach our children. Old Norse is still going to be taught at school. Along with Jǫtnar.”

“That’s what you demand today. Tomorrow it’s going to be something else. That’s all you have ever done. Because no matter how much you claim to be part of this nation, your family has always seen itself as something better. Something more important and you’ve been telling your subject that for centuries. Now they believe it themselves. Yes, you are part of this nation and you are not going to be treated any differently. Old Norse is the official language. The only official language.”

Laufey nodded slowly. “Then there is nothing left to talk about. I am going to return to Jotunheim at once.”

“No, you haven’t been dismissed yet, Lord Laufey. The Duchess of Frensalir is asking for your presence at dinner tonight. Perhaps there is still time and opportunity to find a compromise.”

The Jotun pursed his lips, but eventually nodded and Thor sighed inwardly. Why was their mother always trying to make peace with everyone when there was absolutely no point in it?

“I will see you tonight.”
And that was it, their father left and Thor was glad that he could finally…

“That will not be necessary.” Loki dismissed the grand marshal with a single glance and walked up to Laufey. “If the Lord doesn’t object, I will lead him to the chambers that are at his disposal for the time of his stay.”

Laufey bowed his head, something he hadn’t done in front of the King. “I gladly accept, your highness.”

This meant Loki was definitely planning something. Trying to find one way or another to manipulate the Jotun into giving them what they wanted. Thor had hoped that he could instantly leave after the reception, but now there was no way he could miss out on whatever Loki was about to do. “I think I will join you.”

Now Laufey was looking at him for the second time and Thor felt a cold shudder running down his spine, because the Jotun wasn’t hiding any of his contempt. Damned Frostgiant. “Should I be honored to be escorted by two Asgardian princes?”

Loki put on a biting smile. “After you, my Lord.”

They left the crystal hall and Thor definitely hoped that Loki knew what he was doing, because he had better things to do than this. At least he didn’t have to wait long.

“As much as I admire your passion for your people, my Lord… you weren’t doing a good job fighting for their cause.”

“The last time I saw you, your highness, you were only a boy although 20 years old. Your tongue hasn’t lost any of its insolence.”

“I consider that a compliment.”

“It was a compliment.”

Loki grinned. “You have to know that the language act is not going to be amended or abolished. The festivities for the 500 years anniversary are a prestige project. If Jotunheim refuses to join in on the fun, nobody will be surprised. Sure, it won’t look as good, but one week later everybody will have forgotten about it. You have no leverage.”

“There shouldn’t be the need for leverage.”

“Of course there is. It’s politics.”

The Jotun uttered a hoarse laugh. “Tell me, your highness… do you approve of the language act? Do you see a need for it? Political? Social? Administrative? Or is it just another way to oppress my people?”

“The banishment of Jötnar happened centuries ago. After a Jotun rebellion. It wasn’t my father who put it in place.”

“But he reinforced it.” Laufey stopped, his eyes drilling into Loki, completely ignoring Thor’s presence. His brother didn’t even flinch. “You didn’t answer my question. Do you approve of it? Is there a need for it?”

Loki remained silent which surprised Thor. Or maybe the question was too obvious.
“You have a degree in history. You studied the past of our nation.”

“I studied history in general. Asgard isn’t the centre of the world.” Loki corrected the Jotun who nodded. “But you know about the creation of this glorious nation. You know who built it, created it from nothing.”

Thor wanted to step in and tell him that it didn’t matter who had been the first crowned King. Their ancestors had made Asgard what it was today. 500 years of prosperity and what had happened before that was so long ago that it didn’t matter anymore. All influence from that time was long gone.

Eventually Loki answered the question. “Yes, I know. This history of Asgard begins in Jotunheim. Your family built the foundation of this nation.”

“And your family has done everything in its power to put all of Jotunheim down ever since it stole the throne from the legitimate queen. Forget for a second about everything what your father indoctrinated you about your proud and glorious family. The great Búri who became king 500 years ago… Your family won the war. Stole our treasures, build castles on our land, revoked the titles of countless noble Jotun families, replaced Jotun laws with yours, made it illegal to speak a word of Jǫtnar… Now do tell me, Loki, Duke of Glæsisvellir, second born son of Odin IV, misgotten King of Asgard – do you approve of the language act?”

Thor looked at his brother who suddenly seemed uneasy beneath the Jotun’s glare. All of this they had heard so many times before. It was pointless. What had happened 500 years ago may seem uncivilised today, but it had been common practice all around Europe.

“No.” Loki shook his head. “I don’t approve of it… neither do I approve of rebellion.”

“Oh, your highness… you haven’t seen rebellion yet.”
Hello everybody,

Loki and Odin talk about the Jotun situation and the American embassy welcome a special guest ;)

Have fun

Loki discarded of his tie and opened the first button of his shirt. Strolling over to the bar Loki checked out the labels on the bottles before going straight for whiskey. Casually Loki poured himself a glass and took a little sip. Appropriate to the situation. Very dry.

“I see you’ve already served yourself.”

“Don’t I always?” Loki took another sip while his father was closing the door.

“Of course you do. Also hand me a glass, please?”

Without giving a response Loki prepared his father a glass and headed over to the sofa where they both sat down.

“Thank you.” Leaning back Loki watched his father, almost involuntarily comparing him to the Lord of Jotunheim. There was a difference of 15 years between them and while talking to each other, both were perfectly able to stand their ground. Now, only in the presence of his son, Odin looked tired. Understandably so, but Loki couldn’t get used to it.

“You were uncharacteristically quiet during the reception. You must be dying to say a couple of things. So please, go ahead.” Odin indicated him to talk and Loki smirked, shrugging softly. “I thought there had already been enough interruptions.”

Releasing a very long breath Odin placed his glass on the table. “Thor still has to learn to keep his temper in check. He will have to attend more receptions and parliament meetings. Sometimes biting your tongue is vital. Now go ahead. Tell me what you think.”

Loki put on a smile, half sweetness, half spite. “I think that it wasn’t very diplomatic.”

“Diplomacy is lost on Jotun issues. Now tell me, what would you have done differently?”

“My stance on the Language Act isn’t as firm as yours, father. By now I believe it brings more trouble than good.”

Odin nodded slowly. “Go on. Why do you think that?”

“All it does is alienating the Jotun population from us. It’s a constant source of controversy and it would be quite simple to do something about it. Jqtnar lessons in schools wouldn’t change anything. Both of us know that they already do take place, although illegally. Maybe that possibility might be worth considering.”
The words didn’t feel quite right on Loki’s tongue, but he doubted that there was an actual right way to say them. Odin was studying his face and Loki was well aware that he was being tested. Like all the time. “Where would you draw the line? You would give them Jǫtnar lessons. What would happen next? Because you know that they wouldn’t be grateful. They would say that it was about time and that it wasn’t enough. You like the game, Loki. What would be the next step?”

There were a lot of things that Loki despised. His father pointing out the flaws in his logic was pretty high on the list. “They wouldn’t be content with the lessons…”

“Exactly. It’s either all or nothing. Laufey might say that for now it’s only the lessons in schools, but then it would be bilingual traffic signs. Official documents and eventually they’d even demand that Jǫtnar would be made official language. It’s Pandora’s Box. Opening it would be unreasonable. Also it would be unfair. The Language Act ensures that every citizen of this nation is being treated equally. It’s a tool to unite the people, not to drive them apart.”

Loki didn’t make the tiniest attempt to hold back the soft laugh which wanted to pass his lips. “Father, please spare me the speeches. The Language Act was the punishment for the Jotun rebellion of 1605. It’s rather difficult to sell it as an act of unity.”

“Things evolve, they change. Former Kings were concerned about vast differences that separate us from the Jotuns. Most of their population weren’t able to voice a single word of Old Norse. Language is a mighty barrier. It’s hard for people to feel united when they cannot even understand each other. Thanks to the Language Act Old they had to start teaching Old Norse in schools and now every Jotun is perfectly bilingual. The Language Act is the main reason our ancestors were even able to rule Asgard in its entirety.”

One of Loki’s easiest tasks. Keeping the muscles of his face under perfect control, not showing the sour mood he was drifting into. As a kid he had listened in awe whenever his father had lectured him and Thor about politics or the history of their country. For a child as eager to learn as Loki these conversations had been the highlight of his day and he had memorised every word that had spilled from his father’s lips. Why ask questions? Odin was Loki’s father and the King, the two biggest authority figures Loki could ever think of. It wasn’t like now that he was an adult he didn’t believe his father anymore. No, Loki knew that what he said was true, although he wasn’t blind to how his father’s personal thoughts coloured his words. The lectures were tiring, because Odin was well aware of Loki’s academic career. With two degrees in history Loki had all the credentials to claim that he knew about everything Odin had just been referring to. Nonetheless his father still enjoyed to quote facts as if he was the only one who knew them. Even though his son was an expert in this particular field.

So yes, Loki was quite annoyed, but preferred to keep his mouth shut. Something he didn’t do that often, only when it was absolutely necessary. The benefits of the Language Act couldn’t be denied. 400 years ago the language barrier had almost made it impossible for the monarch to take care of his subjects in Jotunheim. Among the intellectuals and academics of the country barely anyone could speak a word of Jǫtnar. The reason for this was very simple, the Jǫtnar language was infamous for its complexity. There were over 10 grammatical cases, seemingly endless agglutination, a complicated syntax and the slightest changing of a suffix could change the meaning of an entire phrase. Most people who tried to learn Jǫtnar would give up soon after finding out that it demanded absolute discipline and hundreds of hours of commitment. So barely anyone except the Jotuns spoke their language. The Language Act had forced them to teach Old Norse in schools, not a word of Jǫtnar had been used in the legislation since. All of it was Old Norse. It had been a very effective way to tie Jotunheim to the crown and at the same time it had helped the resentment to grow.

Odin had said it himself – every Jotun was bilingual, it was necessary to consume the media and in
the working environment. Technically there was no need for the Language Act anymore, television programs would still be in Old Norse and the economy more or less forced them to be able to speak the official language anyway.

On the other end Loki knew that his father was right about the Domino Effect, Jötun lessons would only be the start. Yet something had to be done, at the moment Jotunheim was starting to transform into a powder keg and they were sitting on it.

“Jotunheim is different. It will always be different. The situation is tense, maybe it would be smart to give them some leeway.”

No, Odin didn’t look pleased. “What do you suggest?”

“No celebrations in Jotunheim. That might be enough to calm down the tempers. Yes, it will look bad if we call everything off, but wouldn’t it be worse if nobody showed up to the festivities or if it ended up in violence. We have to be honest to ourselves, there is no way Jotunheim is going to celebrate the 500 years anniversary. It’s not going to happen. We’re going to lose face if we’re going to force them anyway and it’s going to end up in disaster.”

Loki downed the rest of his whiskey, giving his father time to respond. Naturally he would know that it was the right thing to do, but his pride was very likely to get in the way. Only very few dynasties could claim to have ruled for over 500 years and Odin wanted his entire nation to celebrate their glorious past. Which was never going to happen. “I might give it some thought…”

That was a lot more than Loki had expected and what proved that his father understood that the festivities would never take place. Yet that was all Odin was willing to give them. It wasn’t going to solve the problem which couldn’t be done on a single day anyway.

When Loki was already thinking about excusing himself his father spoke up again, using a completely different tone than before, immediately intriguing Loki. “What do you think about what your brother said during the reception?”

Blinking in confusion Loki couldn’t say much but “What?”

“I want to know what you think about what your brother said during the reception?”

Well, this seemed like the perfect time to be diplomatic, but Loki couldn’t quite find it in him. Not when Thor had acted so tremendously stupid. “I think that he should learn not to get a grip when one of the most influential lords of this country is present… Laufey was anything but impressed. I have no idea what got into him, he’s usually quite charming with the lords…”

A little smile flickered across Odin’s face. “Jotunheim is a sore subject and nobody can hide their thoughts and feelings as well as you, son.”

Loki responded with a frown. “Does that mean you excuse his outburst?”

“No, not at all. You are right and I hoped that your brother would come to the same conclusion and that he would wait here for me to talk about what has happened. Yet here you are and I don’t see him.”

Right, that couldn’t look good, but Loki didn’t feel the need say anything else that would get his big brother into deeper trouble. “Perhaps he wants to talk to you about it after the dinner…”

“Loki, you should know better than trying to lie to me. You haven’t been able to lie to me since you were a little child.”
That wasn’t true, but Loki wasn’t going to point that out. “I don’t always know what Thor is thinking or doing.”

“But you know where your brother is.”

Not the best moment to roll his eyes. “I have the distinct feeling that he is meeting his girlfriend. He wanted to spend the day with her anyway. I don’t know for sure. You could just call him…”

“Loki, it’s not my intention to use you to spy on your brother. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

It was not too late for that and Loki responded with a shrug. “You may excuse me now, father. I’ll see you tonight at the dinner.”

Not waiting to be dismissed Loki got up from the couch, shortly bowed his head and then strolled directly out of the room. He was in no way looking forward to this evening and now he had to warn Thor that their father was very displeased about his disappearance. Loki tried to call him but only reached the mailbox. Now that was just perfect. Groaning softly Loki returned to his quarters, sinking down on his bed to stare at the ceiling. He should be studying documents about the arms deal to be prepared for the meeting with the Americans, but right now Loki couldn’t bring himself to even lift a finger. The talk with his father had been strangely draining.

The dinner with Laufey was another thing that Loki didn’t particularly look forward to. Something about that man was putting him off. Maybe because he was so hard to read. Not all the time. Every look the Jotun gave Loki’s father was a testament to his hatred and anger. Loki wasn’t naïve, he was well aware that they only got see what Laufey wanted them to see. Everything else was a complete mystery. How Loki loathed them.

Grabbing a book from his nightstand Loki tried to surrender himself to the story he was reading. About an hour before the dinner Loki began to prepare, taking a shower and washing his hair. His father would probably want him to put on his most splendid attire, but Loki didn’t feel like putting his rank on display. Laufey wasn’t going to let such simple things provoke him anyway. Eventually Loki settled for a dark green vest and a black jacket. As Loki adjusted his sleeves and his bracelet he noticed that the polish on the nails of his right hand was chipping. To his displeasure Loki had to admit that it was a bit late to call one of the maids to help him out with this. He would have to do it himself. About five minutes later Loki had removed the rest of the polish and applied new one. Dark green, matching his vest.

His phone had already vibrated two times. As if Loki had ever showed up late to any important event. When Loki got to the salon his mother and Thor were already present. What a relief, Loki hadn’t been sure if Thor would show up at all.

“Loki!” His mother stood up from the couch, greeting Loki with two kisses on the cheek and smiling brightly at him. “You look splendid.”

“Thank you, mother.” Loki bowed his head before turning to his brother. “I tried to call you.”

“Yes, I know… Sorry, I was busy.” Thor still seemed to be busy, his thoughts far away.

“Father also wanted to talk to you.”

In response Thor merely nodded, not trying to hide that he would rather be anywhere else than here. Loki was about to call him out on it, but their mother was faster. “Thor, you have a beautiful smile. We have a guest today, you should let him see it.”
“Unfortunately mother, I am not as fond of the Jotuns as you are. I am not delighted to see a Lord who thinks he should be King instead of father.”

A stupid thing to say but Loki nevertheless tended to agree. Their mother had always favoured a more moderate policy when it came to the Jotuns. She wasn’t a born Búrison, the repugnance wasn’t ingrained in her family. As long as Loki could remember she had always tried to appease the spirits. An impossible task given that the divide between the Búrisons and Ymirson has had 500 to become even bigger.

Loki could count the times he had seen his mother angry on the fingers of his right hand, but he could see her features tensing right now. “Thor, one of the most influential Lords of our nation is our guest and he will be treated with the same respect you would show anybody else. Let politics aside for one moment and don’t let yourself be guided by a sentiment that has poisoned relationships between Valhalla and Jotunheim for centuries.”

Thor gritted his teeth but didn’t say anything and chose to nod. Instantly Frigga was all smiles again, affectionately touching Thor’s arm.

“Your highnesses, the Lord of Jotunheim.”

The grand Marshall opened the door and Laufey entered the room, instantly filling it with his somewhat cold charisma. “Your highness.” That greeting was meant for Frigga who instantly walked towards him, offering him the very same smile she had offered her own sons. “My Lord Laufey, thank you for granting the court the honour of your presence.”

Once again, Loki had to admire his mother. This was the incredible difference between a woman of her level and Jane. Frigga was able to charm anyone without making it seem forced, it just came natural. In this case because she meant it.

Laufey kissed her hand and he actually smiled back at her, which Loki found the slightest bit unsettling. “It would be a very dark court without your presence, your highness. Thank you for the invitation.”

“We haven’t seen each other in years and since the reason of your visit isn’t a most pleasant one, I want to make most of it. Tell me, how are your sons doing? They were about to become strapping young gentlemen the last time I saw them.”

Suddenly there was a warmth in Laufey’s voice that had obviously been absent during the reception a few hours ago. “They are doing most fine, thank you. Helblindi just completed law school and Byleistr is studying physics. He is making a lot of progress.”

“You have every reason to be proud of them.” Frigga smiled softly, but there was no time to add something else, because the grand Marshall announced the arrival of the king. This was going to be the most awkward dinner of Loki’s life and strangely enough he didn’t think that it was going to be fun.

Two hours later after mostly silence and only Frigga trying to make civil conversation nothing had changed. To Loki’s surprise Odin had agreed to call off the celebrations in Jotunheim, but Laufey merely responded with a nod, clearly discontent with the outcome. When the Jotun left Odin demanded to talk with Thor and Loki couldn’t fight the feeling that more bad news were heading towards them. Well, at least he still had the arms deal to manipulate, that would lighten his spirits.

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Fury was checking his watch. By now everybody was about to lose their patience which would probably result in the silent cursing of carefree billionaires. Granted, Bucky was fairly sure that if everybody let you get away with everything, you would deliberately start looking for ways to annoy people. That didn’t mean he wasn’t running out of patience himself.

Today wasn’t a particularly sunny day and they had been standing out here for over half an hour. The wind was blowing, not enough to be a danger to the helicopter, but the cold air was creeping through Bucky’s uniform anyway. They were starting to look rather stupid, in their best uniforms, all lined up, trying to look their best.

Normally such an effort was only made when important diplomates or the leader of a nation would show up. It seemed like the same rules applied to eccentric arms manufacturers.

Bucky was tempted to shift around, to stop his feet from getting cold, but Fury was standing right next to him, his eyes narrowed to tiny slits. No, Bucky couldn’t imagine that the greetings would be very friendly.

Finally Bucky’s radio came to life and informed him that the estimated time of arrival was two minutes. Although nobody uttered a sound Bucky thought he could hear a collective sigh of relief. You never knew with these guys, Bucky wouldn’t have been surprised if he had let them wait for several hours to mess with them. Just because he could.

The sound of the helicopter approaching from a distance was the loveliest thing Bucky was going to hear all day. When it finally landed right next to them it was his job to rush forward and open the door. “Mr. Stark, it’s a pleasure to…”

No point in finishing his sentence because nobody was getting out of the helicopter. Bucky heard Fury huffing and made a step back to take a look at the inside of the helicopter.

Their long awaited billionaire was comfortably spread out across the seats, wearing headphones and typing on his phone. Well, Bucky hadn’t expected that. Eccentric, everybody knew that, but Stark wouldn’t have been surprised if he had let them wait for several hours to mess with them, right?

Not in the slightest. The dark-haired man was even happily humming whatever song he was listening to and didn’t bother to raise his head. Bucky cleared his throat, but was unable to provoke any kind of reaction.

That was clearly enough for the ambassador. “Mr. Stark!”

Ever so slowly and in the most leisure way possible Stark looked up, then back down at his phone, typed some more and eventually slid it into his jacket. He didn’t bother to take off the headphones though.

“Hello there, you guys practising for the parade for the 4th of July?”

Bucky ignored the odd question. “Good afternoon, Mr. Stark. Welcome to the embassy, it’s an honour to have you here.”

“Yeah, yeah, I bet it is.” Yawning softly Stark finally got up and got out of the helicopter.

“Mr. Stark, I’m Nicolas Fury, the ambassador. I have to thank you for supporting us in this most critical endeavour.”

Raising an eyebrow Stark took a good look at Fury, seemingly confused. Then hecocked his head to the side and clicked his fingers, as if he had only now understood what Fury was saying. “Right, the
arms deal. Yeah, that’s totally priority number one. Anyway, where is the palace, I’ve got kings to annoy and princes to seduce. Let’s get this party started.”
This was an entirely new experience for Steve and he was absolutely sure that he wasn’t fond of it. James in a bad mood was not a sight to behold. Steve would describe himself as a man searching for harmony, he liked it when everybody got along. He knew that it wasn’t necessary, not even possible to establish a friendship with every person you were working with, but Steve liked to think that they would get along just as fine outside of the work area. The second he had met him Steve had taken an instant liking to James and to his bright, warm self. Seeing James angry or in a bad mood was something Steve couldn’t even imagine.

Well, until today.

Steve had had the early shift, now he had just finished writing his last report when he walked down one of the corridors and ran into James. One glance was enough to see that something was different today. He wasn’t pulling a face or glaring at people like some people would. Instead his expression had become hard. Something that almost resembled a smile ghosted over his lips when he noticed Steve right in front of him. “You’re heading out?”

“Yeah, I’m done for today. I think I’m going to take a run.”

“Lucky you.” The sound that escaped James’ lips wasn’t quite a sigh, but it was definitely a sign of annoyance. Steve’s duty was done for today, he could just walk towards the door and be done with it, but even just noticing that James might be upset pushed a button with Steve. Perhaps Peggy had been right, Steve needed to constantly take care of things. Even if they were none of his business.

“Something’s wrong? You seem a little…” The right word didn’t come to mind, so Steve went for “…tensed.”

“No, just the tiniest bit…” James actually did look over his shoulder before continuing. “…annoyed. Everybody is running up and down, trying to please Stark and to suck up to him, but he’s not making it easy and Fury is going up the walls.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

James’ lips curled, showing his displeasure. “Fury has been in a room with Stark for over two hours now. Talking tactics and strategies for the negotiation process… I’ve only been in there for a couple of minutes, but Stark doesn’t give a single shit. He wants to know where he can find a good bar or a club.”

Steve had read about Stark before, mostly in the tabloids and those revelations shouldn’t surprise him. The man was notoriously known for enjoying his life to the fullest. Enjoying his life equalled lots of women, extreme sports and unconventional behaviour. That included getting drunk at public
events even when the president was present and Stark supposed to hold a speech.

A disaster

It seemed like a miracle that Stark Industries was still one of the most profitable companies in the whole world. The board had to do some magnificent work. Anyways, Steve could easily understand that.

„When I went in there he said something like – Yeah, all that talk is very nice and intriguing, but when do I get out of here so I can have a decent cup of coffee… You know, I have had to deal with a lot of are completely obnoxious. All their privileges make them think that we have to suck up to them. They try to treat us like their employees, like they can tell us what we have to do, but they realize very quickly that they can’t pull that off with Fury. Five minutes, tops. That makes him good at his jobs, he brings them back on track. Stark? He couldn’t care less.”

“Uhm, Stark isn’t a diplomat. Maybe he feels like the whole process doesn’t really concern him.”

Judging by James’ face Steve had just said something not particularly smart. “Stark’s the head of the company who’s going to sell the weapons. He should be more interested in that deal than anybody else. He’s going to make the most profit from it. Either he is really that confident that everything’s going down just fine or… no idea. It’s rubbing Fury the wrong way and that isn’t good for anybody.”

To Steve all of that sounded like his own personal nightmare. A kind of behaviour that he didn’t really want to deal with. Right now he didn’t have to bother with it, Steve was off the clock and he could just leave while Bucky was going to stay here.

Not smiling.

It didn’t feel quite right. “Uhm… how long do you still have to hang out here?”

“Until Stark gets back to his hotel. That could happen in five minutes or five hours, I have no idea.”

Steve didn’t think about it before making his suggestion. “When you’re done, do you want to come over to my place? I want to break in my oven tonight. If you’re still feeling hungry then…”

James blinked, seemingly surprised. “You’re inviting me to dinner?”

Nodding Steve shrugged. “Sure. Cooking for one single person isn’t fun anyway. I think I’m going for pasta. That’d be okay for you?”

“Yeah, that sounds great. I guess… I’ll call you when I can get away from here and…” James started to smile and Steve felt like he had done something right. Everything was way better like this. “… you’ll send me your address?”

“Sounds like a plan. See you later then.”

Steve was instantly looking forward to tonight. Normally Steve didn’t mind an evening alone, when he could do what he liked and enjoy the silence around him. Then again, Steve was still new here and it was his priority to make friends.

About two hours later Steve was in his kitchen, after a long run through the park and a relaxing shower. There still hadn’t been any call from James, so Steve decided to start preparing dinner, just in case. While slicing vegetables Steve hummed various Beatles songs and couldn’t help wondering what Asgardian music would be like. He would have to check that out on YouTube later.
Picking up a paprika Steve admired its red colour and wondered why something seemed wrong with it anyways. He hadn’t asked James any details. What if he didn’t like paprika or if he had some allergy that Steve didn’t know about? No, that was silly. If you invited somebody to dinner, they would tell you about the food that could kill you beforehand. Every time people had tasted his pasta, they had complimented him on it, so there was nothing to worry about. Maybe there was, Stark could still decide to spend the entire night at the embassy, because he felt like he could. Steve didn’t even want to imagine him at the palace.

Eventually his phone gave a little beep and Steve grabbed it a little bit too fast.

Stark’s gone. When do you want me to show up?

Quickly typing a response Steve told him anytime and his address. Half an hour later the pasta was almost done and somebody rang the doorbell. James clearly was another person than he had been the last time Steve had seen him. The one he had got to know. A bright smile on his lips, loose strands brushed back behind his ears. “Hey, I didn’t know if you preferred red or white, so I brought both.”

James gesticulated with the bottles in his hands and Steve laughed in response. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

“Of course, you invited me.” After handing Steve the wine bottles James slipped out of his leather jacket. “Can I help you with the dinner?”

“Thanks, but I’m kind of done. Sorry about the mess, but I’m still trying to settle in. Most of the furniture was left behind by the guy who lived here before me. I have to redecorate.”

“I don’t mind. All my friends say that I leave like a Spartan.”

Now James was in such a good mood Steve couldn’t help but ask how Stark’s stay at the embassy had eventually turned out.

“A never-ending nightmare.” James groaned theatrically while even rolling his eyes. Steve noticed that he wouldn’t do that kind of thing around other agents of the embassy. Of course not, that wouldn’t be professional. It also meant that James felt at ease with him and that made Steve smile “If there are two people destined to hate each other it’s Stark and Fury. It was obvious that Stark wanted to get out of there, but he stayed anyway just to piss Fury off. I have no idea how that meeting tomorrow is going to turn out…”

Hearing that Steve more or less regretted asking because now they were probably stuck with a topic that Steve didn’t actually enjoy. “I’m not an expert on this topic, but I thought that the king was in favour of the arms deal. It shouldn’t be that hard to push it through.”

“Yes, the king is in favour of it, but they haven’t agreed on the conditions yet. Fury needs to get the best deal possible and he is worried that Stark might screw things up, because he is… a flashy showman who doesn’t care. Whatever, it’s not like I can actually influence what’s going on. You said something about pasta. Can I at least set the table?”

Steve congratulated himself on the pasta, it tasted delicious and James really seemed to like it. “So how are you settling in?”

“I’m slowly getting by. The supermarket isn’t as big a mystery anymore. How can there be so many different sorts of mead?”

“Don’t ask me. That stuff is disgusting.” James pulled a face and Steve had to chuckle at that. “In general… yeah, I’m getting by. I’m studying the Runic alphabet, but it’s a real chore. I’m getting
James nodded slowly and took a sip from his red wine, which was also delicious by the way. “You could start with your neighbours. Mine are quite lovely. We have coffee at least once a week. They are all a little bit sceptical at first. You’ve heard it before – this is not the most American friendly country, but they are nice people as soon as they know that you aren’t here to convert them to anything…”

“Convert? What has that to do with being American?”

Before saying anything James sighed softly as if he was about to start a very long speech. “Bad memories of the aftermath of the Second World War.”

That was all he said, but it was clearly enough to intrigue Steve. “I don’t remember Asgard playing such a big role in World War Two.”

“Because most people only think of Germany, the US, the UK, the Soviet Union, France and Italy… and of course the Japanese. Nevertheless it’s called a World War. Asgard was never occupied by the Nazis, but under heavy attacks because of the gold mines and the oil wells. At the end of the war Asgard allowed American troops to be stationed within their territory. Unfortunately the Asgardian way of life didn’t connect well with the mind-set of the average American soldier in the 40ies. Odin’s father kicked them out royally as soon as Berlin had fallen.”

Unfortunately that made way too much sense. Steve didn’t even want to imagine what kind of culture shock that might have been. Some ugly things had probably been said, but was that enough to nurture 70 year old stereotypes?

“But most of the people here probably have Netflix and consume other American media. They gotta know that we’re not living in the 40ies anymore. There’s hardly a movie without a gay character in it.”

“Yeah, because Hollywood is such a great representation of actual life.” James smirked. “Come on, you are a decent guy and even you were a bit thrown off by what you see on the streets here every single day. Men kissing each other in broad daylight without anybody making a bit fuss of it. America is anything but that. It doesn’t have to be, but the difference is very clear and Asgardians don’t really give a flying fuck about different cultures. They’re just careful when a foreigner comes into their country… which aren’t a lot actually. The immigration politics are hell.”

“So you think I have to make clear to my neighbours that I don’t mind who they are in a relationship with?”

For whatever reason James burst out laughing and Steve felt stupid. A little bit. At the same time he couldn’t help but to admire how lovely it sounded. Bright, happy, joyful. Sweet. “No, you don’t have to do that. Actually you shouldn’t do that. Please, don’t. Just act normally. They’re going to like you. Who wouldn’t?”

The laughter turned into the sweetest of smiles and Steve’s mouth went dry.

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Not really able to deny his nervousness Thor watched his father and the three ministers who displayed a varying set of emotions. None of them were happy, of course. 30 minutes now. An affront. They should have all left at least 25 minutes ago, but no, they were still sitting here and were
waiting. What a wonderful way to start a negotiation process. Heimdall had already informed them that the American delegation was on their way. No actual excuse for being late. Thor didn’t understand why they were putting up with this. Sure, the appointment was important, but the Americans had just as much to gain and to lose as them. They should call it off and agree on a new date when the ambassador had apologized.

Not knowing what to do with his hands Thor started to tap his pen against the block in front of him. That action immediately gained him a dark glare from his father and Thor put the pen away, inwardly scolding himself. Odin might think he was bored or didn’t think that this meeting was essential. After the disaster with Laufey Thor had to pull himself together and keep his mouth shut.

Perhaps Odin was even glad about this affront, because it was another opportunity for Thor to show that he actually knew what he was doing. That he could deal with the daily challenges of being king. Odin should know better than that, he has been the one to raise Thor. He had been preparing to become King since his…

There was a knock on the door and Odin responded calmly. “Yes?”

“Your highness, the American delegation just arrived.”

“Then send them in, please.”

Thor instantly straightened up, put his hands on the table and tried to appear like he hadn’t been bored, nor impatient. Odin leaned back in his chair, watching the door with calm, almost stoic eyes and Thor felt his heartbeat speeding up.

The door was being opened for a second time and the delegation was strolling into the room. Fury ahead, two other diplomats right behind him, Thor always got their names mixed up. Then there was Tony Stark. Thor had seen pictures of him before and he didn’t look any different now. A blue, shiny but yet elegant suit that was so obviously tailor made. Stark had pushed his sun glasses up into his hair and casually sat down on the chair closest to him. “Your highness, your other highness, beloved ministers who don’t hold any actual political power and are therefore completely useless… nice to meet you all. Can we get this party on the way?”

Thor was already opening his mouth, but he quickly got a hold of himself and swallowed the comment he was dying to make. Stark was insolent, it wasn’t like they hadn’t expected that. Rather the opposite.

“I apologize for the delay, your highness. We got stuck in traffic.” Fury didn’t even try to make it sound convincing and Odin made a tiny gesture with his hand that showed that he didn’t care. “We have already lost a lot of time.”

“See, that man understands me. Go, go, got.” Leaning back in his chair Stark nicely folded his hands and placed them on his stomach. Thor felt an instant dislike. It didn’t help that Stark remained silent during most part of the conversation. Almost as if they weren’t talking about his weapons.

Or maybe it was a blessing, because they came to an agreement very quickly. Amount, price, date of the delivery and…

“Gentlemen, I did my best to show up last to this table and I have to admit that it was actually quite a challenge.”

Thor wasn’t completely able to suppress a little moan. Sure, they both liked dramatic entrances, but Loki never knew when to stop. This was definitely going to cause a lot of trouble. An even bigger
affront than what the Americans had done.

Odin always kept his calm, at least when the Frostgiants were not involved, but now he didn’t make a single attempt to hold back his frustration. “The Duke of Glæsisvellir was not invited to this meeting. He will leave instantly and I must ask you to excuse this most inappropriate…”

“Hey now, this is not the proper way to greet royalty, isn’t it?”

It took all of Thor’s willpower to not jump up from his chair when Stark simply interrupted the king, not even the tiniest sign of respect. The person who actually got out of his chair was Stark, suddenly wearing a smile on his lips, not that expression of indifference. Since he had taken the first chair available he had been sitting more or less next to the door, next to Loki.

Stark grabbed Loki’s hand and brought it up to his lips. “Your highness, it’s an extraordinary pleasure to meet you and I am sure it will be an even greater pleasure to get to know you.”

The billionaire had the audacity to actually brush his lips over Loki’s knuckles and that definitely was the last drop. Thor wasn’t going to cause a scene, but his little brother was of high rank and Stark couldn’t treat him like that. “Mr. Stark, you will show the Duke of Glæsisvellir the respect that he deserves.”

Loki glanced at him, raising an eyebrow while Stark didn’t take his eyes off Loki. “That’s what I’m doing. Oh and he definitely stays. This meeting suddenly got a lot more interesting.”

“Oh, so trying to scam an entire nation is not exciting for you, Mr. Stark?” Loki sat down with them and Thor knew that in a couple of minutes he would want to smash his head against a wall. It was very well-known that his brother was a hard-liner, unable to find a compromise. For Loki it was always all or nothing. There was a reason why Odin hadn’t invited him to this meeting, Loki would do everything in his power to torpedo the negotiations.

Thor was the greatest admire of Loki’s wit and brilliance, but he couldn’t share most of his views. While their father had decided to change a lot of the old ways Asgard seemed to be stuck in, Loki believed in conservatism. He wanted to keep things how they were, although it was well known that stopping was regression.

“Your highness, you will see that we’ve already agreed on…”

“Ambassador Fury, before you enlighten me, I would like to know why Asgard is even in need of your weapons. Our military forces are doing just fine.”

Finally a part of the conversation that Thor could add something to. “Your view on this arrangement is too one-sided, Loki. It’s not just about buying and selling weapons. It’s an alliance. Our nations supporting each other on the international parquet and pursue common goals.”

Annoyingly slowly Loki turned his head to him. “And what are those common goals? And please, if the words ‘Middle East’ are going to pass your lips I’m going to shoot myself.”

“Now that would be a waste.” Stark muttered softly, a grin on his lips.

“You shouldn’t be making fun of this, your highness.” Fury easily ignored Stark, directly addressing Loki. “Asgard has been a presence in the Middle East for over a decade. Not at the same level as the United States, but it’s still fact.”

“A severe mistake, but please, go on.”
“Tensions are not going to decrease anytime soon and it would definitely help to stabilize the situation if we could work closer together.”

That was the wrong word to use in Loki’s presence. Thor’s little brother snorted in response. “Stabilise? That would be the first time ever your nation stabilised the situation in a foreign nation. What if Asgard has no interest in keeping troops in the Middle East?”

“That is not up to discussion, Loki.” Their father sounded cold, but Loki was clearly unimpressed. “Fine. I will gladly shut my mouth as soon as the ambassador admits that his president wants to get this deal done to gain influence over our nation. Mr. Stark here is going to produce the weapons that your military is going to sell us for a ridiculous price, but that’s only the start, right? We’re going to need an advisor, a constant presence. In the Middle East and here in Valhalla, not just the embassy, but military presence. To explain us how your fabulous weapons work.”

Stark snickered what got him dark glare from Loki. “You are a smart cookie, aren’t you?”

The minister of the interior grunted while the secretary of defense huffed. “Mr. Stark, you are out of line. You have no right to talk to the Duke of Glæsisvellir in this way. Or to even address him without him asking you a question.”

Thor agreed, this was outrageous.

“Oh, I’m sure the Duke can take it. Why is it Duke anyway? Prince sounds so much better.”

“What about me, Mr. Stark?”

There was something about Loki’s tone that made Thor feel uncomfortable. Challenging, but Loki did that a lot. Something else.

Stark was still folding his hands, this time behind his head and he shrugged. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out how these things usually work out. Sure, you get an advisor. My stuff is top quality, you will want somebody to show you how to properly use them. When Nick over here and you guys are best friends, they’ll sooner or later want to station a few tiny, little troops on Asgardian grounds. Then that’s going to grow into an actual base. “

“Tony Stark is not talking on behalf of the American military here.” Fury was quick to intercept and Loki narrowed his eyes while Stark continued talking. “Hey, don’t be mad at me for having some common sense. Anyway, it’s not like there’s something you can actually do about it, your highness.”

Another thing nobody should ever say to Loki. “Do you think I am stupid, Mr. Stark?”

The American grinned in response. Looking like a cheeky boy for a second. “No, I think you are gorgeous. What are you doing tonight?”

That was it. Thor was moving to get up from his chair when he felt Odin’s hand on his wrist. “I think this is enough. What Mr. Stark is trying to tell you that you cannot do anything about it, because it’s not your decision to make. You have a brilliant mind, Loki, but you need to use your eyes. You are only looking at one single part of the picture, not seeing the whole of it. Gentlemen, I fear we have to continue this meeting another time. Without any interruptions. It was a pleasure talking to you, ambassador Fury. Mr. Stark.”

A single nod and the conversation was done. Thor could see how Loki was opening his mouth to protest, but then he obviously knew better. Before leaving the room Thor walked past Loki, giving his shoulder a little squeeze. Just because Thor didn’t agree with his opinion didn’t mean he couldn’t understand how Loki felt when he suffered a harsh defeat.
All of them were strolling out and Loki didn’t bother to look. He wasn’t as angry as he should be. His father had pretty much told him that this deal would go through, that it was over, but it wouldn’t be done today. So there were still options left. Things he could do.

“If it’s any consolation, this whole ordeal only got interested when you joined in.”

Stark was still here, smirking at Loki in a way that barely anyone dared to do. There were a lot of things that Stark seemed be comfortable with that other people would never do. Like sitting here as if he owned the palace.

“What are you still doing here?”

“Enjoying the view? Marvelling at the sights? Telling you that I’m a big fan of how you tell people to fuck off.”

“Fuck off.”

“Exactly, that was amazing.” Stark laughed and it sounded more honest than anything that had been said during this appointment. “I know I fucked up our first introduction, so let me do it again – Tony Stark. Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.”

Loki felt the corners of his mouth twitching. Not quite so involuntarily. Quick. Smart. Interesting. “You forgot Merchant of Death.”

“Yeah, that’s also quiet catchy. Isn’t it? Still waiting to hear your name. Highness, Duke, Prince, Emperor Palpatine…”

“It’s Loki, but for you, it’s Your Highness.”

After standing up from his chair Stark instantly sat back down, on the edge of the table, considerably closer to Loki. “I can work with that. It’s very hot actually.”

Before even granting him a response Loki let his gaze linger on Stark. His eyes were bright, brown and striking. Their intensity wasn’t uncomfortable, rather intriguing. It had been a while that Loki had met somebody who actually knew how to play the game. “You’re insolent.”

“I’ve been called worse things. Hey, at least I’m honest. You are gorgeous and I do want to know what you are doing to tonight.”

“Are you asking me out?”

“Sure, I want to make a unique experience that only this magnificent country and you can offer me.”

Tilting his head Loki raised an eyebrow. “And that would be?”

Stark was smiling, showing off perfect white teeth. His voice was low, but perfectly audible and filled with more charm than most men in this world would ever possess. “I’ve never had a real prince kneel in front of me. Care to help me out?”
Prince charming

Chapter Notes

Hello there,

Tony and Loki meet up for a second time ;)

Have fun

What would Tony give for some decent beer? Seemingly impossible to get in this country. He would have to settle for wine instead. The problem was with a glass of red wine in his hand people would easily start thinking that he was a sophisticated person.Couldn’t have that.

“Mr. Stark, have you made a choice?”

The waitress smiled at him, standing there as straight as an arrow in her boring, up-tight uniform. Tony was longing for a burger and a beer. Or a dirty fast food joint. Any place where he could put his feet on the table.

“Actually no, I’ve decided to let you make the choice. I need an entire bottle of something expensive. Ridiculously expensive. Like so expensive that it has to taste like crap. The kind of expensive that everybody rolls their eyes and thinks – Fuck that rich asshole, he’s trying to show off’. Great. Oh and if you could tell the room service that I’d like the bar in my suite stocked with beer. German beer, I’m not taking any more risks. Thank you.”

To Tony’s incredible disappointment the waitress didn’t even bat an eyelid. “Certainly, sir.”

How boring. Well, Tony was in for an amazing treat tonight, so he wasn’t going to moan and bitch about the perfect professionalism of the hotel staff. His phone was turned off and Tony might have forgotten in his pager. Best conditions for an entertaining night.

Tony wasn’t sure if he should expect him to be late. Would be a bit obvious, but in character. Then again, they both knew how this was going to end, so why do this long and complicated dance?

The prince seemed to share Tony’s opinion on this.

Being a billionaire and having devilishly good looks Tony was used to constantly have eyes on him. That was something he didn’t mind, they should stare all they wanted, there was a lot to see. A lot of awesomeness. Anyways whenever Tony entered a room and people recognized him, without previously knowing that he would be there, gasps were the natural consequence. Gasps and lots of murmuring, even pointing fingers.

That didn’t happen. Instead this room full of busy waiters and chatting customers suddenly fell silent. Now that was a little bit exaggerated, wasn’t it? By the prince’s reaction Tony could tell that an entire restaurant watching his every move wasn’t something new or unfamiliar.

Downright casually Loki walked past several tables and Tony was tempted to comfortably stay in his chair and show how completely unimpressed he was. A decision had to be made quickly. Loki still wanted to be called ‘Your highness’, so there was a good chance that he would be pissed off if Tony
wouldn’t show any kind of respect. At the same time Tony thought that he had already read him pretty well. People who sucked up to him were boring, perhaps even mindless idiots. One look at the privileged, elitist son of a bitch to know that he wanted to be provoked, but he wanted you to be smart about it. A tiny step too far and the prince would pull a face.

Tony had always hated easy missions.

Eventually he settled for getting up, charming him with his smile and made a second attempt to take Loki’s hand.

“You’re not trying to kiss it again, are you?”

“Well, I thought I would start with your hand and then work myself upwards.”

The corners of Loki’s mouth twitched, not enough for Tony to be sure what he was thinking, but he would count that as a positive reaction. It wasn’t like anything could go wrong after the negotiation meeting. After all Tony had asked him to get down on his knees and here they were, having dinner. Expect that they were not going to have dinner, Tony hated losing time unnecessarily.

“Mr. Stark.” Loki said it like a greeting and then sat down on his chair. A single movement that was so graceful that anybody would have guessed that he was royalty.

Taking a second or two Tony eyed him up, more than content with what he saw, and then he also sat down. “What’s with all the green? Did all the other colours from your wardrobe disappear? Or do you like to match your clothes with your eyes?”

“The colours associated to my position and rank is green. It’s Asgardian tradition to dress like this and yes, I like that it suits me.”

“Well, glad that they don’t associate orange with your rank. That would look awful.”

Loki crossed his legs and slightly raised his chin as if he was waiting for something important to be said. The entire pose reminded Tony of a photograph that he had seen of him not so long ago. Tony wasn’t the most pious person, most of the times he wondered if he even believed at all, but if there was a god, he had probably sculptured Loki for Tony as a gift.

You’ve been a good boy, Tony. Here, a perfect specimen for you to play with. Oh and because you’re so amazing, I’ll make him a prince too

Skin as white and pure as marble. Tall and so lean, his tight green waistcoat hugging his body in all the right ways. Those cheekbones were sharp enough to cut paper. Tony couldn’t help but wonder how these cheeks would look when they were flushed. The prince had something cold about him, passionate and yet cold. It was only natural to want to touch his skin when it was glowing hot.

“Are you thinking that appearances are important, Mr. Stark?” Loki tilted his head, looking intrigued, daring Tony to say something that he wouldn’t like.

“Sure. I’m a business man. You can sell the best product, nobody is going to buy it if it looks like shit. No, let me rephrase that. It doesn’t even have to look like shit. It’s enough if it isn’t perfect in the looks department. People are shallow and most of them stupid. They’ll buy anything if it’s wrapped in something nice with bright colours, but they won’t touch something that could hugely improve their life, but wouldn’t look pretty in their living room. That’s not really what you meant, right? Yeah, appearances are important. Mothers can tell their sons and daughters all they like that only their character is important. If you’re out in a club, people don’t come up to you, because you are such a nice person. They do that because you’re hot. So yeah, I like beautiful people. You are here,
aren’t you?”

The prince let out a strange noise that sounded like something between a huff and a laugh. Tony was about to go a step further when somebody stepped up to their table. At first glance Tony thought it was a waiter, but then he realised that his suit had a different colour, just like his tie. Also a little bit old to still be a waiter.

“Great, I’m still waiting for the wine.”

Tony was being ignored, the man was too busy to bow his head in front of Loki. Then he said something that sounded like a lot of consonants and no vowels at all. It instantly captured Tony’s attention though. The tone, the melody, the awe.

The prince smiled graciously, nodding his head. He said something and Tony cursed his mother for making him study Chinese and Japanese when Old Norse suddenly seemed a lot more useful. Now he had no idea what was going on. Loki and the waiter could well be talking about him, but that seemed very unlikely, given how smitten the man was with the prince. A few more words were exchanged, then Loki held out his hand and the man took it between his own. When he lowered his head Tony thought that he was going to kiss Loki’s fingers, but the old man stopped, closing his eyes and remained in this position for several seconds. His forehead almost touching Loki’s wrist.

A comment was lying in wait on Tony’s tongue, but for some reason that he couldn’t explain he didn’t feel like uttering it. Whatever was happening right in front of him, it looked private, almost intimate. Although there were lots of other people around.

Eventually, to Tony it felt like an eternity, the man slowly let go of Loki’s hand, whispering something and Loki simply nodded. Smiling. Gorgeous.

The man walked away and since the smile was still lingering on Loki’s lips, Tony let another moment pass before clearing his throat. “Uhm, what was that?”

Turning back to him Loki seemed quite disinterested in him. “The owner of the hotel. He wanted to greet me personally.”

“And I get shit for kissing your hand? It seems quite common.”

“He didn’t kiss my hand.” Loki pointed out drily and Tony shrugged. “So what did he do? Come on, I am the tourist, showing interest in your culture and rites. Enlighten me.”

Loki now leaned back in his chair, taking a long breath. “He comes from a long line of nobility, a rather old-fashioned man. He thanked me for honouring his house with my presence… In Asgard the sovereign doesn’t wear a crown. Most European kings wore a crown with a cross, that would symbolise their position as a Christian leader, protector of the Christian faith. This isn’t a Christian nation. Only to very special occasions the king wears a precious filet. Any other day the symbol of his rank and status is a bracelet. The king and his three oldest sons all have one. It was a tradition that whenever the king would receive members of the nobility at the court, they would touch the bracelet with their forehead. It was an act to show your loyalty and at the same time the king promised to protect his subject. It’s hard to explain this since you are a stranger to our costumes… A gesture of respect and friendship. It’s an act that is supposed to strengthen the person’s luonto by… Right, I am sorry, you cannot know what that means. I guess you could say… it’s supposed to bring him luck. Like I said, he is old-fashioned and he knows that I am too.”

That was more Asgardian history than Tony had ever thought he’d learn. There was only one thing that didn’t add up. “You are not wearing a bracelet now.”
“Only for special occasion. It’s an old tradition, there is some lee-way.”

Finally the waitress returned and brought the wine that Tony was paying a little fortune for. Loki didn’t disappoint, he instantly noticed. “Either you have atrocious taste in wine or you just ordered the most expensive bottle on the menu.”

“Maybe a little bit of both.” Tony smirked and the prince rolled his eyes, taking a sip from his glass anyway.

This was fun, but Tony felt he could get to the point. Why waste time? “So you got me a little bit worried with all that talk about you being old-fashioned. That’s not something I like to hear.”

“Why? I didn’t think you’d be especially interested in my character.” Not necessarily a reproach. Tony didn’t miss the promising twinkle in Loki’s eyes.

“Oh, I do. If you think you need a ring on your finger before you can spend a night away from home with a man you’re not related with…”

Loki sighed loudly, shaking his head and sipped again from his glass. “You Midgardians can be so tiring…”

“What?”

“I’m sure you spend a lot of time to come up with these little phrases, but they are mostly lost on me. In Asgard there is no notion that you have to be married to have sex.”

“Your country sounds greater by the second.”

“Naturally.” A smirk appeared on Loki’s lips and Tony felt a little shiver going down his spine. This one wouldn’t hesitate to give him shit. By not saying anything Loki was implying everything. Sure, his nation was amazing and vastly superior to Tony’s. Daily life could get so boring when every single person you met was doing their best to please you. Sure, every now and then Tony met a reporter or an NGO that cursed him or tried to spit at him, because he was an evil weapons manufacturer. But even the harshest critic was willing to willing to take his money whenever Tony decided to donate to a humanitarian organisation. Nobody had ever called it blood money.

In Tony’s position it was hard to find an equal and when people realised that he wasn’t any better than them, they still overcompensated. Tried to be rude and disrespectful, not acting like they normally would.

The prince didn’t give a damn and Tony liked that.

“Okay, then let’s get to the point.” Tony watched Loki’s expression, curious what he might see in a second. “Do we even have to order food? I’m not hungry and you’re not here for the pasta anyway.”

Putting down his glass Loki let his fingers run across its edge. A teasing gesture. “I know so many people who would lose their minds over what you just suggested. Saying those words to a prince.”

“What? I didn’t even say ‘fuck’ to upset their little virgin ears. You are only interpreting stuff that you want to hear.”

Frowning softly Loki pulled back his beautiful, lean fingers. “I am sorry, I must have imagined the part when you asked me to kneel.”

“That was real.” Tony quickly nodded, he was hardly able to believe how much he was enjoying
himself. “But I didn’t specify what you should do on your knees. You have a twisted mind, Loki.”

“Your highness.”

“I’ll call you ‘Your highness’ all you want as soon you’re down on your knees.” Maybe he was taking things one step too far, but Tony was usually spot on when he tried to find out what made people tick.

The prince openly looked him up and down, then eventually clicked his tongue as if he had come to some kind of conclusion. “I despise the deal my father is trying to make with you and the military. I’ll try everything in my power to make it crumble and fall apart.”

So now he was trying to draw a line, fine with Tony. “I don’t care.”

“A multi-million dollar deal and you don’t care?”

No, it was actually rather annoying. “That will probably disturb you, but I’m not here, because your nation is so awesome or important. The board is breathing down my neck, they want that deal done and I’m running with it, because that will keep them off my back when I’m going to finance some other project that they don’t think are that profitable. Personally, I don’t give a crap about the arms deal. I need it to go through though and it will. Sorry.”

For the first time Tony thought that he had made it to surprise Loki. The prince blinked and then brushed back a strand of hair. He couldn’t fool Tony into thinking that this wasn’t a deliberate gesture. “We will see about that.”

“Right. I am sure you will.”

After a little nod Loki took a look at the bottle of wine and then got up to his feet. “I hope you have better wine in your room.”

That turn of events was exactly what Tony had been hoping for. With a smirk on his lips he quickly followed Loki who was already heading towards the exit of the restaurant. The prince was eager and clearly in a hurry, since Tony only caught up with him at the elevator. Not a surprise, Tony had admired those long legs before. Not a reason left to keep his hands to himself.

While pressing the button to call the elevator Tony put his left hand on Loki’s lower back. The doors opened and when Loki didn’t move immediately Tony softly pushed him inside, eager to get his hands on him. Before that Tony had to press another button, to get them to the penthouse. Loki was standing right next to him. Tall, lean, graceful and gorgeous. Tony wanted to let his fingers run down that extravagant waistcoat and so he did that, settling on Loki’s chest. “I appreciate that you got all dolled up for me.”

Loki didn’t respond, he grinned and Tony almost got dizzy thinking about all the things he wanted that mouth do to him. In Tony’s room Loki did a look around, walking by the windows while Tony was only watching him. Curious what he might say or do. Being intrigued by a human being and not by a piece of technology was a sensation that Tony had almost forgotten.

“You like the view?”

“Nothing new. I’ve seen Valhalla from every angle imaginable.”

By now Tony had walked up behind him, his hand reaching out without any hesitation. Slowly he moved his fingers up Loki’s spine before settling on his shoulder, turning him around. “I can offer something more interesting.”
Tony was leaning in and was honestly startled when the prince moved away. He voiced a question that was the last thing Tony would have expected. “Are you in any form of commitment?”

Really? Was he serious? Tony shouldn’t laugh, but he couldn’t fight it. “What? Are you looking for a date?”

“Just answer my question, Stark. No, I don’t want to date you, I want to know if you are in a relationship.” Loki sounded strangely dry as if that was an actually important question and Tony just wanted to get over with it. He had Loki in his room. “No, everybody who knows me would gladly tell you that I’m toxin for any form of commitment.”

Strangely enough Loki was content now and nodded shortly. “Okay.”

Tony almost gasped when a hand was put in the back of his head and a demanding mouth was pressed against his own. No surprise there, Loki kissed like Tony would have expected him to. Demanding, hard and perfect. There was a lot of passion inside of him, Tony had already seen that during the negotiation meeting and luckily Loki didn’t just get excited about politics.

Instantly Tony’s arms went around Loki’s waist, pulling him against his body. His head started to swim a little bit from the exquisite taste of Loki’s mouth and Tony felt his skin tingling. Longing for touch, contact. Carelessly Tony pushed the waistcoat over Loki’s shoulders, urging him to take it off. Such a wonderful piece of clothing, dropped to the floor and Tony thought he even stepped on it when Loki started pushing him towards the couch.

It happened rarely but Tony was the tiniest bit overwhelmed when he was suddenly sitting on the couch and Loki dropped on his knees like it was nothing. With sure and confident movements Loki’s fingers set to work on the fly of Tony’s pants. The mischievous smirk on Loki’s face literally took Tony’s breath away, because it showed him who was really calling the shots here. “I may be a real prince, but I’ve knelt before every single one of my boyfriends and a very handsome groom. I guess you have to share the honour.”

This man might just know how to make Tony lose his mind. For once in his life there was no time for a witty or snarky remark. Tony preferred to tangle his fingers in that soft, black hair and pushed Loki’s head down. Not that he needed any encouragement, Loki quickly wrapped his mouth around Tony’s cock and it was bliss.

Even with a gun to his head Tony wouldn’t be able to determine what he preferred – Loki on his knees, sucking his dick in such a filthy manner that he shouldn’t be capable of, that man was a prince for Christ’s sake or Loki in his lap, riding him with his head thrown back, lips parted and cheeks flushed with Tony’s hands on his hips and his lips against Loki’s throat.

They ended up in that huge four-poster bed, sheets crumpled and slick with sweat. Short nails were digging into Tony’s back, hot breath in his ear and pleasure was overwhelming all of Tony’s senses while he was thrusting into the gorgeous body beneath him. His heart was racing and seemingly it wasn't going to stop when they were already lying next to each other, Loki catching his breath instead of moaning Tony’s name.

It had been Tony, not Stark. Tony realised that with a content grin.

Loki was quick, even now. Completely relaxed Tony watched Loki slipping into the bathroom and seconds later he could hear the shower running. When Loki was done he put on whatever clothing had ended up on the bedroom floor and Tony lazily raised an eyebrow. “Leaving already?”

“I have a very busy schedule, Mr. Stark.” Smiling Loki leaned over the bed and Tony marvelled at
his green eyes. “But I thoroughly enjoyed this little meeting. Good night.” To say goodbye Loki kissed him. It was an astounding contrast to several minutes ago. Slow, languid, almost sweet and Tony was tempted to pull him back down, to have his way with him, but his body was worn out and Tony thought that a couple hours of sleep would be just as nice.

“Good night.” Tony was stretching out on the bed while Loki left. Probably heading down to some limousine that was already waiting for him. Sure, Tony was American and he loved all the virtues of democracy, but tonight the Monarchy had presented itself in the most flattering light.

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Thor was biting down on a slice of bread while studying the morning paper. Breakfast had to be rather quick today, he was going to meet Jane in half an hour. Or at least that was the plan. His heart sank when his phone on the table started vibrating. Messages from his secretary weren’t a good sign when Thor had already planned out his entire day.

A link to an online article.

Fantastic, probably even more gossip about him and Jane. With a knot in his stomach Thor’s eyes ghosted over the headline, not really understanding what it said until he saw the picture beneath it. Unfortunately it wasn’t a relief that Thor wasn’t the object of this article. Thor hadn’t met up with an American billionaire last night and he definitely hadn’t ended up in his hotel room. Normally he would have believed that some online blogger was making this story up, but there was his little brother with Stark’s hand on his back.

Well, at least nobody was going to care about Jane anymore…
Hello everybody,

Lots of people aren't thrilled about Loki and Tony spending the night with each other :)

Have fun

Coulson wanted to talk to him way too frequently to automatically assume that such a meeting would mean bad news. Today Bucky was sure that fate and most of all the embassy didn’t have anything good in store for him. Every headline of every Asgardian newspaper made that perfectly clear. Technically Bucky had nothing to do with any of it, but Loki seemed to like him.

Which supposedly made Bucky an expert.

“Sir?”

“Have a seat, Barnes.” Coulson made a leisure gesture that indicated Bucky to sit down in front of his desk. Bucky did his best to instantly analyse the situation. His boss seemed a little bit agitated, which meant that Fury had already had a little talk with Coulson. Hierarchy. Now Coulson was talking to Bucky and Bucky would have to find somebody else later on. Sitting down Bucky waited for the question he already knew that was coming.

“Have you read the newspapers today, agent Barnes?” Coulson was speaking in his usual low and calm manner. That didn’t mean anything. One day a hurricane would hit them all and Coulson would maybe arch an eyebrow, completely unimpressed. His appearance didn’t mean that he didn’t care.

“Yes, I did.”

“What is your opinion on it?”

“I don’t care too much about gossip.”

Coulson huffed involuntarily. “You know it’s a bit more than that.”

“We don’t know what happened. It’s the prince and Stark, in Stark’s hotel. That could mean 100 different things. Most likely a conversation.” Bucky didn’t think that this was very likely.

So did Coulson. “A conversation would be the worst possibility. God forbid they might start talking to each other. The prince has a reputation and we have a picture of Stark’s hands on his lower back. There are tweets that state that a limousine picked the prince up in front of the hotel at about 1 o’clock in the morning.”

“Sir… I don’t think I know why I am here. So Stark and the prince had a one-night stand. What do you need me for?”

“You’ve been here for over a year. You’ve been to court a lot of time and as far as I know you’ve
also spent some of your spare time with the prince.”

A tight and very unpleasant feeling began to settle in Bucky’s stomach. No, he didn’t like where this was going. Bucky would feel offended if he wasn’t already thinking about how to defend himself although he hadn’t done anything. “I mentioned to Prince Loki that I like to play tennis and he invited me to a match. You may forgive me, but I totally kicked his ass. He wants to beat me and we play about two times in a month. Is that a problem? Because I did ask for permission and the ambassador told me that it was our main interest to keep the royal family happy.”

That should be enough, Bucky had no desire whatsoever to defend himself when he had done nothing wrong.

“I see. Did you ever have the feeling that he was trying to fish for information? Did he show particular interest in your work or what was going on at the embassy?” Now Coulson had a pen in his hand, ready to take notes and Bucky wanted to huff. He did have reason to feel offended after all. “Sir, if I had had the feeling that the prince was going to try and use our personal relationship to get his hands on secret information, I would have reported that instantly.”

Grey eyes settled on his face. While Fury used a lot of intimidation to get what he wanted, Coulson was a bit more subtle. He liked to stare people down, almost looking a bit disinterested, making you wonder what was going on. If he was only waiting for you to tell him something that he already knew. “What personal relationship do you have with the prince?”

Damn, way to shoot yourself in the foot. Sitting up a little bit straighter Bucky tried to not show any kind of reaction, when he realised that changing his position was already reaction enough. “I may have phrased that rather clumsily. I don’t have a personal relationship with the prince. We like to exchange words when we meet and we play tennis. That doesn’t mean I would be able to tell you his favourite colour or what he likes to eat. To answer your first question – no. The prince never asked about my job. He was more interested in what I could tell him about life in the United States. Not even politics.”

Eventually Coulson nodded and Bucky couldn’t tell if he was content or not.

“Sir, do you think that the prince tried to gain information from Stark about the arms deal? As far as I know he burst into the negotiation meeting. I doubt that there is a lot that he doesn’t know.”

“I also have been the palace a few times, Barnes. I am aware of the prince being informed about everything. Information is not what we’re worried about. We’d like to find out what he is willing to do to get what he wants and how easily Stark might be played.”

Bucky blinked and he his mind wandered to Loki’s flirtatious smile and his little remarks that made the other agents shift from one foot to another, avoiding to look at him.

“Why are you smiling, agent Barnes?”

“Am I? I am sorry, sir, but I have a hard time believing that the prince of nation is going to sleep with an arms dealer to get him to call off the deal. There is so much money at stake. Sex is not going to outweigh that.” That thought was ridiculous.

“We might agree on that, agent Barnes, but the ambassador is worried nonetheless. You and I weren’t present at the negotiation meeting, but the prince clearly showed his disdain for our nation and the new policy. Stark reacted by aggressively flirting with him. Considering Stark’s reputation we can easily assume that it wasn’t a negotiation strategy. The prince isn’t stupid and I want your personal opinion on this since you are the only person at our disposal who shared more than 10
words with the prince. You have all this information lying in front of you. What do you think happened?"

The pen was still in his hand, eager to note whatever Bucky was going to tell him. “Sir, I am not the prince’s friend. I don’t know what he would or wouldn’t do. Everybody knows that he wants the American policy to be ended and go away, he’s said that publicly several times. Yes, it is odd that he would join Tony Stark in his hotel room… but Stark is the head of billion Dollar Company. He’s not going to promise to call off a deal to get somebody into bed. The prince… I will only go so far and say that the prince might try to manipulate him, but he is surely smart enough to know that one night will not do that. The deal is through anyway.”

Coulson nodded ever so slightly. “When is your next match with the prince?”

Taken aback Bucky needed a couple of seconds to remember. “We had to postpone the last match, so it’s next week. Tuesday.”

“Excellent. We’d like you to try and find out what the prince’s opinion on Stark is. What his plans are.”

A punch in the gut was a more pleasant idea than spying on Loki. “Sir, you cannot be serious.”

“The prince likes you, Barnes. It would be stupid to not seize such an opportunity.”

This was going to end up in disaster. Bucky didn’t believe in his own abilities of an actor and Loki would see right through him.

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The guard bowed his head when he opened the door for Loki. Stepping outside Loki sucked in the fresh air. It was still a bit cold outside and he wore a long coat, slipping on his gloves. It was typical for his mother to want to speak to him in the gardens when they could have easily had a cup of tea in front of the chimney. The conversation wasn’t necessarily going to be frosty, but definitely not pleasant. Loki couldn’t wait to get it over with.

Just a few steps down the path and Loki found his mother standing next to a rosebush which wasn’t going to flourish anytime soon. She was wearing a blue coat with a dark, a high collar that highlighted her bright hair. Loki would easily admit that he wasn’t an expert on feminine beauty. Male faces had always bore more charm and grace in his eyes, but that didn’t mean he didn’t like to look at women. There was no discussion about it, his mother was a beautiful woman. Still young, delicate, but by no means small and fragile.

The moment Frigga’s eyes fell on him her face lit up and Loki felt a warm, pleasant feeling spreading inside of him. It wasn’t unfamiliar. Loki couldn’t remember a single day in his life when Frigga hadn’t showered him with affection. Now that he was adult, approaching 30 years of age, there weren’t as many hugs anymore. No more good night kisses, her brushing his hair out of his forehead and telling him that he was the son of a king, an extraordinary prince.

That didn’t mean that Loki didn’t enjoy the smiles anymore. No matter how old he would become, there was no age his mother couldn’t make him feel like the world was a bright and a beautiful place with a single smile.

“Loki, thank you for coming.” Both her hands were on his arms as she kissed him on the cheeks. “Walk with me a little bit.” Frigga linked their arms and Loki let her lead the way. “I have the feeling that you didn’t just ask for me to take a walk in the park?”
“Why do you always have to be so direct, Loki? It’s going to put people off sooner or later.”

“You raised me to be honest and direct, didn’t you?” Loki smiled and his mother let out a playful sigh. “Always someone else to take the blame… you look pale, you should sleep more.”

There it was. Still hidden in motherly care which was completely real. A tiny reproach. “I’m always pale and that has nothing to do with my sleeping habits.”

Frigga gave him an amused look that said ‘Stop talking back at me, I’m your mother’. “Your father is not very content with your behaviour, Loki. He’ll probably want to talk with you later this day.”

Loki openly chuckled. “That would be the first time father shows interest in the choice of my lovers.”

“Would you have preferred it if he had integrated himself more into this part of your life?” Frigga was mercilessly teasing him and Loki shuddered. “No, thank you. I would prefer though you telling me why you wanted to see me.”

His mother nodded as if she had decided that he had suffered enough. She put her hand on his lower arm and asked in a soft voice “What are your intentions with Tony Stark?”

Intentions. A funny word and not at all appropriate. “I don’t have any intentions.”

“It’s hard for me to believe that, Loki. Ever since you learned how to walk on your legs you’ve had a plan where you wanted to go.”

There was no way Loki was going to deny that. “It’s uncomfortable to discuss such things with your own mother… but I don’t have any intentions.”

“You are right, I am your mother and therefore I worry. Tony Stark is not necessarily the type of man I want my son involved with.”

Loki was an adult, so he tried to push down the discomfort he was feeling. “I spent the night with Tony Stark, that doesn’t mean we are involved. I think he is as attractive as he is unpleasant.”

“Not unpleasant enough to not sleep with him.”

That made Loki smirk and he shrugged. “What are you worried about, mother?”

“His reputation, carelessness. The business he made his fortune with. His age.”

“I think the age gap between you and father is about the same? I see what you want to tell me and I understand. It was one night and I have no intention of repeating it. I’ll be most happy when the entire American delegation gets on a plane and leaves our country.”

The second Loki had made that perfectly clear he could see the relief on Frigga’s face. Was she indeed so worried that Loki might want to start an affair with Stark? Did she really think that Loki would be interested in a man 16 years his senior? An American? Laughable. Stark had proven that he could offer good sex, but Loki knew other people who could do that too.

“So you decided to sleep with a person involved in the policy that you loathe with every fibre of your body?”

“I am perfectly capable of separating my personal life from business and politics. I liked his charm and his looks. That’s all there’s to it.”
Frigga stopped and forced him to do the same. With astonishment Loki took in her smile which was filled with love and overwhelming warmth. “Charm and looks… Maybe it’s time to start looking for something more.”

Not the first time that she made an allusion towards marriage, but she had never been this direct. It threw Loki off his game a little bit. “Mother, I’ve told you before that I’m definitely going to marry and you will have more than enough grandchildren. The line will be secure. Not tomorrow though.”

“Nobody is talking about tomorrow. Your brother has found the person he wants to spend his life with. He’s going to marry and have children. Such an event makes a mother long for equal happiness for her other son.”

“I know, mother, but I don’t feel any hurry.”

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Jane couldn’t remember a dessert tasting this sweet, being well aware that it had nothing to do with chocolate. It had been days since he had seen Thor and now that he was here with her, she could have been eating burned pancakes, she would have loved them. Thor had promised to show her around the city today Jane could hardly wait. The schedule of a prince was all-consuming and she wanted to make most of every minute that she had with Thor.

Act like a normal couple, like they had all the time in New York.

As soon as Jane put down her spoon, she was looking at Thor expectantly. “Can we leave now?”

Thor was reacting with a big smile that made Jane admire his handsome face. Sometimes she almost thought him to be a stupid cliché. A blonde, muscular and most of all handsome prince. On paper these things always seemed silly, but when you met one in real life, everything changed.

“This is one of the most exquisite palais of Asgard and you are so eager to get out of here.”

“I’ve been sitting in the most beautiful rooms for over three days now. I want to get outside and see something of your home. Your father is worried that I know too little about Asgard, right? So I shouldn’t spend my time here watching BBC.”

The last person Jane had wanted to impress this much had been a professor when she had still been a student. Now it was all about her future father-in-law. Not that Thor and her had talked about marriage, but Thor’s willingness to bring her to Asgard and to introduce her to his parent spoke for itself.

“Fine, then let’s get going.”

It wasn’t quite as Jane had imagined it. Bodyguards were never part of anybody’s fantasy. Thor couldn’t move as freely in Valhalla as in New York, but they did their best to stay unrecognized. Thor was wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses, the bodyguards were several metres behind him. Maybe people were staring at them, maybe not. Jane didn’t care. They were walking through the streets and Thor explained her the sights, a little history of Valhalla and so on. Jane knew that all of it was important, but she was still mostly interested in listening to Thor’s voice and holding his hand. Being a couple.

The sun was already setting when they approached a white building with a red gate and a red roof. Golden ornaments were surrounding the gate and although Jane didn’t recognize a single one of them. “What is this?”
Thor smiled at her before looking up at the gate. “This is the heart of Valhalla. The temple.”

Jane nodded, but she didn’t say anything, because she had no idea what to feel right now. She knew that Thor wasn’t a Christian, but that was about it. Asgardian religion was nothing she had ever encountered. Nor heard about. “Are we going to a mass?”

Her suggestions caused Thor to laugh heartily. “No, definitely not. There are no masses. Sometimes there are public rituals and people come here to talk to the spirits… you would probably call it praying.”

“Spirits? What spirits?”

Although the religion of this country was the last thing that genuinely interested Jane, her questions seemed to make Thor happy. “I’ll show you.”

Against Jane’s expectations they didn’t enter through the red gate, but walked around the temple to a smaller side entrance. With her first step into the temple Jane felt the temperature drop a few degrees. Not unpleasant, but noticeable. A patio opened up in front of them. Ivy was crawling up the white walls, a fountain took up most of the space. Perfectly clear water, about 20 centimetres deep. No altar or something that would resemble a religion symbol. It was beautiful and would be more fittingly situated in a palace than in a temple. “Are there any priests or… Am I allowed to talk?”

“Sure, you are allowed to talk. Not too loudly… No actual priests, there are men who prepare and perform the rituals. I don’t want to explain the trúa to you, that would be too complex… I’ll keep it simple. You are a scientist, you will like this. There is energy all around us. Older than mankind. We call them spirits and they’ve been here before us. Whenever we build a house, we take the space that has been inhabited by them. So we have to give something back. Most people, when they build a new home, they also build a shrine to honour the spirits. There are shrines next to bridges, mines, parks. The temple is a shrine for the entire city. A home for spirits who lived all over Valhalla before we built houses. We’re honouring them. Nature.”

Jane nodded, but it was too much information to comprehend at once. It was important to Thor and important for their relationships, so Jane listened. Until they went back to the palais and snuggled up to each other on the couch. She wanted to just fall asleep on Thor’s shoulder when she heard a familiar voice.

“… charming, attractive. He wanted to spend the night with me. I feel physically attracted to Tony Stark, so I agreed.”

Thor’s entire body next to her went stiff and Jane started at the TV screen that showed Loki talking to some reporter.

“What does that mean you have changed your opinion on the American policy?”

“No, the policy is stupid and the arms deal invites American troops into our nation and the last thing anybody wants is the American in your home. They have the tendency to overstay their welcome. What I did last night with Tony Stark in said hotel room had nothing to do with policy. He is an attractive man, we had sex, that doesn’t mean I want to buy his weapons.”

“So you and Mr. Stark are not dating?”

Loki pulled a face as if the reporter had asked him to stick his hand into a garbage can. “Mr. Stark is pleasant to the eye, but unpleasant company. This interview is merely a favour. This way the papers won’t have to make up stories about what happened.”
“Thor, what is your brother doing?”

“Telling our father that he isn’t complotting against him with Stark. Loki has always liked a stage where everybody can see him.”
Hello everybody,

Some more worldbuilding and Steve has to deal with some real Asgardians... it kind of goes all wrong

Have fun ;)

“I’m not the type who goes clubbing.”

“No need to constantly repeat that. You go clubbing with me, you’ll enjoy it. Believe me.” Sam winked at him and continued to make his way through the crowd while Steve didn’t bother to hold back a sigh. Why had he let himself be talked into that? This really wasn’t his scene.

It was dark inside here even despite the neon lights. The dance floor was so packed that Steve wondered if there were more people than the safety standards even allowed. At least the music wasn’t so loud that nobody could talk. Nevertheless Steve was already regretting letting Sam talk him into this. This wasn’t his scene. Not at all.

Now they were already here and Steve couldn’t just tell Sam that he instantly wanted to leave. So he followed Sam towards the bar. “Why does it have to be a club? Couldn’t we find some nice lounge?”

“Oh come on, you’ll like it. Look around, the women here are gorgeous.” Sam winked at him and Steve didn’t bother to check out their surroundings. “Yeah, but after all I’ve heard it’s quiet likely that the guys might start hitting on us.”

“So what? I’ll gladly tell them that I don’t swing this way.”

“James said that the people here don’t have a concept of heterosexuality… or homosexuality.”

Sam groaned and made a dismissing gesture. “Barnes talks a lot… and these people have television and newspapers. They know that the rest of the world has that conception. Stop looking for excuses. Two beers, please!”

The bartender nodded and Steve gave up. Fine, he was going to make the most of this. When they got their beers Sam and Steve clicked their bottles. Looking around Steve tried to get a better impression of the place. It was popular, there were people everywhere. About their age, maybe a little younger but Steve didn’t feel completely out of place. The music wasn’t too bad either, it sounded like something you could actually dance to. This didn’t mean that Steve would even set one foot on the dance floor. Not his type of thing.

“I don’t want to flatter myself, but my amazing charisma has already been doing its magic. Right over there, two girls are watching us.” Sam was grinning and Steve tried to discreetly look over his shoulder. There were indeed two young women looking into their direction, but Steve heavily doubted that they were checking them out.
“They are looking at you.”

“Of course they are. Who wouldn’t?”

“I may be wrong, but they could just be watching us because you are the only black person in this place.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up before doing another look around. “Huh, guess you are right. Doesn’t matter. That makes me exotic and interesting.”

Steve laughed in response and shrugged. Whatever Sam was going to do, he was fine with it. That didn’t mean Steve had the same plans. He wouldn’t mind spending a night out, drinking a few cocktails and chatting with his friends. It was a shame that James hadn’t come with them, but Steve had noticed that Sam didn’t like him that much. Hard, if not impossible to believe. James, at least to Steve, seemed like the most likable person on this planet. How could anybody…

“My friend and I have a bet going. I say you’re from the States. She thinks you’re from England. Who’s right?”

Turning around Steve saw the two girls from before standing right next to them. Smiling, looking pretty and Steve instantly wondered if they maybe were a couple. No way to be sure in this country. The one who had spoken up to them was a blonde, almost white haired. Steve would have said that they colour wasn’t real, but her eyes were also shockingly light. At least hair and eye colour perfectly matched her pale skin. She almost looked like an elf. The other one was also pretty, but more normal. Brown hair, brown eyes.

“United States of America. At your service, Miss.” Sam gave her a charming smile and a playful salute. Immediately the elf girl grinned at the other one triumphantly, then she said something in Old Norse that suspiciously sounded like “Told you so.”

“How’d you know that we aren’t from here?” Steve casually wanted to know although he was sure that he already knew the answer.

The brown-haired girl laughed softly and shrugged. “Two things. Well, he’s black and it’s easy to tell from the way you look at the women who aren’t dancing with men but with each other. Asgardian men don’t take notice of that.”

Oh, now that was embarrassing.

“Guilty as charged.”

“I’m Vélaug, this is Myrún.” The elf said and the two girls seemingly made them comfortable next to them. Another surprise, but they made a good impression, so Steve didn’t mind. Sam and him also introduced themselves and Sam instantly ordered them drinks.

The beginning of the conversation was slow and not very astounding. What were they doing here in Asgard? Did they like it here? What were the things they thought to be the most different?

Eventually Sam and Myrún checked out the dancefloor while Myrn and Steve stayed at the bar.

“New York. I’ve never been there. Can you compare it in any way to Valhalla?”

Steve shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. New York is… special. It’s not quite like other American cities. It’s loud and incredibly hectic. People are always running, trying to get somewhere and they’re ready to murder you to get a taxi. Valhalla seems more relaxed and it’s a lot greener… and older. In a good way. I was born in New York, I love it, but I can see why other people would
Vélaug seemed amused and nodded. “I’ve never been to the States.”

“You’d like to check it out sometime?”

“Not really, no. I’m from Álfheimr. I’m used to snow and cold winters. The places I want to go to are the Caribbean or Australia. Yeah, I know that look. I can’t lie down on the beach for longer than five minutes before I get completely sunburnt. I still want to go there.” She shrugged and Steve couldn’t fight off the mental image of her skin getting as red as a crab.

“Álfheimr?”

“One of the northern regions. East of Jotunheim. It’s lovely, but I chose to go to university in the capital, because I wanted to get a little bit of sun.”

“It’s still quiet cold.”

“It’s Asgard, it’s never going to get hot. Not even during summer time. You’re probably going to miss the sun.”

Steve responded with a laugh. “I can deal with a little cold…”

Vélaug smiled and there was a knowing twinkle in her eyes. It caught Steve off guard. “What?”

“Go ahead. Ask. Everybody who isn’t from Asgard wants to ask the same question. I don’t mind. Go ahead and ask.”

Her smile was genuine and inviting, so Steve asked the question that had been torturing him since the very day he had come here. “This is a modern, very rich county with educated people … are you really okay with living under a Monarch when the rest of this continent lives in Democracy?”

The smile on Vélaug’s face disappeared and was replaced by confusion. “Oh. That wasn’t the question that I expected.”

Now Steve was feeling equally bewildered. “Okay… what question were you expecting?”

“If I’m really into women and men.”

Of course, Steve should have known. “Uhm… I’ve already had that explained to me. I guess… and it’s easier to wrap my head around that than the monarchy.”

Obviously Steve had made it to intrigue her, because Vélaug’s gaze showed clearly that she was listening closely. “Why? It’s not that uncommon as a form of government.”

“Yeah, but usually the King doesn’t have actual political power. The parliament does. There is a reason for that. These societies have advanced far enough to realise that one single person shouldn’t hold that much power. It eventually does corrupt and I can’t understand that a country like this one… hasn’t come around yet to abolish the monarchy.”

It started with a frown, then Steve could see how Vélaug’s features lost their resemblance to an elf. A moment ago he had felt openness and warmth radiating from her, now Vélaug was building a wall between them and her gaze became hard as stone. “And you guys probably even wonder why the rest of the world hates you.”

While Steve was still having no idea what was happening to him, Vélaug got up from her barstool
and walked away, disappearing in the crowd. Steve must have insulted her by calling the monarchy into question which seemed nonsensical. Coulson had warned them about that kind of reaction, but it just couldn’t be real.

All over the world people were constantly fighting against oppressive regimes to gain their freedom or the right to vote. Asgardians were able to go to school and to attend university. It was a European country, the Enlightenment had started here, so why would they not long for empowerment?

An uneasy sensation was crawling up Steve’s back and he knew that somebody was watching him. Not even trying to be subtle about it. Turning around he saw the bartender glaring at him. Had he been listening to their conversation? Feeling a bit offended Steve snapped “Can I help you?”

“No, but I will give you some free advice. Get off your high horse.” Steve was too stunned to reply, but the bartender wasn’t done yet anyway. “So most industrial countries in this world are democracies, right? Most industrial and developing countries in the world want your stupid nation to leave them the fuck alone. I have to deal with this shit every holiday season. The young American men get here and think Valhalla is the new Amsterdam. They assume that all Asgardian women are sluts and instantly willing to have a threesome. But when a guy only looks at them, they lose their shit. Or you. How you like to tell us that every advanced country has to be a democracy… because that system clearly can’t be corrupted. You enjoy your democracy, we enjoy our free healthcare, free education and our barely existing crime rate. You know nothing about this country and yet you expect us to overthrow the family that has been protecting and defending this country for over 500 years… It’s because people like you that I wish that Duke of Glæsisvellir could become King, because he would end that fucking policy and stop your government to even get one foot in our door.”

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Loki’s heart was racing when he bent down and stretched his muscles. They felt the slightest bit sore, but in a pleasant way. Most days Loki woke up and had no desire whatsoever to go for his morning run, but he forced himself to anyway. Discipline. Nothing in life could be achieved without it. Nothing of value.

It was a cold morning, the sun hadn’t warmed the earth yet and Loki’s breath was condensing. The smell in the air was lovely. Moist grass and water drops. Like this Loki was actually looking forward to his day. Representation. Important, but dull. At least most of the time. Loki was going to make most of it.

As soon as he was done with his stretching exercises Loki walked up to the entrance, relieved to see that nobody was waiting for him. No news is good news and at the moment Loki expected Thor to show up all the time to ask him for advice what to do about his relationship. How to sell it to the public.

Yet nobody was there which meant Loki had another half hour before he had to work through his schedule. Back in his rooms Loki took a long shower and washed his hair. Watching the water running down his arms Loki could see that the colour on his fingernails was already coming off. Shortly he considered fixing it himself, but that seemed rather pointless. He had several public appointments today, a stylist would check on him before that.

The maid had already served his breakfast when Loki entered the salon. She was still waiting for him if he should have another request. “Thank you, Kyi. That would be everything.”

Sitting down Loki first reached for his orange juice and then for the pad which had been neatly placed on the table, next to his breakfast and the three different newspapers. His private secretary had
updated the pad with all the necessary information he needed for his appointments. Loki doubted that there was nothing left that he didn’t know, but he liked to double check. A long list of people had already tried to contact him this morning. Most of them were unimportant and could wait. Absently Loki was scrolling down the list of names, taking a bite from a slice of bread.

A little note caused him to stop and to focus. Loki felt the corners of his mouth twitch. Rather involuntarily. It was impossible to feel not amused.

_I call from Anthony Edward Stark, CEO of Stark Industries (personal) – demanded the Prince’s private cell phone number to agree on an appointment. The Prince deserves a good spanking (actual quote)_

Loki had to pat himself on the shoulder. Leah had been the perfect choice for his private secretary, she knew what information he wanted to have and she gave it to him. Uncensored.

Well, either Stark really wasn’t too thrilled about Loki’s interview or he had loved it. Strangely enough Loki couldn’t tell for sure. That man wasn’t too easy to figure out. If Stark didn’t like it, too bad for him. Also if there was one thing Loki wasn’t into – it was spanking.

After another minute Loki put down the pad and picked up one of the newspapers. The pleasant sensation that the morning run and the shower had bestowed on him vanished instantly as Loki’s eyes fell on the headline. What could be more enraging than stupidity and disrespect? Here Loki saw himself confronted with both of it and his mind was racing to consider all the possible consequences.

Things were going to go down quickly. A bit of completely justified public outrage and people would be quick to point out who they wanted as a successor. Which was going to be a problem. Loki knew what his father was going to think about this. They had to talk. Picking up his phone Loki called his secretary and Leah instantly answered. “Good morning, your highness.”

“Good morning, Leah. I need you to cancel all my appointments before 12 o’clock.”

“I’ve expected you to say this, but there is no way we can do this, your highness. Not without seriously upsetting the members of the industrial association. I do not need to remind you that press is going to be there and the date has been fixed over half a year ago?”

Loki grumbled beneath his breath. It would be tremendously stupid to call off the meeting with the industrial association. He had been preparing for weeks and by now he knew every detail of every board member of every company by heart. As much as he hated to admit it, Loki needed that meeting. Making contacts, forming allies and making them realise that Loki’s goodwill was a must-have to be successful in this country. No, he couldn’t pass on that.

Why did the secretary of state have to start an affair now?

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“I don’t get it.” With a sigh Sam lowered the newspaper, still shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s bad for his image, but who actually cares if a politician cheats on his wife? That kind of things happens every day, everybody does that.”

Steve was still chewing on his cereal and shrugged lightly. He didn’t want to think that everybody cheated on their partner, but to be honest he wasn’t really listening to Sam or James. His mind was still occupied by what Vélaug and the bartender had said to him last night. Not once in his life Steve had been reproached of being arrogant. He didn’t believe that he was narrow-minded, not at all, but looking back he had been rather bold and not very delicate when he had asked Vélaug about the
monarchy. Steve could have done that better, but expect for that…

Sam was right – this was a monarchy. Who cared if the secretary of state had an affair? It was bad for his image, but he didn’t have actual political power. So what? This was something Steve should probably care about, but this morning he was in such a sour mood, he couldn’t really think about any of this.

“You got it the wrong way round.” James’s lips formed a thin line which made Steve think that he wasn’t having a good morning either. “Nobody does that and everybody cares. This man’s life is over. He is going to lose his position and he is not going to find something new. This isn’t some small image problem, his reputation is ruined forever.”

Looking up Steve swallowed his cereal and this time he would try to be a little more diplomatic. Obviously he still didn’t understand the Asgardians. “Isn’t that a little bit… I don’t know… an over-reaction? I don’t approve people cheating on their partners, but that doesn’t say anything about his competences as a politician. Clinton cheated on his wife in the oval office and he didn’t have to leave office… it’s not pretty, but that’s what he’s doing as a… private person? If that makes any sense?”

Sam nodded in approval. “Steve’s right. The newspapers are totally freaking out, already speculating who is going to be his successor.”

“Because at the end of this day the King will have already dismissed him.” James seemed a bit frustrated with them for not believing him and Steve felt bad. Then James’ light blue eyes were on him and Steve had to think of Vélaug. There was nothing elfish about James and his broad shoulders, dark hair and angular facial features. Still very attractive though and beautiful eyes. “Do you remember when I told you that this country isn’t liberal but quite conservative?”

Steve winced when James interrupted him mid-thought and he feared he was going to blush. “Uhm, yeah. Sure.”

“In the trúa cheating is considered a horrific thing to do. Like it seriously fucks up your karma…”

“Wow, hold on for a second.” With a little gesture Sam indicated James to stop. His face put his confusion on display. “Too many foreign words in this sentence for me. What is a trúa?” Steve had to chuckle when Sam put way too much emphasis on the u and James immediately corrected him, much to Sam’s irritation.

“It’s the official religion. About 95% of this country believe in its principals. There is no concept of god though. Some professor call it a philosophy, not a religion. It’s all about spirits and the human soul. What you can do to strengthen it or to make it perish. Cheating falls into the second category. I tried to date a girl from Valhalla a couple of months ago and she put it this way – when you marry someone, you make a bond. You choose that person to be the most important person in your life. The one you choose to love most. How is anyone supposed to trust you if you cheated on that person? In Asgard nobody is going to make business with you if you cheated on your wife or husband. Because they expect you to screw you over. You betrayed the person you declared the most important person in your life. What’s going to stop you from betraying people you don’t give a crap about?”

Steve didn’t know what to respond, so he shared a look with Sam. Hearing it like that made it somewhat different and Steve realised how jaded they all were. Cheating had been kind of accepted by society. Sure, nobody approved of it, but it wasn’t a big deal either. An affair wasn’t enough to shock anyone these days.

“So are you saying that Asgardians don’t cheat unlike the rest of the world?” Sam was raising and
eyebrow and James sighed. “Obviously they do. Look at the secretary. But if it gets out, they’re not coming back from it. Nobody here is going to date a person who’s had an affair. Not going to happen.”

As a breakfast conversation this was really dark and depressing, so Steve straightened up. “I should get prepared. The Royal delegation is going to show up in two hours.”

It was a bit abrupt, but Steve had no desire to continue that discussion and he didn’t want to screw up with the king or the crown prince present. New negotiations about the trade agreement and since it was going to take place at the embassy the second prince wouldn’t be able to crush it. What a relief.

Somehow the appointment and the location had been leaked to the public and a small crowd had formed in front of the embassy before the royal guests had arrived. Steve and the other agents had to keep an eye on that, make sure that the street was empty and surveil the neighbouring buildings. Everything worked out fine, the reception was a success and the doors closed behind Fury, the king and the crown prince.

It would have been a quite uneventful day for Steve if he hadn’t chosen the exact same moment to head to the restroom as the crown prince. A bizarre scene. Steve had been washing his hands when somebody pushed the door open and looked into the room. One of the bodyguards and his eyes lingered on Steve, almost reproachfully. Before Steve could say anything the prince was pushing past his bodyguard, clearly annoyed. He was muttering something in Old Norse and then unceremoniously kicked the door shut, keeping the bodyguard out.

Maybe he wasn’t aware of Steve’s presence or he didn’t care. He instantly pulled his phone out of the pocket of his jacket and Steve tried to remember how to properly act around royalty. When you were alone with them… in the restroom.

Eventually Steve went for clearing his throat and the prince looked out, startled. “Oh, sorry… I thought nobody was here.”

Steve had to bet some money, he would say that the prince had just told his bodyguard to stop taking his job so seriously – they were in a fucking embassy. What was going to happen here?

“I’m already on my way out, your highness.”

The prince was already looking at his phone again. “You don’t know by any chance the difference between the National League and the American League in Baseball and who has to win what to become champion? I have to know that by the time I am back at the palace and the Wikipedia articles are about… the size of the bible.”

Steve blinked, tempted to ask if this was a joke. Weren’t they negotiating about the economic future of two nations? Now the crown prince wanted to know about baseball? Okay, this was lunch break, but still…

“Yeah, I think I could explain it to you…”

Instantly the prince’s head came back up and he looked as happy as a child in front of a Christmas tree and Steve decided that he liked him. Probably all his days were about things like these. Deals, negotiations, business talks, parliament discussion and constant training to be king… it made him human to try to find out about something as trivial as baseball. Also Steve had the slight suspicion that it had something to do with his American girlfriend.

“That would be great.”
No, Steve was never going to understand this country.
Hello everybody,

A big wedding is celebrated and almost everybody is present. Thor isn’t looking forward to it, Loki is and somebody wants to know about Tony ;)

Have fun :D

“I don’t like weddings.” Thor kept on grumbling while trying to adjust his tie and Loki wouldn’t stop chuckling. “No… you love weddings. A lot of champagne, everybody is in a good mood and all the women suddenly are desperately looking for someone to marry. Could you stop tugging at your tie? It’s perfectly fine…”

Dropping his hands Thor glared at him and Loki inwardly counted to three. “I should be able to take Jane with me.”

Here they went…

“You don’t want to start that conversation with me, Thor. You’re not going to get any support. You should take that to mother.”

“She is my girlfriend. That’s the thing you do with your partner.”

Loki didn’t say anything, he just gave Thor a certain look which should clearly be enough and it was enough. “Yes, yes, I know… Bringing her along would make the relationship official.” Thor was about to roll his eyes and Loki nodded. “Why don’t you take care of things? It’s about time. Jane needs a coach, courses about the trúa, Asgardian history and etiquette. Old Norse lessons. It’s incredibly hard to learn for native English speakers.”

Now Thor had what he wanted, they were talking about Jane. “She is in here on holiday. I can’t demand her to stay for several weeks to learn everything about our nation.”

There was a good chance that Thor was only saying this to get on Loki’s nerves. Not today, there was going to be a wedding. Loki planned on spending a nice day. “Why are you doing this? You know how things work just as well as I do. You told me that Jane is the one for you, that you want to marry her. If you want to do that and be able to rule when you become king, you need the acceptance of the public. She’s foreign. Hard enough. She’s American. With the new policy – almost impossible. Soon you’ll have to make the relationship public and then she will have to be able to say a few words in Old Norse. You know all that, so if you just want me to lament how hard life is on you, because you can’t take her to the wedding… Sorry, not going to happen.”

Thor was looking almost sad, then he grumbled softly. “I know… It’s just… She is an amazing woman and I wanted to propose to her the way she deserves. Spectacle. If I ask her to learn Old Norse and study the rituals of the trúa… Well, it’s kind of obvious what I have in mind and that’s not very romantic.”

Loki blinked in total confusion. This was an argument that he couldn’t wrap his head around. It
made no sense to him. Tiny, unimportant ideas, details, silly. “I am pretty sure Jane already knows where this relationship is going. We are royalty, Thor. Spectacle and romantic proposes aren’t for us. Stability, producing heirs, securing the bloodline. If Jane goes back to the US, then get her a teacher there.”

The look on Thor’s face left no room for interpretation, he was clearly displeased. Loki had no idea why he always counted on him to tell him something else than the hard, unyielding truth. Perhaps that was something that little brothers should do, but Loki refused. Sugar-coating was for ordinary people, princes didn’t have that luxury. It made no sense that Thor wouldn’t stop trying.

Today it was no use trying, Loki was in a good mood, he wouldn’t let Thor’s brooding ruin it. Political discussions were ahead, networking – Loki loved weddings. Well, weddings of importance with all the nobility of this country present. Any terrorist only had to walk in with a bomb and the entire nation would sink into chaos within seconds. If his mother could read his thoughts, she would be telling Loki to cheer up. His views always seemed so sombre. Loki just liked to be aware of all of his options.

“I can’t understand why you are looking forward to this. It’s going to be an ordeal of the worst kind…” At least Thor had now abandoned the idea of bringing Loki on his side. “How can you say that? Two souls are going to be joined in love in devotion. It’s sacred, Thor.” Loki offered his meanest grin to which his brother rolled his eyes in response. “You know what I’m talking about. Aðaliz is from Vanaheim and Randví is from Niflheim. Ancient nobility… everybody is going to be there. The guest list must be long enough to cover all the way from gate to your bedroom….”

“What’s the problem with a big wedding?” Now Loki was just openly messing with him and Thor who seemed so desperate for a conversation that he wasn’t calling him out on it. Interesting how far Loki would be able to go.

“I don’t mind a big wedding when I like the company. Are you really keen on spending an entire day one table away from people who despise you and vice-versa.”

Loki feigned ignorance and raised an eyebrow and that was enough for Thor to softly punch his shoulder. “The Frostgiants. All of them are going to be there. Even Laufey’s sons.”

There was instant need, an almost tugging sensation that urged Loki to turn around and look out for his mother. Frigga hated that expression. Frostgiants. One of the few things that could get her to raise her voice. Loki’s mother didn’t lose her temper, she was too elegant for that. Always one step further than everybody else. No, a woman like that didn’t get angry and yet Loki wouldn’t dare to use that word in her presence. Frigga wanted her children to live up to her example. Royalty, they should be above using such insulting terms. For a moment Loki searched his memory, but he couldn’t remember a single incident when Thor had been careless enough to let her hear it. Unthinkable. Acting against his instinct Loki didn’t call his brother out on his foul language. “The Ymirsons are distantly related to Randví’s family. Of course they are going to be there. Also, I don’t hate them. Laufey is stubborn and unwilling to change course, but no lord is as unanimously adored by his people as him.”

Thor uttered a dry laugh, crossing his arms in front of his chest. By the way his lips curled into a small smile Loki could tell that Thor thought that he had outwitted him. “And why is that so? Not because of his politics, but because he loathes the king. The entire royal family. Us. All of Jotunheim does. Nothing brings people closer together than hating somebody. Not even love.”

What reply was Loki supposed to give when Thor was so obviously right? “Look at you, you said something smart and displayed political understanding… how come?”
Shrugging the teasing words off Thor turned back to face the mirror, his finger back on his tie. As if he was going to improve it in any kind of way. “It’s going to be a tense affair and you know that. Sure, everybody’s going to smile and pretend for the happy couple, but here I still can be honest and say that I’m not looking forward to it.”

Loki could be praying to his ancestors for the rest of his life, they would never bestow enough wisdom on him to understand Thor’s reasoning. An evening with the people you would maybe even call your enemies. What could be more entertaining and interesting? When it came down to diplomacy nobody was a better teacher than an Ymirson. Over hundreds of years they had perfected the condescending smile and how to say ‘my king’ with the finest trace of mockery in their voice. Hiding insults and insolence in plain sight. One million ways to show one’s contempt.

Learning from the best was a privilege.

“There will be lots of champagne?” Loki offered and Thor just smiled, shaking his head. That was supposed to mean that they agreed on not understanding the other’s point.

“See you later then… and do something about your hair.”

“Huh?” Loki looked at his brother in confusion who jumped at the opportunity and ruffled his hair with both of his hands. “Oh, you bastard!”

Thor and him had never been in the same car. Not once in their lives. Security reasons. Protocol. Two heirs apparent couldn’t end up in the same accident. The thought of them being on a plane with their father was ridiculous. Over the years they had established a routine if the entire royal family was heading out. Loki was riding with his mother, Thor and their father alone. Today wasn’t any different. It wasn’t a surprise that his mother was also excited about the wedding. A common distraction from all the political chaos that surrounded them. Well, a distraction that would last for two hours or so. Over dinner it would be politics all over again.

Loki loved weddings.

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By now Steve should be used to having no idea what was going on, but he clearly wasn’t. Perhaps it was strange that he didn’t have to be on guard. He couldn’t help himself, Steve was already checking out his surroundings. Exits. Secluded corners. People. What was he doing at a royal wedding if he wasn’t here to prove security? Was it even a royal wedding? There, another example, Steve had no idea what he was doing. Also he clearly shouldn’t be here. How do you decline an invitation from a prince? Could the prince even invite him when it wasn’t his wedding?

No, Steve was completely lost.

A glass of champagne in his hand Steve longed for someone to talk to and at the same time he dreaded being approached by anyone. Naturally it had to be the most gorgeous woman in the room. Bad luck all the way.

“You seem in desperate need for company and I find myself looking for a gentleman. Care to help me out?”

Steve didn’t have the best ear to name an accent, but if he had to guess he would say that the woman in front of him wasn’t Asgardian, nor a native English speaker. That was all though and her beauty was way too distracting to focus on how she pronounced her vowels. A black and white dress that hugged a body so tightly that most women wouldn’t be able to wear it. Not without showing off all
the little bumps that were completely natural but really flattering. At least in a dress like this. This woman didn’t have to worry about any of that, her figure was flawless. A waist so narrow it would always stay an unreachable fantasy for the most part of the female population of the world. Strangely enough being so slim didn’t stop her from having curves and actual hips.

Her face was also lovely, but Steve thought that her smile was distant, her features a bit hard. Dark red hair was reaching down to her shoulders, but there wasn’t a single freckle on her perfectly white cheeks.

“I’m sorry… I can’t quite follow you.”

“You will excuse my honesty, but you are clearly a bit lost. The man who was supposed to accompany me cancelled on short-notice. I need someone to get me drinks, sit next to me and make interesting conversation. You need somebody to not make you feel completely out of place. I am good at that. So?”

Steve was overwhelmed and that woman clearly meant trouble, but everything was better than hanging out alone at a wedding, so he held out his hand. “Steve Rogers, nice to meet you.”

“Natasha Romanova. It’s a pleasure. You are American?”

“Indeed.”

“Without a doubt your first time in Asgard. Either you are journalist or you work at the embassy.”

Now Steve realised very quickly why he had a bad feeling about her. How could she figure that out without knowing a thing about him? It was better to stay vague. “And what about you?”

“Oh, I am a mere dancer. Ballet.” The smile on her face made Steve think that he was missing something important here. Ballet. Romanova. Hadn’t he heard about some Russian ballet troupe being in Valhalla? “One of the brides watched more than 10 of my performances. That’s how I came into the honour of being invited.”

Before she could ask him how Steve had ended up here, he was quick to go into another direction. “You’ve been to an Asgardian wedding before? I have no idea what is going to happen here and I don’t want to make a fool out of myself.”

“I’ve been to several.” When Steve frowned, she dazzled him with a smile and linked her arm with his. “I am a socialite and I get invited a lot. You don’t have to be nervous. Guests at an Asgardian wedding have a very passive role. All we’re going to do is watch.”

That was a relief, but Steve still felt completely out of place. Just because he had explained baseball to a prince?

Steve was beginning to feel grateful when Natasha didn’t keep asking about what he was doing here, instead he instantly started to provide him all the gossip in the world about all the other guests. Asgardian nobility didn’t seem so much different from Hollywood celebrities. Except that there were no stories about cheating.

Natasha was smart, surprisingly funny and had everybody looking at her. Which meant people were also staring at Steve. He was just about to feel uncomfortable when the sound of a little bell filled this big hall. Everybody turned to the door which was wide open. A man in uniform was standing right next to it. “Her highness, the Duchess of Frensalir and his highness, the Duke of Glæsisvellir.”

The few people who had already sat down at their table instantly got up and bowed their heads when
the prince and his mother walked in. Despite Steve’s dislike of the monarchy and its glorification of a handful people that had been born with a certain surname, he had to admit that they made a tremendous impression.

Mother and son looked like royalty.

Anybody could put on an elegant blue dress or a green frock coat that cost a fortune, but that still wouldn’t make you look like a queen or a prince if you didn’t know how to move in that clothing. They both knew perfectly well what they were doing, walking with a grace that couldn’t be learned.

Steve thought that they looked happy.

Two women and men stepped forward, personally greeting them. Most probably the parents of the two brides. The man in uniform announced the Duke of Bilskimir and then the king himself. Curiously Steve watched the guests and how they acted in the presence of the royal family. He had expected some tension or a lot more… awe. After everybody had bowed their heads everything went instantly back to normal. The chatting continued and people sat back down, turned their backs to the royals.

That was it?

“As much as red suits him… it must be tiring to only be able to wear a single colour in public.”

Steve had almost forgotten about Natasha right next to him. “The prince?”

“Yes. Well, I guess both of them. Red or green every single day. It’s so boring…”

Clothes were boring in general and Steve was more than willing to change the topic of the conversation. “Any idea when the ceremony is going to start? I can’t imagine that any more important guests are going to show up?”

No more guests, but about 10 minutes later they were asked to leave the room and Steve found himself in the most beautiful patio he had ever seen. With a Russian ballerina on his arm. A little bit surreal.

“There are no chairs.”

“Everybody has to remain standing during the ceremony.” No further explanation, so Steve was going to accept it like that. The crowd was forming a circle around the centre of the patio where a fire pot was located. It wasn’t big enough for Steve to feel the heat at this distance. Was the fire a part of the ceremony? Would there be rings?

Natasha leaned in to him and Steve was almost overwhelmed by the sweet scent of her perfume. “This is the man who is going to perform the ritual. I can’t remember what his position is called.”

A priest?

Steve thought that he looked like an ordinary man. Young even. Dressed in black, almost shockingly elegant. The poor guy had to be sweating, standing right next to the fire. Just when Steve was about to ask how things were going to continue now, the entire crowd fell silent. There was no music, nothing.

It wasn’t necessary. A young woman was walking towards the fire pit. The smile on her face was bright, almost dazzling. On a normal day you didn’t see somebody so happy. She was very small, petite, wearing a tunica dress and she was barefoot. Maybe that was the reason for the fire?
The bride had almost reached the pit when Steve noticed that another woman had been approaching from the right. Dressed the same way, but her tunic wasn’t gold but violet. Just as happy.

It didn’t matter that Steve didn’t understand a word from what the priest said. The couple was beaming, looking at each other with sparkling eyes, full of love and adoration. When the one in the gold tunic spoke up she took her future wife’s hand. She didn’t say much, but reached into a not-visible pocket of her dress and pulled out an envelope. Steve watched with a frown how she handed it the other bride. “What is that?”

Even whispering seemed out of place but Natasha answered in an equally hushed tone. “The letter she wrote to the ancestors of her bride. The bride is going to place it in the shrine of her ancestors and vice-versa.”

The scene quickly repeated itself and the other one also handed her future spouse a letter. After a few words from the priest the couple enlaced their fingers and the priest wrapped a white ribbon around their hands.

Handfasting. At least one ritual that Steve could recognize. Both of them were saying soft words. Maybe their personal vows or a ritual text, Steve had no idea. Another thing that wasn’t important, because they were still looking at each other like the other person was the only thing they could ever need.

Eventually the priest gave both of them a quill they seemed to draw a little mark on each other’s wrists before the priest untied them. Steve had the feeling that the ritual had been completed and as it turned out, he was right. Together they tossed the white ribbon into the fire and the crowd erupted into cheers.

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“You both look splendid. I wish you all the best.” Thor first kissed Aðaliz on the cheek, then Randví. He wasn’t exaggerating. Looking at them it was easy to believe that it was the happiest day in their lives.

“Thank you, Thor.” Both of them hugged him at the same time and caused him to laugh even though he was stumbling a little bit. Sure, Loki had been only trying to work him up, but maybe he hadn’t been so wrong after all. It could be a nice day. It would be the most wonderful day for them.

Thor had never been a sentimental and he had attended more weddings than he could count, but today had been the first time that a ceremony had deeply touched him. Obviously these things changed when you had found something you wanted to share these moments with. It was still a shame that she couldn’t be here.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other. We have to catch up later.” Randví squeezed his hand before Thor had to step aside to give the next one in line a chance to congratulate.

A waiter was instantly next to him and Thor gladly took a glass of champagne. Loki was only a few steps away, already talking to the sister of the Lord of Svartálfar. Naturally, Loki was always networking and charming people. Thor took a look around and there was no shortage of distant family members or friends that he hadn’t seen in a while. He would do his best to stay close to them and avoid everybody else.

Thor engaged in a conversation with some nobles from Álfheimr, he knew they were somehow related, but he had forgotten how. Then Randví’s family and Thor noticed that there was no mentioning of their daughters who were lovely and the same age as Thor. So all of them were indeed
convinced that he was taken. Loki was right, he had to make sure that Jane was going to introduced into their culture.

"Should I buy Jane a ring?"

Loki blinked in surprise and swallowed a big gulp from his wine. Thor had immediately approached him when Loki had been alone. "Well, you’ll expect one… does she know that we don’t have wedding bands in Asgard? Does she know about the markings?"

"No, but that’s another thing she can learn… I can’t ask her to accept every little detail about my culture if I don’t do the same. An engagement ring?" Thor looked at his brother questionably who nodded softly. "I don’t see why not. Just make sure it’s a big diamond. Really big."

"No need to tell me that." Thor smirked and Loki clicked their glasses before his eyes travelled back to the newlyweds. "They are really cute… that’s going to be you soon."

"I haven’t even proposed yet… and father still doesn’t approve."

"That’s why you should have already started to prepare Jane… Yeah, don’t give me that look, I’m already shutting up."

"You never shut up."

"I just have the most interesting things to say."

Thor smiled gently, because there was definitely some truth in Loki’s statement. He was starting to amuse himself, so the event that followed was nothing but a surprise. This wedding could only end up in disaster for Thor.

"Your highness. Long time, no see." A voice that Thor didn’t recognize, but the man in front of him couldn’t be mistaken for anybody else. Helblindi Ymirson was the embodiment of everything that was Jotun.

Almost as tall as Thor, lean build, pitch black hair that seemed to gleam in a dark shade of blue when the light fell upon it, marvellous white skin, thin lips and the bluest eyes that Thor had ever seen. The strong resemblance to Laufey couldn’t be denied and it was a reason for Thor’s dislike of him. Nevertheless it would be a lie to call Helblindi unattractive, he was anything but.

"My Lord Helblindi." Thor was going to start pretending, he had no interest whatsoever to talk to him. "You are right, it must have been more than five years…"

"Time flies by in great company, doesn’t it?" The smirk on the Frostgiant’s face was unbearable and Thor was almost relieved when he turned to his little brother. Loki was looking at Helblindi with mild interest.

The Frostgiant bowed his head, his smirk turning into a smile. "Your highness, it’s a pleasure."

Loki nodded shortly. "My Lord Helblindi. I heard congratulations are in order. Was it magna cum laude?"

"Summa cum laude. Thank you, your highness." Another smirk. "My father told me about his short stay at the court. You impressed him."

"He didn’t let that show."
“He never does.”

Thor shot Loki a look. Couldn’t they cut this short? Before… Oh, for the love of all of his ancestors and the great Buri…

“Your highnesses. I am sorry to interrupt you, but I was looking for my brother.” Both of Laufey’s sons at once, that was clearly more than Thor had bargained for. Their constant smirks and little comments were insolent and arrogant. Just like their father. Small talk shouldn’t be possible. Thor couldn’t be more grateful when Byleistr spoke up to his brother, telling him that one of the brides wanted to talk to them. Right, they were related…

“You will excuse us.” Helblindi didn’t make it sound like Loki or Thor were in any position to actually excuse them. He made a single step before stopping and glancing at Loki. “Now that I think of it… I simply have to know. Do you mind another question, your highness?”

Loki frowned, but made an inviting gesture.

“I loved your latest TV interview. I just want to know… Did you literally tell Tony Stark to fuck off after you fucked him?”

Thor felt his mouth drop and even Loki seemed surprised for a second. A very short second. “No, I let him fuck me and then I kissed him goodbye. I am classy.”

“Most definitely.” Helblindi laughed before turning back around, he and his brother disappeared in the crowd, but Thor could hear them talking in Jőtnar. About them, obviously. Scandalous.

“How could you let him talk to you like that? You are his prince, he doesn’t have the right.” Thor downed the rest of his glass while Loki’s eyes were still following the Frostgiants. “I thought it was an absolutely valid question.”

Thor needed another glass. Or several.
“Do you see how happy they are? It’s such a beautiful sight.” Frigga could easily been talking about herself too. While watching the bridal couple she had that expression of absolute content on her face.

Although she wasn’t looking at Loki, he felt like the question was directed at him. Luckily his father was quick to agree. “Yes, they are indeed lovely together. We should invite them to the court when they have finished their honeymoon.”

“A splendid idea.” Frigga smiled brightly and then raised her glass. “To the bridal couple.”

Loki joined in on the toast and then immediately went back to what he had been doing before. Thinking about he was going to avoid being dragged to the dancefloor every five seconds.

The heads of the noblest families of the country were all this room, there was a lot to talk about. If Loki played his cards right, he could make some vital connections that could be very useful in the future. Everybody wanted something and although Loki wasn’t the right position to give it to them, he wasn’t without influence. Today every conversation would be about the possible new secretary of state. Not something that Loki was looking forward to, because he knew how his father was going to react to it.

Only a couple of minutes later his father got indeed up from his chair to go and smoke a cigar with other nobles from Vanaheim. With the king gone, their table was so much easier to approach and before Loki knew what was happening to him, one of the brides had asked him to dance. That he couldn’t refuse.

Of course, one dance wasn’t enough and Loki hated to admit that he had no idea how to escape the bubble of people which had formed around him. People seeking his presence and attention was nothing new, not at all. Normally though whenever Thor and him appeared together in public, the crowd divided into two separate teams and there was a little more room to breathe. Now Heimdall didn’t even need to tell the security agents to look out for Thor, he was comfortably sitting at a table while Loki was surrounded by people who all wanted a piece of him. It was more annoying than uncomfortable.

“Your highness, have you met my daughter yet?”

“Your highness, he has just finished his studies. An incredible bright, young man.”

“She read your thesis and was severely impressed.”

“He shares your political opinions. Whenever he talks, it’s like hearing you.”
Loki really needed to get into a new relationship, just to get away from this. For now he was smiling, talking, trying to remember names. It was always important to remember names. They all may be boring and interchangeable, but you never knew…

“Will you excuse me for a second?” This time Loki didn’t even bother to come up with an excuse, he just wanted to get away from everybody a short moment. On his way to the patio Loki winked a waiter who instantly brought him a new glass of wine. Stepping outside Loki sucked in some of the fresh air and then took a moment to once more scan the crowd.

Giving the circumstances the Ymirsons were the most important ones, but with the entire nobility of the country around, it was hard to not forget about anybody. All they were going to talk about was the vacant position of the secretary of state. Ridiculous. Everybody already knew who should be the successor. It was quite obvious.

Loki was taking a sip from his wine when he spotted something rather unexpected. Very easy to make them out, Romanova always had to make sure that everybody noticed her. That dress was a bit much, even for a wedding. Not a surprise though, that woman thought that the best way to distract somebody was to draw their attention to your physical attributes. Sure, that might work on some people. Shallow ones. The dumb ones.

Every event that Loki saw her at Romanova had a different guy as her arm candy. Normally those were all Asgardian and in powerful positions. Politicians or noblemen. Not the case this time.

Blond, broad shoulders… similar to Thor. Loki could swear that he had seen him before. Not his type, but by looking at him Loki knew that this wasn’t the first time he…

The realisation came quickly and it bestowed a smile on Loki’s face. At the embassy, one of the new DS agents. To not immediately remember him wasn’t such a big deal. Standing right next to Barnes, this poor guy could only fade into nothingness. Invisible.

Romanova was so easy to read. A new DS agent who had no idea how things worked in Asgard, Loki felt almost sorry for him. Any day when he could make Romanova miserable was a good day.

Humming softly to himself Loki made his way through the crowd. Reistr was the son of a business tycoon from Niflheim and the most boring human being Loki could think of. Also clingy and had over heels for the Russian. That proved his lack of wits.

As soon as he and the two men he was talking to became aware of Loki’s presence, they instantly fell silent and bowed their heads. Obedient and so boring. Nonetheless Loki put on one of his charming smiles. “My dear Reistr, I hope you and these marvellous gentlemen forgive me this rude interruption.”

“Oh no, it’s an honour your highness.”

Yes, yes, Loki looking into their direction would also be an honour. Everything was an honour…

“Yes, thank you, but I won’t keep you for long. I heard the lovely Natasha Romanova complaining that nobody asked her to dance yet. A crime, isn’t it?”

That should be enough.

Merely two minutes later Reistr walked off and Loki watched contentedly how he approached Romanova. Reistr had a too important position in the Asgardian society, she couldn’t afford to scare him away. The foolish young man who had no idea who he was dealing with pulled Romanova towards the dancefloor and Loki jumped at the opportunity.
The American was standing alone and Loki let a few seconds pass to take in all the information that he needed. Easy. “Did you escape from the rather boring and uptight claws of your embassy?”

A great feeling of satisfaction was spreading in Loki’s guts when the American winced, quickly realising who was talking to him. “Your highness.”

Loki could see him struggling to remember protocol, then he eventually hastily bowed his head. Almost endearing. Maybe Loki would go easy on him. Loki could be nice if he wanted to. “No need to be so formal. My name is Loki.”

The bait was thrown out and Loki was curious to see how the American was going to react. Just like expected, he was squirming like a worm. This was going to be so much fun.

“I am afraid I can’t call you that, your highness.”

“Oh, of course not.”

It was a quick analysis, because Loki could read him like a very short book for kids. For a short moment Loki inwardly bemoaned the fact that he hadn’t seen the American interact with Thor. To see how his reactions would be different. Loki obviously made him feel uncomfortable, but he also wanted to know why. Royalty? Or was it something else? Definitely something else.

Tilting his head to the side Loki continued to smile sweetly. “So what do I call you?”

Embarrassed the agent shifted his weight from foot to another, clearly not knowing how to present himself. It was typical. These agents were chosen to protect ambassadors and important diplomats and to those people they were merely furniture. They didn’t talk to him and now there was Loki, completely overwhelming him.

“I’m sorry. My name is Steve Rogers.”

Trivial. “Hello Steve Rogers. Did you enjoy the ceremony? It must have been quite different from what you are used to.”

Rogers blinked, taken aback that Loki was trying to start an actual conversation. To his credit, he wasn’t stumbling over his own words. Loki had already seen and heard everything. “Uhm, yes. I thought it was very different, but sweet. They’re clearly very much in love.”

Now the discomfort wasn’t there. A slight awkwardness but he was being honest, Loki found it shockingly easy to tell. “Oh, they are. They’ve been together for over five years, they’ve been looking forward to this day.”

“I see, but I didn’t understand…” Out of a sudden Rogers trailed off, shutting his mouth so ridiculously fast that Loki would have almost laughed. He must have remembered the rules they had told them. Don’t talk unless the royal asks you a question. Sometimes Loki wished it would really work like that.

“Go ahead. If you have questions about the ritual I can explain it to you.”

A slight hesitation, but then Rogers probably came to the conclusion that it would be impolite to not ask a question now. “I was a bit confused by the quills and what they were doing with them… Were they drawing on each other’s arm?”

Now that was a question that Jane was also going to ask very soon. Loki could be helpful while having fun. “Oh, the markings. It’s an old tradition. Somewhat like weddings rings, but much more
permanent.”

Rogers was raising an eyebrow and a mischievous idea came to Loki’s mind and he simply couldn’t resist.

Reaching out Loki gently took a hold of Rogers’ hand. No, he didn’t flinch, but his eyes grew wide and now Loki knew exactly what was causing his discomfort. Midgardian men could be so tedious. Yet so much fun to play with.

“The couple chooses a symbol to represent their love. It can be anything, a rune, a word, a name, whatever they want. Their hands get are tied together to make them one, to unite them. Together, as one, they draw the chosen symbol on the other’s skin. Somewhere on the lower arm. You choose the spot beforehand. Maybe here.”

Loki used the index finger of his left hand to create an invisible pattern on Rogers’ lower arm. No, he wasn’t feeling the other’s pulse, but Loki knew anyway that it was racing and that the agent was itching to pull his hand out of Loki’s grip. “During the ceremony it’s a mere symbolic act. They are not allowed to wash them off until they get the symbols tattooed tomorrow.”

“You get a tattoo when you marry? Like everybody?”

“You have already heard that we don’t take infidelity lightly. The markings are a promise and a means of protection. This way everybody knows that you have decided to give your entire love to another person. It’s a promise.”

Loki sounded dry, he knew he was stating facts, but now it was finally enough for Rogers to pull his hand back. “A tattoo… seems a little extreme?” His eyes were lowered, he wasn’t directly looking at Loki. Too easy.

“Actually no, it does not. I’m sorry, I’ve kept you for so long. I’m sure you’d like to join again the lady that has been keeping you company. It was lovely talking to you, agent Rogers.” Loki took a step and then turned back around as if he had forgotten something. “Oh, right. Please tell the most gorgeous agent Barnes that I said hi and that I’m looking forward to our tennis match next week.”

Rogers’ face was getting a bit paler now. “Since we’ve had such a nice talk… you better don’t mention any details about your work to Miss Romanova. She has a habit of repeating everything she hears to the Russian government.”

Rogers’ dumbfounded expression was delicious, it filled Loki with childish glee. He winked and then let him stand there, dealing with the thought that he was spending the evening with a Russian spy. Life was good when you can find pleasure in the little things.

Loki found himself a new spot to observe the hall, but he didn’t get to do that. A soft shiver was running down his back. Not really uncomfortable, but incredibly hard to shake off. Somebody was watching him. Nothing new there, Loki was being watched everywhere he went. So much that he got used to it.

Now Loki could feel someone’s eyes on his skin in an intense stare. Looking around Loki tried to make out who he was dealing with, but he couldn’t see anybody who might evoke such a powerful reaction. Was he only imagining this? Eventually Loki turned his head and things instantly became a lot clearer.

The eyes that were watching him were blue and belonged to the stoic face of the Lord of Jotunheim. Laufey held his gaze, but he wouldn’t smile. The intensity became almost hard to bear, but Loki wasn’t going to look away. Out of the question, he wasn’t going to be the one to do that.
It also wasn’t necessary, because Laufey turned around and casually walked out, into the patio. A person with such charisma could easily make you understand what they wanted without talking to you. Loki perfectly remembered their last conversation and how he had felt like every single word was being put up to the test. Hardly anyone could make feel unsure or wake the need in Loki to actually impress him. Laufey most probably loathed Loki just like the rest of his family. Even if they were of the same opinion, would he admit it?

Strangely enough Helblindi had said that Laufey had been impressed. Because Loki was critical of the language act? Why wouldn’t he be? It brought more trouble than advantages. With every Jotun now being bilingual, there was no more use of it.

Once again Loki’s interest was sparked and he slowly followed Laufey outside. The Jotun was standing next to the fire pit, the still dancing flames were softly illuminating his face. Whatever their conversation was going to be about, Loki knew it was going to be the most interesting one of the entire evening. While keeping his steps deliberately slow Loki took in the Jotun’s appearance and compared him his father.

It wasn’t the first time he did that. Ever since he had seen that reportage as a young child. A Jotun protest in front of the parliament, a man shouting “That usurper is never going to be our king! The real king’s name is Ymirson!”

Laufey was considerable younger than Odin and it was clearly visible. He was taller, his posture impeccable, not a single grey hair on his head and an unmatched grace. It was easy to imagine him as the king of this country. But he wasn’t…

“My lord…” Loki stopped next to Laufey who looked up and indicated a greeting with his head.

“You enjoyed irritating the American, your highness.”

“Immensely, yes.”

“You are indeed hard to figure out. You openly state how much the American policy disgusts you, although it’s your father’s main project. You sleep with the American weapons manufacturer and you don’t even try to keep it a secret. Then you warn an agent of the embassy that a Russian spy is seeking his company.”

Loki shrugged. “The policy is a disaster and my attraction to Stark was merely physical. I don’t care about what the agent might tell Romanova, but I don’t like her. If I can make her miserable, I will go for it. Gladly.”

“Making people miserable.” Laufey laughed, but it sounded dry. “How oddly familiar.”

It happened so rarely that Loki felt embarrassed and he was doing his best not to show it. He needed to come up with something to say, a change of topic. Anything. Yet it was Laufey who continued the conversation. “A beautiful wedding, wasn’t it? I’ve known Randví since she was a child. A bright and gentle young woman, her luonto is strong. I am perfectly sure that her fylgja is a small bird. A free spirit, strong but nevertheless fragile. She deserves a long lasting and fulfilling love.”

Loki nodded in agreement while pondering what Laufey was thinking about Loki’s fylgja. He was a Búrison, so probably a snake. A poisonous one. “I’m sure they’re going to do their best to make each other happy.”

“Again, an odd choice of words.” Laufey pointed out and Loki was getting annoyed by not knowing if he was amused or not.
“What am I supposed to say? Life can always get in the way, but I think that they want to make most of it, that they love each other and that’s all one can ask for. So many things can make you unhappy, but they will do their best to not be part of that. To me that’s the most important thing in a relationship.”

There was no immediate reaction, Laufey was letting the words sink in until he started to smile for the very first time. Small but soft. “You sound much older than you are. Tired of romantic ideas and sentiment.”

Those words were enough to cause Loki to huff, but he resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Maybe I don’t believe in it. Or it doesn’t matter to me, because it’s not going to be a part of my life. At least most probably.”

“Most people would call that sad.”

“Oh, please… I’m in a position where the choice of my future spouse will affect a lot more people than just me. That is something that has to be considered and is definitely more important. It’s nothing to lament about though.” Loki shrugged, he didn’t even think that this was a topic worth of discussion.

“You don’t believe that a loveless marriage is more likely to lead towards disaster?” An obvious allusion to the secretary of state. “I don’t feel sympathy for people who break their vows and ignore their responsibility.”

Laufey continued to watch him closely, giving the impression of looking for something and Loki was urging to know what that might be. “Are you hopeful that the new secretary of state is going to be more honorable? That he will take his duties more serious?”

“I have no reason to doubt Leifsson’s character in any way.”

“You see your highness, now I can’t tell if you’re trying to spite me or if you are being honest.”

What? Loki hated surprise. He hated it when he didn’t know how to react and this was one of these moments. “Why would I try to spite you, my lord?”

It was a ridiculous question, they both knew it, but Loki was fairly sure that Laufey was intelligent enough to understand an entire family didn’t have to share the same opinion.

“Because I hate it to be wrong. Until now I’ve been convinced that you inherited your mother’s bright spirit and sharp wit. You simply have to see that Leifsson is not going to be made secretary of state. I would have never thought you to be naïve.”

“I am not, be assured. It’s a simple matter. He has the most experience, he is the most qualified and the people support him. He is the logical choice.”

“And yet he is never going to be secretary of state.” The certainty in Laufey’s voice was enough to make Loki doubt his own conclusion. “And why’s that?”

“He is Jotun.”

For a second Loki was tempted to agree with Thor. They really did feel persecuted for no reason, but then… “And he is the perfect candidate to become the first Jotun to be a minister.”

“Did your father say that? Did you hear these words leaving his mouth? Did you, your highness?”
Gritting his teeth Loki shook his head and Laufey smiled again. Cold and heartless. “Because King Odin of Asgard is never going to make a Jotun a minister. It doesn’t matter that the entire country, even his own son are expecting him to. He will not do it.”

“I know that you feel nothing but disgust for my family, my lord, but my father is not stupid, nor driven by emotions. Also, he is not racist.”

“No and he is not trying to make up for the crime his ancestors committed. Usurping the rightful queen of Valhalla and Jotunheim. Now he is trying to pretend that this part of history doesn’t exist and most of the country likes to pretend that they forgot too. Jotunheim doesn’t pretend. Odin is never going to tolerate a Jotun in a powerful position, because we don’t pretend that he is anything different but a descendant of a long line of usurpers.”

Loki felt his heart rate speeding up a little bit, but he wasn’t going to lose his calm over this. Nothing about this was new. Hatred that reached back about 500 years. History should be looked at critically, but that didn’t mean Loki would tolerate an insult to his family or his father. Taking a step forward Loki deliberately entered Laufey’s personal space. “This entire statement would be so much more meaningful if it led to something else than just you considering yourself the rightful king of Asgard. You are not. The constitution is very clear about that. My brother Thor is heir to the throne, not Helblindi. Our families went to war 500 years ago, but we are willing to move on. Not every decision my father makes is meant to spite or to discriminate you. Have a nice evening, my lord.”

Turning around Loki walked back into the hall, trying to not show that this little dispute had shaken him. Such a reaction was completely unlike him. Radical Jotuns had been saying the exact same things for half a century and Loki had got used to it. Like everybody else. It hadn’t occurred to him that his father could make anybody but Leifsson secretary of state. He was the obvious choice. Everybody was expecting it and yet Laufey had a point.

No Jotun had ever been a minister before… if Odin should indeed dare to nominate someone else Jotunheim wouldn’t react kindly to it. The rest of the country was also unhappy with the American policy, wonderfully bad timing to upset them with an unpopular choice.

No, Odin was too experienced and too smart to make that mistake. Leifsson was the best candidate and Asgard deserved the best option. Odin was going to go for that.

Loki got himself a new glass of wine, his eyes scanning the room for Thor. Before he could spot his brother somebody touched his arm. “There you are, we’ve been looking for you.”

Frigga was smiling at him, her eyes bright and warm. Such a difference to the Jotun lord. “Loki, I want you to meet Balder.”

With his mind still focused on the conversation with Laufey Loki needed two seconds to the notice the young man next to his mother.

“Your highness.” Another smile. Sweet, open and family Loki’s manners caught up with him. “Lord Balder, how lovely to meet you. It must have been…”

“About 15 years.”

The last time Loki had seen his cousin they had still been children. To be honest, he would have recognized him, but the gawky kid had grown into a very attractive man.

“A horrible long time and I’m very glad that Balder is going to spend the summer at court.” Frigga looked indeed overjoyed when she announced these news and Loki raised an eyebrow, slightly
confused that he only learned heard about this. “Oh really?”

Balder nodded. “Yes. It’s kind of embarrassing, but I haven’t been to Valhalla in over 10 years. I’m looking forward to spend some time in the capital.”

“And since it has been such a long time I thought it would be a nice idea if you could take Balder under your wing. Show him around and introduce to Valhalla’s society.” There was something about Frigga’s smile. Almost as if she was teasing him and when Loki looked at Balder, he could only see sweetness and sympathy.

“Only if you want to, of course. I would appreciate it immensely.”

Loki’s eyes darted to Frigga and it was obvious that he had no choice but to agree. She wanted him to, otherwise she would have asked him in private. Not in front of Balder. “Of course. Gladly. Can’t let somebody show you around who has no idea what they are doing.”

“Thank you, your highness.”

“Wonderful.” Frigga’s smile got a bit brighter as she put her hand on Loki’s lower arm while her other hand was on Balder’s wrist. Finally it dawned on Loki what was happening here and he almost uttered a loud sigh.

Well, he blindly walked into this one.
Hello everybody,

Tony is still in this story, who would have thought? ;D

Have fun ;)

“You can’t do everything on your own. Why do I have even to explain that? You are the CEO of this company. You don’t have the time to develop the prototype on your own.”

Tony had his back to the webcam, but he didn’t need to look at her to know she was frowning, inwardly shouting at him. Maybe if he kept this going for a few more minutes, she was going to put that thought into action.

“Too bad that nobody but me is able to developing the prototype. Just call off some of my meetings and I’ll be fine.”

“Out of the question, you’ve already missed too many and the board…”

“I’m here in Asgard, ain’t I? I’d have better things to do than being bored by negotiations and other stuff that somebody else should do…”

There was a loud and offended huff behind him and Tony knew that he had succeeded. “When are you bored by negotiations? When you are not sleeping with a prince?”

Now that was worth turning around, but Tony was still eating that delicious stuff the hotel service had brought him. It reminded him of porridge, only better.

Pepper was glaring at him through the screen, but that didn’t mean her eyes lost any of their heat. Oh, she hated him so much right now. Fortunately Pepper was smart enough to know that loyalty didn’t have to be tied to sympathy. Then again, that strong, extremely competent woman would never admit that she actually liked him. For whatever reason.

“Oh? Does everybody think that I’m still sleeping with him? Even after the interview? Amazing!”

Although Pepper opened her mouth, she didn’t say anything. Too smart to voice these thoughts and yet she let him feel that she was severely disappointed in him. It amused Tony. He was her boss, they weren’t related or actual friends, but Pepper, for reasons that Tony was never going to understand, had a soft spot for him. Something had to be wrong with that woman.

As his personal assistant Pepper knew a lot more about the one night stands, the booze and the occasional gambling. Everything that has ever been written about Tony in the newspapers… Pepper had seen the real extent of it and that had been most of the time even worse. Yet she seemed convinced that when Tony wasn’t acting like a careless and spoiled playboy, that he could be a decent guy.

Very unlikely…
“Anything you’d like to tell me?” Ever so slowly Tony was licking off his spoon and Pepper sighed softly. “You can do anything you want, but you have to realize for once in your life that your actions will cause certain reactions. You might not care about bad press, other people do. The board for example.”

Worst word in the history of language. “I’m here, the papers are going to be signed tomorrow. Everything is just wonderful. The board gets their deal and I want them to shut up about the arc-reactor project. It’s my company. I get to do what I want.”

Not quite the truth. The mere fact that he was here in Asgard and not in his penthouse in New York was proof that Tony didn’t have the ultimate ‘Get out of jail’ card. Which was ridiculous. Ask any random person on the street, they’ll tell you that a billionaire and CEO of a weapons company could do whatever the fuck he wanted. So why was Tony here? He didn’t give a shit about Asgard. Fury and Odin could take each other’s hands, sing Kumbaya, blow up Russia together or beat each other to death with a few bars of gold from the Asgardian mines. It all came down to that in the end and everybody knew that. Tony didn’t give a fuck.

“I know it’s a lot to ask for, but how about a little bit of realism? You can’t do everything alone. If you ever want to go into production, you’ll have to let somebody else in on it. What are you planning on doing? Locking yourself up in your workshop until you’ve built it from scratch?”

Yes, that was what Tony had been thinking about. Creating a miracle, like only he could. Like his father had done before, only Tony’s miracle would be different. Better. He just needed some time to work on it without the board moaning about all the money they were losing.

Bullshit. Nobody was losing anything here, they just couldn’t get enough. Nobody ever could. To be honest, Tony didn’t want to find out what it would be like to not be one of the ten richest people on this planet. There was nothing bad about being insanely rich. No disadvantages. Maybe one or two minor inconveniences, but the money made even up for that.

“As long as I can do it alone, nobody is going to get in on it. When I get back, I want no meetings or conferences. If it is absolutely necessary I can kick the board’s asses via skype. That’s my last word. Got it? Great. Now let’s talk about something else. Have I told you that I met a guy?”

Pepper glared at him and Tony winked. “Okay, fine… I’ll do my best to give you as much time as I can. May I ask something in return too?”

Shrugging softly Tony continued to eat his porridge. “Shoot.”

“For the rest of your stay, could you please try to not step on anybody’s toes? I’ve been spending the last two days telling investors and business associates that you’re taking this seriously. That you don’t consider the whole deal a joke. Yes, I know, but they don’t have to know, right? Just try to not find any more princes that will immediately pull their clothes off when they see you.”

“I swear to god that what happened.”

Pepper didn’t attempt to swallow her groan. “Just for once… the publicist would be incredibly grateful.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Tony wouldn’t feign interest. The publicist also got paid very well, he was going to be fine. “Now that you’ve already brought up that topic… Do you think hacking the server of the palace to get the phone number of a certain prince might cause a war between Asgard and the United States?”
“Good night, Mr. Stark.”

“Hey, I’m being serious! That’s an important decision to make!”

Not even rolling her eyes Pepper ended the call. She was probably trying to make Tony feel like he was pathetic and ridiculous, but that was a sheer impossible task, so he didn’t mind.

Pepper was a treasure and they both knew it. Although Tony was paying his PA a king’s ransom, there weren’t a lot of people who would actually put up with Tony’s antics. No, Tony wouldn’t hack into the royal family’s server. Tony was pretty sure that he would be able to do it, but why so much hard work when things could be so much easier.

Strangely enough Tony had even tried the professional way first – calling the prince’s secretary. That had led him nowhere. Why would anyone play hard to get when they had already spread their legs for him? Tony hardly tried to get in touch with his one night stand a second time.

Hadn’t he thought about the advantages of being stupidly wealthy just a moment ago? Not only that, Tony was also a public figure. Usually CEOs were old, boring man whose faces would maybe make it on the cover of some economics magazine. What a nightmare. Parties, galas, concerts were making life fun and Tony’s presence was a blessing to all of these events. Sure, he had always loved the attention of the crowd and crowds laughed him. Such circumstances helped to create a certain reputation…

Another thing that Tony didn’t care about, but everybody else did.

Young people treated him like a celebrity, thinking he was cool and stylish. Admittedly, Tony had good taste, he knew how to dress and what cars to drive. Other business men, the owners of huge multinational companies considered him an extravagant, eccentric playboy who couldn’t be taken seriously and owned all of his success to his inheritance.

Strangely enough, whenever Tony met a person for the very first time, regardless of their background, well, they dropped to their knees and started to immediately kiss his ass. It didn’t matter how much they despised him, the moment they smelled money on him, everybody got friendly. If they weren’t impressed by his wealth, there was still Tony’s celebrity and success to make other people act weird. Always laughing at his jokes, which were mostly hilarious, but even if they weren’t.

Laughing at jokes, not so bad right? What really annoyed Tony was the shy smiles and how people lowered their eyes. For no reason. Or how they dropped everything and kept asking him every five seconds if he needed something, if he was doing alright.

Well, there was also another possibility. The ones who desperately wanted to make him believe that his position didn’t impress them at all. That normally resulted in them being unnecessarily rude and pretty much telling him that he had lost contact with the masses. Which was bullshit… Tony had never had contact to the masses.

Anyway, Tony thought that he was good at reading people and their disrespect was almost every time a weak attempt to hide their intimidation. Money and influence did that to people and it was incredibly boring.

Enter the prince

Tony could count by the fingers of one hand how many people he had met that hadn’t given a single damn about his status. Somebody who was legitimately annoyed or bored by him. Sure, it could
have something to do with him being a prince. He was also used to immense wealth and attention, so why should Tony impress him in any kind of way?

Except that Tony had met so many presidents and even dictators before. Most of them played by the rules or they were acting completely crazy for the mere sake of it. Tony had never met somebody who seemed almost… indifferent to him.

That sounded like a very strange thing to be attracted to. Well, Tony’s life had never been ordinary. Not even in the slightest.

So his stay in Asgard was almost over and Tony was always looking for ways how to have some fun. Hacking into the server was clearly an option and obviously the most fun, but it was also time consuming and might cause some annoying inconveniences… like… war. Better go about it the old fashioned way.

Tony reached for his phone and scanned through the numbers. It took him three calls and an instant bank transfer, but then he was looking at an odd line of numbers. Yes, being rich had tremendous advantages.

Typing in the number Tony hummed to himself. This was going to be so much fun.

“Who is this?”

This was already amazing. The prince sounded clearly irritated and Tony was probably lucky that he had even picked up. A prince definitely didn’t get called a lot by unknown numbers. “Are you really hoping you can avoid your spanking by ignoring my calls?”

“Stark? How did you… Who do I have to fire?”

“Smart cookie…” Tony leaned back, he was already enjoying himself. He liked the other’s voice, it was deep and smooth. Easy to listen to. “What are you doing? Don’t worry, I was just kidding, I’ve already forgiven you the nasty interview. It wasn’t nice though.”

There was a huff at the other end of the line. “Did I at any time give the impression that I wanted to stay in contact with you? Please, tell me, because if I did so, I want to make sure to never make that mistake again.”

“Oh come on, don’t give me that speech. We’ve had fun and I was a perfect gentleman while you gave a TV interview, telling the world that I am… what was the phrasing… unpleasant company?”

To Tony’s surprise there was a short pause before Loki responded. “Well, it’s the truth. You are arrogant and full of yourself. Also you seem to think that the weapons deal between our nations is a joke.”

“Sure and you are taking it so seriously… Showing up late although you’re not even invited.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t think you’d be able to understand my tactics. Really now, what is this about? If you’re just bored, I’m sure you can find somebody else to talk to. I am a very busy person.”

Wasn’t he adorable? “You know that I like it how you tell other people to fuck off.”

“Fuck off.”

The prince hung up and Tony chuckled. Just his idea of a prince charming. Lying down on the couch Tony began typing on his phone.
You also called me charming and attractive. Too shy to say that to my face?

Tony grinned to himself when the response arrived only seconds later.

You’re charming and attractive and incredibly unpleasant. Obviously, you’re also a stalker.

Too easy. No, just in love with myself. I watch every interview that’s somehow about me.

Would have never guessed that.

Not the type to send emoji’s, of course not.

So what else are you up to lately? You must be so bored without any meetings that you can interrupt.

This time Tony had to wait a little longer.

Are you a lonely man, Mr. Stark? Do you not have somebody else to talk to than a one night stand?

Interesting. He was immediately getting personal. Tony suspected that he might be enjoying this as much as Tony.

I’m just thinking that talking to you is the most fun.

Not for me.

Such a bad liar.

I am a great liar.

Oh, Tony didn’t doubt that. Not at all. Though he believed that it wasn’t a skill that Loki used very often. Should I put you to the test?

I am ending this conversation now. Good night, Mr. Stark.

Smiling to himself Tony put the phone down. Nothing was more interesting than disinterest.

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Jane was afraid of hyperventilating. Which was ridiculous, she had already met Thor’s mother, a very nice woman. Yet she had never been alone with a member of the royal family, other than Thor. He had always been present. Now Jane was personally invited. Alone… and she was probably going to throw up.

Until now Jane had done a pretty good job, but they had only sat down to drink some tea. Frigga had greeted her with overwhelming warmth and smiles. She seemed happy and Jane hoped that she was partly a reason for that. Well, Jane making her son happy.

“I hope you are enjoying your stay in Valhalla so far. Unfortunately Thor hasn’t had as much time for you as he would have liked to. The current political events demand for his presence.”

Answering was kind of difficult when Jane could only think about holding her cup of tea without spilling any of it from shaking so much. “Yes, it’s a beautiful city. Sure, I would like him to be around all the time, but… I understand that he has more important things to do.”

Frigga smiled in understanding. “Important things, yes, but you, my dear, are important too. That’s something women in our position never ought to forget.”
Now was definitely a good time to put that cup away, Jane didn’t trust herself with it. Did Thor’s mother just compare herself to her? Did she really think that their relationship was this serious? Naturally that was what Jane had been hoping for, but truth to be told, she hadn’t expected it.

Not knowing what to respond Jane just continued to smile back Thor’s mother who took mercy on her. “I know my son. Despite his charm, his communication skills aren’t always the best. I doubt that you’ve already talked about the obvious. Mostly because Thor doesn’t want to put any pressure on you.”

Were they already getting serious? Jane had hoped for a tiny bit of small talk. “Mam, I am aware that this relationship is… complicated.”

“My dear, I know that normally these things should have time to develop naturally, but you didn’t fall in love with a normal person. My son is the heir to the throne of a proud nation that still demands its king to govern and lead it. Thor has a lot more responsibilities than other men and unfortunately that makes the future of your involvement much less romantic. I know he deeply cares about you and I know my son well enough to be sure that he isn’t going to tell you this himself. You will have to decide very soon if you want this relationship to continue.”

Jane knew what she meant, she wasn’t stupid and the mere idea of not being with Thor anymore was making her uneasy. That didn’t mean that he implications of being with him made her feel safe. Quite the opposite. “Because Thor is going to be king…”

“Because Thor is going to be king maybe sooner than you think.” Frigga stated that so casually, almost coldly and it caused a shiver to run down Jane’s back. “What? Is the king not doing fine?”

“My husband is perfectly healthy, but fooling ourselves is another privilege that this family doesn’t possess. The kingship is taking its toll and my husband is not getting any younger. With the American policy he is trying to create another column of his legacy. Nevertheless the daily duties are getting more and more strenuous. Thor is well prepared and old enough to take over the crown. It’s very likely that Odin made ask him to do so within this year.”

Jane was feeling nauseous. “Does… does Thor know?”

“He certainly is expecting it.”

Sure, Thor was going to be king. Jane had known that, but only now it suddenly seemed to become real. “Oh…”

Frigga gently smiled at her. “I know this is difficult, but you’ll have to consider what you want for your life. If you decide to share your life with Thor, your future is in Asgard, not in the United States. You won’t be able continue your professional career. You would be forced to change your entire life. I know this sounds harsh, but I have to be direct. I want my son to be happy and he is very fond of you. Nonetheless it’s your decision to make. I thought I should be the one to talk with you about it, because I’ve been there too… not quite the same situation.”

“Because I’m not Asgardian.”

“It doesn’t make things easier, no. But from the short time I have spent with you I can tell that you are lovely and that you have honest intentions. The people of Asgard are going to see that too. It’s them you have to win over. Not me.”
Blind date

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,
I'm back from my vacation and you get a new chapter :)
Loki is having a bad day...
Have fun :D

“I really don’t get why she is doing this.” Loki rubbed a towel over his face, the fabric feeling uncomfortable against his heated skin. Today he felt way more tired than usual after his fencing lessons. Thor and him against each other always ended up giving each other a hard time, because… Was there even an explanation necessary? They were brothers and they had always tried to beat each other in any physical activity. Fortunately they had very soon developed different preferences. While Loki would get out of the city to go for a ride with his favorite horse, Thor would get on his bike. Loki got himself a Yoga and Capoeira teacher, Thor started boxing and tried to spend the summers in Australia to be able to surf. A strange hobby for the prince of a Scandinavian nation. Well, it could be worse, at least they weren’t into polo or something ridiculous like that. Loki loved pretty much everything about British culture, but that sport he would never understand.

Fencing was the only thing both of them were doing regularly and whenever they ended up in the gym together… they were still 14 year old boys who were trying to outdo the other. Today Loki’s fencing trainer had called it even between them, shaking his head in mild amusement.

Now Loki was taking off his fencing gear, rolling his shoulders and enjoying the rest his muscles were getting now. Thor next to him had already stripped off his shirt. “Maybe you are seeing something that isn’t there. It would be very much like mother to want you to take care of Balder. We’re cousins after all.”

Loki screwed up his face while taking off his socks. “That’s another thing…”

Amused by his disgust Thor laughed loudly and patted his shoulder. “Very, very distant cousins… Come on, did mother say anything? You could be imagining all of it.”

That was a possibility, Loki could admit that, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling that he knew exactly what was on Frigga’s mind. “After the thing with Stark got public mother wanted to talk to me… asking me if it was something serious. Of course not, but she mentioned something about… I’ll spare you the details, but she more or less said that it was time for me to find someone to marry.”

Again, Thor didn’t seem surprised, maybe Loki was expecting too much. “Yesterday she met up with Jane and they talked about the future of our relationship. I didn’t know about it, but Jane said that she was very grateful for mother’s honesty and support. She basically had the conversation with Jane that you wanted me to have. When I talked to her this morning, she was reading ‘Old Norse for Dummies’.”

Now Loki was the one who wasn’t able to hold back a chuckle. “Looks like somebody has to
propose now.”

Thor’s expression froze the tiniest bit, most due to Loki’s teasing tone. “Yeah, I wanted to do that anyway.”

“I know, I’m merely messing with you. I am happy for you, because Jane’s reaction makes pretty much clear that she is going to say yes.”

Thor’s reaction was evoking an almost unknown feeling inside of Loki. Almost warm and fuzzy. Disgustingly sweet. Marrying someone you’re in love with. Of course, that was something everybody was hoping for and in the best case scenario even Loki would get together with somebody like that. Unlikely though. With Thor and Loki time was working against them. Marriage was one of the columns on which the monarchy rested. They needed to produce legitimate heirs. Even if both of them wouldn’t find somebody they were head over heels in love with, they would have to marry eventually to secure the bloodline.

Well, that wasn’t going to happen to Thor. The look on his face made clear that marrying for the monarchy was the last thing on his mind. Marriage meant for him being with Jane and that was what he wanted.

Loki on the other hand…

“Mother is trying to set me up. I’m perfectly sure of it…”

“She is our mother, she wants us to be happy and to start a family. Or maybe she just wants you to show Balder around. She didn’t say anything, did she?”

Loki shook his head. “No, but… body language, subtle things… I’m pretty sure. He is my age, royalty… I’m not imagining this!”

To Loki’s dismay Thor was now laughing again. “Wow, she introduced you to a man and probably hopes that you will end up liking him. How terrible. How absolutely terrible. I’m going to hit the showers. I’m going to meet up with Jane for lunch.”

Thor gave him a shit-eating grin and Loki instantly threw his sweat-soaked shirt at him. “It wasn’t my idea!”

“I don’t get why you are acting like that. Mother is perfectly fine with me marrying an American, she’s even encouraging it. I think she won’t mind if you tell her that you are not into Balder. Although…”

Loki raised an eyebrow when Thor wouldn’t continue. “Although…”

Thor shrugged, grabbing a fresh towel. “He is beautiful and you haven’t talked to him yet. Maybe you’ll like him. What I’m trying to say… it’s way too soon to freak out.”

There was no point in denying it, Loki hated it when Thor had a point. “Yeah, you are right… I’ll call you after lunch to give you an update.”

Eventually Loki hit the showers and tried not to ponder too much about the current situation. Until today his mother had never tried to push him into a certain direction, well… concerning his love life. Thor’s impending proposal had maybe made her realize that she wished for both of her sons to be in a stable, healthy relationship. It was just lunch and Loki knew nothing for sure. Maybe Balder wouldn’t even be into him and the entire scheme would vanish into thin air.
Back in his chambers Loki opened his wardrobe and he had no idea what to wear. More importantly Loki cared what he was going to wear. Fantastic, now Loki had made himself go crazy. He had had meetings with presidents, generals, CEOs and now Loki didn’t know what to wear. That was ridiculous and embarrassing.

Not willing to think about this a second longer Loki randomly grabbed a pair of jeans and a green blazer. That had to be enough. Despite himself Loki looked himself up and down in the mirror before leaving. It wasn’t an actual date, it didn’t matter how he looked.

Leaving the palace Loki was met with another surprise. Heimdall was opening the door to the BMW for him. “The chief of security himself? Special occasion?”

“Always, your highness.”

Not a real answer, but Loki knew that Heimdall was extremely cautious. The entire atmosphere in the city was slightly tensed as long as there was no new secretary of state. No reason to worry, but nobody wanted to take any unnecessary risks. Sitting down in the back of the car Loki pulled out his phone. Among other things there was a new message from Stark.

That man was obstinate and kind of amusing when Loki didn’t want to rip his throat out, because of his utter lack of respect.

I went out to have breakfast this morning and I realized that not one person in this country has a decent haircut. Why is that?

Loki was about to type back that they didn’t have stupid ideas about masculinity in this country, but then he shook his head about himself. He wasn’t going to start another conversation with this man. Especially since Loki had pretty much to accept defeat in the American policy. The papers were going to be signed, not much that he could do about it anymore. Not now anyway. When Thor was going to be king, Loki would have entirely new ways of influencing. Treaties were written on paper, so they weren’t worth much. And ripped apart so easily.

After the short ride they arrived at the restaurant, Heimdall closely following Loki as he walked inside. Here went nothing. Balder was already waiting for him and Loki instantly noted that there was no time to check it him out. Attentive, Balder saw him the second that Loki had entered the restaurant. Standing up, smiling. A perfect etiquette, but Loki had expected that. Everything else would have been a surprise.

“Loki.” Balder’s smile was sweet and innocent, immediately likable. Just like Loki remembered it. Sure, it had been years ago, but to him Balder had always been that boy who instantly did his homework when he got home, not even thinking about playing before all his chores were taken care of. Completely harmless, but Loki had also just been a child. A child who had loved to cause trouble and had looked down on those who refused to. So Loki probably hadn’t been the best judge of character. Time to get a new impression. Perhaps he was wrong about everything.

Not likely though.

“Hello Balder. I’m sorry I took so long. I hope I didn’t make you wait.”

“Not at all. I just arrived.”

Loki thought that there was a strong probability that Balder wouldn’t complain or even mention it if he had waited for several hours. They sat down and Loki didn’t even get the time to say another word, the waiter was so quick at their table, Loki wanted to tell him to let him breathe for a second.
Not really thinking about it Loki ordered a bottle of wine and another bottle of mineral water.

“I don’t come here often. The seafood is amazing, but the staff atrocious. Also there are way too many people here who I usually don’t want to meet.”

Balder tilted his head as to indicate that he was listening closely. Loki wouldn’t doubt that one second. “What kind of people would that be? If you don’t mind me asking?”

Was he trying to fish for information? Loki’s first idea had been that Frigga wanted to set them up, because of her smile and the entire absurdity of the situation. There were other possibilities though? His mother had wanted to talk to him after his one night stand with Stark. So maybe his behavior had started to worry her a little bit. Loki saw no reason why, but Frigga was his mother… Mothers didn’t need a reason to worry. Not necessarily. Okay, Frigga trying to spy on him through Balder was not very likely, because she wouldn’t need to. That woman was able to find out everything she wanted by talking to people herself.

“Old nobility. Always trying to make conversation, with some ulterior motive. It’s so boring. All they can talk about is the new chandelier they have bought. Or their sterling cutlery. Or dressage… or chess. A sport that doesn’t make you sweat, because real physical exercise would be plebian.”

Loki realised that he started rambling and bit his own tongue or he would probably go on like this forever.

The smile on Balder’s face got a little bigger and Loki still couldn’t find anything dishonest about it. Somewhat plain and at the same time Loki found himself intrigued. If Balder hadn’t changed at all, if Loki’s first impression of him had been correct, was this man even capable of feigning a reaction or telling a lie?

“So if you don’t like the restaurant… or its clientele… why did you choose it? We could have met up everywhere else.”

“Sure, but if you want to find your way around Valhalla, the first thing you should know are the places you need to avoid. Okay, that’s an exaggeration. The food really is excellent and this place never gets boring. It’s a good place to start… why haven’t you been in Valhalla for so long? Your family is high nobility, your father is a known presence at the court.”

Loki could do his own interrogation.

“I haven’t been in Valhalla, because I haven’t been in Asgard. I’ve spent my entire studies aboard.”

Interesting, not many Asgardians chose to study at a university that wasn’t located in Asgard.

“Economics, am I right? So where did you study?”

“Cambridge. I grew quite fond of England, I wasn’t in a hurry to come back… After I got my degree I worked in Russia for three years, but… I guess a man can only be away from home for so long. I missed home and the differences between Asgard and Russia are… vast. To say the least. Also my mother was very adamant about… what is the right expression? Take my place in society? Anyway, I’m glad to be back at home. I don’t really plan on leaving again any time soon.” Balder gave him a nice summary and Loki saw his first theory being confirmed.

It was so obvious, almost shockingly so. Economics – perfectly fitting. Cambridge educated – more than appropriate. Personal relations to Russia – invaluable. Balder was an impeccable check-list. Blue blood, the best reputation, smart.

Frigga was indeed trying to find Loki a husband. They would have to have a talk about that.
“Russia? Tell me about it. I’ve been there, but I have trouble imagining staying there for a longer time. My experience with the Russians is… that they like to stay among themselves…”

“Yes, it takes a while for them to warm up to strangers, but I can be very insistent.”

So Balder started to talk about what it had been like to live aboard and Loki leaned back, listening to him. To his relief it turned out that Balder knew how to tell a story and that there was some passion inside of him. Nevertheless it was quite clear that Balder was a calm personality, not stoic but reluctant. The kind of guy mothers wanted for their daughters or sons. Loki just couldn’t get that off his mind. Only partly listening to him Loki took his time to study Balder’s appearance. Handsome, of course, in a very traditional way. Small, straight nose, clear, bright blue eyes and soft brown curls framing his gentle face. Easy to look at, but just the slightest bit boring.

Or perhaps that was unfair…

“Loki?”

Startled Loki blinked, feeling caught doing something that he shouldn’t do. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Balder continued to smile, not for the sake of it, he seemed to mean it. “You know, this was your mother’s idea. I didn’t ask to have somebody to… spend time with me until I’ve settled in. I definitely wouldn’t have asked that person to be you. Not because I don’t like you, but because you definitely have more important things to do. If you don’t want to be here, just tell me. I won’t mind, I don’t want you do something that’s annoying you.”

***

“Loki, I thought you were well aware of the concept of knocking at a door and waiting for a response before entering a room.” Frigga didn’t look up from the letter she was writing, which meant that probably nobody else but Loki had ever had the audacity to storm into her study. Not even Odin.

That couldn’t bother Loki right now, he wasn’t angry, not really. A little upset perhaps. “I must have left my good manners in my rooms, mother. We have to talk about Balder.”

Ever so slowly Frigga put away her pen and finally met Loki’s eyes. It seemed like everybody was smiling at him today. Real smiles, warm and endearing. In that way Balder was similar to his mother. “A lovely young man, isn’t he?”

Now that was hard to deny. Loki dropped on one of the chairs in front of Frigga’s desk and gave a soft shrug. “Yes, he is very nice and I would like to know why you feel the need to find me a spouse.”

Frigga’s reaction was amusement and she seemed absolutely alright with Loki’s question. Nobody knew him better than her, she must have expected him to show up anyway. “I ask you to do a member of our family a favor and you immediately think I want to marry you off?”

Great, now she was already stealing the second point he was about to make. “Mother, I have eyes and ears, I know how to use them and you didn’t actually try to be subtle. You have never done anything like this before, so why now? He is my cousin, it’s all a little bit strange.”

“A very distant cousin. You would have to intensely study the family tree to find out how you are related. His parents are close friends and now that Balder is going to move to Valhalla, I want to know him in good company. You are the same age and you, my son, are the best company I can imagine.”
Raising an eyebrow Loki was tempted to huff, but he knew better than doing that in the presence of his mother. “So you have no ulterior motive when you ask me to go out with a beautiful, intelligent, noble individual who happens to be single and who is pretty much the definition of the perfect spouse?”

Eventually Frigga leaned forward and Loki was almost feeling overwhelmed by the kind expression in her eyes. “Well, I must admit… he is a delightful, lovely young man and I wouldn’t be displeased if you came to a similar conclusion.”

“I knew it! Thank you, mother, but I think I am perfectly capable of organizing my dates myself.”

“Dates, yes. I cannot argue that you have very successful in that department, but I’ve told you before that charms and looks aren’t everything. That it might be time to start looking something more. Your father and me never criticized your choices, a young person should feel free to do whatever they want.”

“I’m only 28 years old.”

Frigga chuckled softly. “I gave birth to you, Loki. Believe me, I’m not going to forget your age. This is not about you getting 30. There hasn’t been a proposal yet, but your brother is most definitely going to marry the sweet American. You are smart and not the slightest bit naive, you know why your father is so persistent when it comes to the American policy. He is getting tired and Thor will have to face the responsibility he was born with and so will you.”

Loki had so many things to say, but he remained silent, because he knew that Frigga wasn’t done. “Thor is ready to take his place on the throne of Asgard, but they both of us know that he will need you. He doesn’t have your gift of persuasion or your astuteness. Around me you don’t have to pretend that you don’t know this yourself. You are going to be Thor’s most important and most influential advisor. An ungrateful and demanding position. You will need somebody you can rely on, somebody to trust. You know that a marriage is inevitable and I want you to be the person of your choosing, but you have to choose intelligently. Somebody who is able to help you carry the weight of your duties. It’s time, Loki.”

At the end she was still smiling. Differently. All the warmth a mother could feel for her child was in that smile and a little bit of pity. Loki was disgusted by his own reaction, because he suddenly felt the urge to spite her. Over and over again Loki had made clear that he knew what was expected of him. What was necessary to play his role and serve their nation. Marriage was part of that and Loki had never thought about opposing that idea. Now that his own mother told him it was time to get married when he didn’t even have a boyfriend. Sure, it was his choice, but he should make it soon? Loki hadn’t expected to marry some day for love. A political marriage that brought some distinct advantages, that was something he could understand. Telling him to find a spouse, because he might need emotional or any other kind of support…

“Thank you, mother. For the explanation.”

“Loki…”

For now he had had enough, he left without saying another word. On his way down the hall Loki pulled out his phone, not really knowing who to call. He just wanted to do something, talk to somebody, so he wouldn’t have to continue thinking about his mother trying to get him a husband… for no reason.

Another text from Stark. Loki had to get a new number.
You need to something about your money. The guy on your 10 crown bill looks like his face has been in an accident

Loki should have deleted it and he would have deleted it any other day. Now he was in a bad mood and like this he had at least somebody to yell at.

Shut your insolent mouth. That’s my grandfather

To Loki’s surprise the answer came instantly. Was that man doing anything else than sitting around, being rich and pissing people off?

What? No way! You're a 10 out of 10. No way you have the same genes like that shovelface

Now that just couldn’t be… That man knew no limits. Loki appreciated a good fight, but the other participant shouldn’t forget that he was a prince.

Do you really think that I’ll let you provoke me that easily?

Got you to reply, didn’t I? ;)

Staring at the screen of his phone Loki huffed in faint outrage. Yes, he got him to reply. It was just a bad day.
Hello everybody,

This chapter tells us a lot about the history of Asgard and why the Jotuns don't think that Odin is the rightful king. Looks like filler, but it's sooooooooooo important ;)

Get your theories on :D

During her time at university Jane had spent most of her days in a laboratory or in a library. She was pretty much an expert. Yet the library of the palace utterly amazed her. The mere size of it was astonishing and a little bit concerning. Was there anything left for the public libraries if this was all private property of the royal family? Well, that had been Jane’s first thought, but the staff told her that the public library of Valhalla was even bigger.

For Jane, the library of the palace was more than enough. Maybe already a bit too much. Like a good and responsible student Jane had prepared before sitting down in front of a huge pile of books. The first contact with an Old Norse grammar book made Jane realise very quickly that she would need a teacher and a lot of patience. It wasn’t like her to give up immediately, but even the chapter of ‘Introducing yourself’ made her feel completely out of her depth. Sure, she had a boyfriend who was fluent in this language, he was a native speaker, but not a teacher. Jane would need an expert to introduce her to the basic, to get to a certain level, after that it would all come down to practice. A lot of practice.

Until then Jane would do her best to get a better understanding of Asgard itself. Parts of it were so foreign and unfamiliar that Jane had her doubts that she could ever fit in, that it was too different. Then again, she thought of Thor and how sweet, nice, educated and open-minded he was. As a prince and future king Thor should be a representative of the entire society. Which was a good sign. So many things seemed different and would alienate Jane, but at second glance and close examination the differences didn’t seem impossible to overcome. The one thing Jane had worried most about was the religion. She herself was anything but a devout Christian and what Thor had shown and told her about the trúa sounded like a very liberal belief system. Then again, Jane knew way too little of it to form an opinion and even the worst ideologies had some shiny aspects.

Entire shelves were filled with works treating the trúa and Jane quickly delved into them. Just like Thor had told her, the main principals of the philosophy evolved around spirits and energies. Except that Jane now found out that Thor maybe had only used the word ‘spirits’ to make it easier for her to understand. It seemed way more complex than that. There was a lot of emphasis on the human soul and how it was made out of several parts. Although that seemed like the most important message of book, Jane started flipping pages, because she was concerned about something else.

Hardly any rules about what you were allowed to do and which things were forbidden. Women weren’t mentioned at all. Which was shocking for a couple of minutes until Jane noticed that the word ‘men’ was also missing from the text. Persons. Souls.

Using the computer and doing a short google search confirmed Jane’s impression. Since the trúa
didn’t point out any differences between men and women, since it didn’t even address their existence, it had always been interpreted as making no difference between not just the genders but anybody.

Jane could almost feel a little weight being lifted of her shoulders. So there weren’t any small but important details like her being expected to give birth to at least ten children. Or having to ask Thor if she wanted to leave the house. One second later that mere thought seemed so ridiculous. In a country where two women could get married, it made no sense for the husband to be in a superior decision.

About the children – even if the religion didn’t oblige her to do anything, Thor’s status as a prince and future king created another set of rules. That wasn’t a problem, Jane wanted kids and Thor only had one brother. Hopefully two would also be enough for the both of them.

Closing the book Jane leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes for a second. By now she had spent already over two hours reading and there was still so much work waiting for her. The entire history of Asgard was scattered all over this library. The last couple of days Jane had been watching TV and reading the newspapers. From what she had gathered, she could tell that the political situation in Asgard was a little bit tense at the moment. There was some kind of conflict between the different regions of the nation. It reminded her of the situation in Spain. Then again, Jane knew way too little to come to any sort of conclusion. Those were going to be important issues. As the fiancé of the crown prince she would have to be informed about everything if she didn’t want to make a complete fool out of herself.

Fiancé of the crown prince…

Jane felt a strange but rather pleasant sensation in her chest while thinking about that. No, it hadn’t happened yet, but Thor’s mother had made quite clear what was about to happen. It had probably already been decided when Thor had invited her to Asgard. Well, Jane could always say no, but she couldn’t imagine spending her life with anyone else but Thor. Before him Jane had never felt the desire to constantly be around another person. Her relationships had never worked out, because Jane had always felt suffocated by the other’s attention. Jane could easily spend a whole week without seeing her partner. Many of her friends had told her that she was crazy, since when you were love, you had to want to spend every single minute with your significant other. If you felt any different, you weren’t serious about the relationship. There were no words to express how much that point of view had annoyed her. If such a relationship model worked for other people, great, but Jane couldn’t imagine it. She wanted to do some things on her own and Thor respected that which was incredibly important to Jane.

Besides him giving her enough freedom, there was Thor’s kindness, his openness to new ideas and the fact that he could get so easily excited about the smallest things. His enthusiasm made Jane smile and it was reassuring to know that there was something else in his life. Something big that would ensure that Jane wouldn’t be his entire focus. To a lot of women that had to sound strange, but Jane wanted a man with his own projects, who desired more in his life than a relationship and family. That wasn’t a problem when you were going to be king.

King, right. Of Asgard. Lots of responsibility and Jane was going to be part of it. Time to delve into the history of her future home. She would have to move here eventually.

Getting up Jane walked between the shelves, searching for the history area. It was found quite easily since it was so incredibly vast. It took some minutes to find several books that provided an overview about 1000 years of Asgardian history. The pile weighed quite heavily in Jane’s arms and she had advance really slowly, since she was barely capable of looking over it.
Luckily she made it back to the table without tripping over. For the next couple of hours nothing existed but those very thick books that held the promise for her to better understand the country that had until now welcomed her with open arms.

“Now that looks awfully familiar and it’s still not what I expected.”

Completely startled Jane looked up and faced a rather handsome man who smiled at her rather dazzlingly. He had to be working here, since not just anybody could walk into the library of the palace. “Uhm, hello. Can I help you?”

“Unfortunately I don’t think so. I was looking for Loki, because when he doesn’t answer his phone, he’s usually in the library. Turns out I was wrong. So impolite of me. My name is Fandral. I’m a friend of Thor and Loki.”

He held out his hand and Jane shook it, still taken aback that she wasn’t alone anymore. Her new company made a nice impression, but also very casual. Jane didn’t like to be approached like this, especially since she was working. But this wasn’t her office and what she was doing wasn’t actual work. “Jane Foster, Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, you’re Thor’s girlfriend.”

“You already knew that.”

“Huh?”

“When you spoke up to me you were already talking English, so you knew I wasn’t Asgardian.”

Fandral’s grin was the one of a young boy and Jane had yet to decide if she thought it was endearing or annoying. “Right, because the books you chose are written in English.”

Yes, obviously, Jane hadn’t thought of that. “Right… the Runic alphabet is still a complete riddle to me…”

“I see. What are you doing? Looking up family history?”

“Kind of… uhm… sorry for the question, but can you just… walk around the palace like this?”

His laugh was loud but not unpleasant. “That’s a privilege you earn when you play with the prince in a sandbox and when you teach him how to climb a tree. Believe me, it was amazing when having a sleepover at your best friend’s place meant staying overnight at the royal palace. I got lost so many times… mostly because Loki was deliberately sending me into the wrong direction… He was always lurking around the corner when Thor and I were playing. Loki invited me over for dinner. I am too soon, can’t find him and he hates it when I call his secretary. I thought the library would be the most likely place to find him since he and Thor don’t pick up their phones. Any idea where I can find them?”

About now was the time to decide what kind of first impression he was giving her. Fandral seemed nice enough and Jane thought she could remember Thor mentioning him some time. “Thor is in a meeting with the American delegation and Loki… I think Thor said something about him visiting the construction site of a new bridge… Can that be right?”

“Yes, totally… no surprise I can’t reach him.” Suddenly he looked like he didn’t quite know what to do with himself now. “Huh… well, seems like I’ve got an hour to kill. Anything I can help you with? While Loki was writing his thesis, he didn’t talk about anything else than Asgardian history… I think I remember one or two things. Or maybe you want to hear an Asgardian opinion?”
That offer took Jane aback, but she had to admit that it sounded appealing. She definitely needed someone to put all that date into perspective. “Sure, if you want to…”

Instantly Fandral slumped down on the chair next to her and propped his head up on one hand, his elbow resting on the tabletop. “Where do we start?”

“Well, I have trouble wrapping my head around the civil war…”

“Don’t worry, everybody feels that way. Sorry, I interrupted you. Go on.”

This was going to be rather strenuous. “If I understood this right… Asgard was founded only 500 years ago?”

Fandral pursed his lips and shook his head. “Kind of… there’s no exact date. Before 1517 there hadn’t been one united nation. At that time Svartálfar and Alfheimr were parts of Jotunheim. The rest of what is Asgardian territory today was… Well, the whole thing was a complex of territories under Jotunheim’s leadership. Like I’ve said… Svartálfar and Alfheimr and Jotunheim were considered one. The other regions had more independence. For details you have to ask Loki, he really knows that stuff. What I remember from history lessons is that… Múspellheimr, Niflheimr, Vanaheimr, Helheimr and Asgard had to pay taxes to Jotunheim, but they were able to govern themselves for the most part. The most important laws were made by the king, but the entire system was more like… the other regions had pledged their allegiance to Jotunheim and were therefore protected by the king. It was a confederation… you could say so.”

Jane couldn’t deny that she was impressed by Fandral’s knowledge. Maybe Asgardian schools were putting a lot of emphasis on history. “Wow… okay, so at that time Asgard was only the name of one of the eight regions. Am I right?”

“Absolutely right, my lady. It still is one of the regions… and when the regions were untied to one country, the new nation was also named Asgard.”

Now that suddenly made a lot more sense. Unfortunately there civil war was still up for discussion. “Uhm… so the regions went to war, because there was no male heir left to take the throne, but only a girl?”

With a raised eyebrow Fandral indicated that he didn’t understand her confusion. “Yeah, that happened all over Europe during the Middle Ages and later. England, France…”

“Yes, but… the family in charge got overthrown and the entire structure of the country got changed. It’s the determining event of your history, isn’t it? The usurpation of…”

Shaking his head Fandral signalled her with one hand to slow down. “We don’t like that word. Technically it’s true, yes, but that’s Thor’s family you’re talking about. He wouldn’t like to hear you use that term.”

“So what am I supposed to call it then?”

Fandral shrugged. “I’m not a historian, but the civil war is the most debated and most written about event that took ever place in Asgard. There is a common understanding that the federation had drifted into chaos when Óníðingr, the Jotun king, died. The Black Plague had killed all of his sons and the remaining male members of the Ymirson family. That was an unprecedented situation. Suddenly there was no male heir and the king hadn’t had the opportunity to choose somebody else to sit on the throne or to make sure that the possible succession of his daughter would be accepted by the influential noble families…”
“They didn’t accept her on the throne.” Jane pointed out matter-of-factly, thinking of the picture of the portrait of the Jotun princess she had seen in the books.

“Nope, that didn’t happen… Well…” Fandral cleared his throat. “Jotunheim accepted her succession, but according to the law only a man could assume the throne. Lopthæna was a girl, only 19 years old and the entire situation was very unstable. Neighbouring countries were likely to take advantage of the confusion and uncertainty, to try to conquer Jotunheim and the other regions… Talking of the other regions, Asgard was the first to state that they weren’t going to recognize Lopthæna as their queen. The most influential Asgardian noble family at that time was led by Búri, Thor’s ancestor. They were the first ones to… proclaim that. Vanahemr quickly followed and since Lopthæna insisted on being queen… the civil war was a short affair, it only lasted three months, then the Jotuns were defeated and Búri was crowned king. Shortly after he united the 8 regions and then he even conquered Midgard… but that got lost over 300 years ago.”

“And what happened to the queen? I mean princess… after she lost the war?” Jane asked carefully and Fandral shrugged. “I’m not a history scholar, you need to ask Loki for the details. She got stripped for her titles.”

“So the family eventually completely died out?”

“Oh no. She must have been fine, because she had kids. Today the Ymirsons are again in charge of Jotunheim. Perhaps not the smartest idea to put them back in place, because the Jotun populations still sees them as the rightful kings… but there had been one rebellion after another when new kings had tried to install Asgardian nobility in Jotunheim. You’ve been here for several weeks now, haven’t you? You must have noticed that the Jotun situation is kind of tense at the moment.”

Jane nodded softly. “Yes, I’ve seen it on the news… you mean it’s not always like this? Protests in the streets?”

“No, not really. There have always been ambitions to get more independence and a large part of the Jotun populations wants an Ymirson as king, it hasn’t been as bad as now in… decades. Obviously because of the 500 year celebration. For most of Asgard it means to celebrate the union of the eight regions… for the Jotuns it’s a whole different thing.”

Slowly nodding Jane thought that it was indeed more complicated than she had initially expected. There was some conflict, conflict that Thor was going to be confronted with. Especially as king. It was incredibly naïve to believe that such a position didn’t come at a high price. Even in England or Spain were lots of people who wanted the monarchy abolished, although the monarch was a merely representative figure. Not in Asgard…

“Too much information?” Fandral was smiling, somewhat guilty as if he had overwhelmed her. “A little bit, I guess. Although we’ve only been scraping at the surface.”

“Well, you don’t have to learn everything today, do you? Also, your boyfriend’s brother is a history scholar. He’ll gladly explain everything in detail.”

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Seeing Fury in a good mood was almost bizarre, but very easy to explain. After today he would be rid of Tony Stark which was a very happy occasion. Steve had only seen him for a short moment, getting out of his limousine and then disappearing the conference room with Fury. The king and the crown prince had already been waiting. They must have come to an agreement very quickly, since the champagne was served only half an hour later.
Seemingly sick of the tiny room Stark and Thor immediately left it again and Steve couldn’t help but to overhear their conversation. “… real pity your brother couldn’t come and join us today. His presence during the last meeting was so refreshing.”

“It’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about my brother, Mr. Stark.”

Steve thought he was going to be sick when Stark almost started to pout. “Why not? We were getting along rather well.”

“Unfortunately my brother has never been very wise in the choice of his lovers, but he is nonetheless a smart man. He disposes of them very quickly. So please, don’t think yourself more important than you actually are.”

Just listening to his made Steve uncomfortable, but he found it equally hard to turn away. Especially since Stark was still wearing that pleased grin on his lips, completely unimpressed by everything Thor might have to say. “So sad to hear that. Luckily he and I get along rather well. We have the same sense of humour. We laugh at people who tell us what to do. Tell that most wonderful specimen that I said hi.”

Stark actually winked before turning around and heading towards the exit. Just like that. Leaving the embassy without even saying goodbye to the king or any of diplomates. Steve was about to turn around as the prince became aware of his presence. Wonderful, now he would think that Steve…

“Hello, it was Steve, right?”

Admittedly, Steve hadn’t thought that the prince would remember his name. Evidently explaining the rules of baseball to him was something like a big deal. “Yes, nice to see you again, your highness.”

What else was he supposed to say?

The annoyance on Thor’s features vanished and suddenly he looked kind and friendly. Stark seemed to have a bad effect on people.

“I am so sorry I didn’t get to talk to you at the wedding, that wasn’t the plan… I hope you had a nice time nonetheless?”

Sure, expect for the Russian spy and generally having no idea who to talk to. “Yes, it was very interesting, but I gotta admit that I felt a little lost…”

Thor’s face fell and Steve instantly felt guilty. He liked the crown prince, he didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

“Sad to hear that. That definitely wasn’t my intention. How about… Listen, tomorrow evening my mother hosts the annual dinner for the ambassadors and diplomats working in Asgard. It’s a small affair, way more intimate than the wedding. I insist that you join us, you will most definitely enjoy it.”

Steve didn’t even get time to answer which meant he was supposed to show up at the royal palace tomorrow. Somehow he had his doubts that this was going to be fun.
Nightly conversation

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

It's a Tony / Loki chapter... the second Tony leaves Asgard. I know, how strange ;)

I hope you have fun and keep theorising, it's a lot of fun to read :D

“A few minor stitches, Mr. Stark. You were very lucky.”

Tony wanted to say something smart or funny, but a painful hiss put an end to that plan. Minor stitches, right. That didn’t make them hurt any less. Still better than being dead. Car accident – how terribly trivial would that be. Tony had always loved spectacle and if he had to go down at such a young age, it would have to be something more exciting. Like a heart-attack while sleeping with a 17 year-old supermodel. Or dying after having saved a toddler from a burning building. Yeah, that seemed about appropriate.

“Some painkillers and then you can be on your way, Mr. Stark.” The doctor smiled at him and Tony nodded in agreement. “Drugs. That sounds great. Right up my alley.”

Whatever the doctor would have replied to that, Tony would never know. The very familiar sound of heels clicking on the floor entered his ears and the mere thought about what was about to come brought a smile to Tony’s lips.

“Whenever the police calls me, I pray that they want to tell me that you’re in a hospital, not arrested for stealing a yacht or public indecency. Now I feel like a terrible person. You’re alright?”

It took Tony a second to scan Pepper’s appearance. As immaculate as always. A dark blue pants suit, black high heels and a very small smile on her lips. Her eyes betrayed that image of professionalism that she tried to convey. That gleam of relief. For some reason that woman had been genuinely worried about him. For whatever reason. Perhaps because of the job security. Something was clearly wrong with that woman. Or she was a saint. Which would be equally wrong. “The doc was saying something about painkillers, so I’m better than fine. I’m amazing.”

Tony winked and Pepper immediately sighed. So he had already thrown her goodwill out of the window. Perfect. “You’ve been in an accident. That’s not something to take lightly.”

“The driver is far worse off than I am. He’s got a concussion and I got my arm scratched. Everything’s fine. My flight was super comfortable by the way. I would have called you from the car if it hadn’t crashed into another one.”

“You wouldn’t have.”

“Yeah, I probably wouldn’t have.” Tony smirked and he could see that Pepper wanted to chuckle, but she had herself under perfect control, so she wouldn’t do it. Why would she do that? Why would anyone do that?

Turning away from him Pepper had a quick talk to the doctor, to make sure Tony wasn’t making up
stuff to obtain some painkillers. Or, far more likely, she had the doctor telling her everything that
Tony could and could not do during the rest of the day, so he wouldn’t die from internal
bleeding. Always so responsible.

He could leave the hospital about 20 minutes later, sitting in a new stretch limousine, his feet propped
up on the seat opposite of him. Pepper was scanning through her pager, reading out loudly all the
appointments that he was supposed to attend and Tony could only yawn. “I did the Asgard trip. I got
the deal done. I should be in the board’s good graces until forever. I’m not going to do any of this
shit for the next couple of months. Or maybe years. I almost killed myself in Asgard getting that deal
done.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow, looking at him in the most ‘Did you really just say that?’ way ever. Tony
smirked and thought about his home, his own bed, his workshop. For fuck’s sake, he hated hotels.

“I could empty your schedule, but you have to…”

“No, I’m past ‘have to’. I don’t want to hear about any ‘have to’s.”

“It’s the most important gala of the year. Please, let’s not pretend that you don’t know that. We have
been talking about it even before you took the plane to Asgard.”

Unfortunately Tony remembered that conversation perfectly and maybe he would even go there.
Now he had an amazing story to tell. Car accidents were perfect to pick up women. Life was fleeting
and so short. Anyway, Tony couldn’t immediately agree to go there. People would get the wrong
impression.

“Tony, you…”

“I’ll think about it. Hey, you wanna come over tonight? I’m going to binge watch the 2nd season of
Fargo and finally kill the two bottles of French red wine that Mark Zuckerberg sent me for my
birthday last year. Interested?” Tony winked in the most obvious way. A gesture so annoying a
woman playing in Pepper’s league simply had to be tempted to start throwing up. That would be a
disgusting mess and another limousine ruined, so Tony was actually glad that Pepper was merely
wrinkling her nose and declined politely. “I’m sorry, but I already have plans.”

“Aha, new guy?”

“Still the same guy.”

“You’ve had a guy?”

“For over a year. You’ve met him.”

“Can’t remember. Means he’s boring. You can find a better one.”

Instead of continuing this little, childish game Pepper shook her head in slight amusement. “I hope
you have a pleasant night, Mr. Stark.”

When they arrived at the tower Tony told his driver to bring Pepper home, also wished her an
exciting night with her boring boyfriend and then got out of the vehicle. The doorman greeted him
with a joyful smile and Tony supposed that he was one of the few people who were actually glad to
see him. Why not? They rarely talked, but Tony liked the guy. Shit job, but he was always
professional and yet not too professional to not laugh at Tony’s stupid and most of the time offensive
jokes. That didn’t make a difference, lots of people immediately opened their mouths to let out a
hearty laugh whenever Tony was a remark that was supposed to be funny. Their eyes made clear
though that they were doing it to be polite or to kiss his ass.

Frank though, that was the doorman’s name, he was having fun. For some reason he seemed to have the same dense sense of humor as Tony. Was that the reason for the good tips Tony gave him or the other way round? Anyway, Tony liked Frank, so he got a real smile and Tony even asked about his daughter.

Francis? No, that would be too obvious. Michelle? It would come to him again.

“Everything’s fine, Mr. Stark. Two weeks left then she’ll come from college. Spending the summer at home with the family.”

Tony told him that it was nice to hear that, then wished him a good night and headed for the elevator. After typing in his code Tony leaned against the wall, loosening his tie and watched the doors sliding closed. Most days wasn’t bothered by the long ride, the view from his penthouse was definitely worth it. He had had to use the elevator in the hotel in Valhalla every day and by now he was kind of annoyed at losing so much time inside of them.

Perhaps a change of scenery was due. It had been months since he had last visited the house in Malibu. Why not letting his gorgeous body enjoy the Californian sun? At this stage of development it didn’t matter where he worked. Once he was going to start building the prototype, Tony would have to stay at one place. Nothing that he had decide tonight. Tonight was all about Fargo.

The elevator doors opened slowly and Tony stepped right into his living room. Home, sweet home. “Lights.” By the time Tony had made his way to the couch the entire room was illuminated. After taking off his jacket Tony folded it and put it over the backrest of the couch. “Music.”

AC/DC was filling the room with their unmatched sound and Tony liberated himself by completely taking off his tie. “TV. Netflix.” His home cinema activated itself and Tony hummed to himself while getting undressed. The place smelled wonderfully familiar. Tony was surprised how nice it felt to be at home. To get more comfortable clothes Tony headed up the stairs to his bedroom. Passing a mirror Tony stopped to take a look at his lower arm. At the moment the stitches stood out, quite ugly so, but they would fade away. Couldn’t let something like this diminish the perfection of his body.

Thinking that bullshit line Tony winked at himself and laughed at the lines around his eyes. Looked like he was laughing too much. Strangely enough his father had never had lines around his eyes. What a mad coincidence…

The sight of his bed made Tony him appreciate being at his own place even more. Grabbing a pair of sweatpants and a worn-out t-shirt. The soft fabric felt nice against his skin. As much as he enjoyed his closets filled with tailor-made suits, sometimes casual clothes were just the better alternative. Especially when you wanted to spend the night on your couch.

15 minutes later the picture Tony had described Pepper had become reality. Lying comfortable on the couch, a glass of wine in his hand, a sandwich close by and the first scene of season 2 of Fargo was on the TV screen.

Sadly he couldn’t get into it, because his phone wouldn’t stop vibrating. Texts on his private number. At least no business associates who were coming up with a new way how to squeeze more money out of the working class. First money and then their blood. So terribly predictable.

Tony was part of the 1% of the 1%, getting his private number was a very hard task. Pretty impossible. Well, unless you were a highly attractive woman in your twenties, preferably blonde. Or a guy with nice legs and big eyes. On second thought, Tony most of the time let Pepper handle the
dumb ones who didn’t understand the concept of a one-night-stand. Taking out the trash, that’s what Pepper called. A little harsh maybe, but she was the one who was dealing with it, so Tony knew better than to comment.

Anyway, it hadn’t been that long since he had changed his number the last time, so not many people who didn’t want to talk to could actually have it.

Therefore it was all the more annoying when Tony checked his phone and the name on the display was Catherine. Typical case of all lights on nobody’s home. An annoyingly stupid young woman. It had been a boring party, Tony hadn’t liked the wine they had served, so the best way to not complete waste a night had been to take her home. Thinking back Tony must have been drunk or why would she have ended up with his phone number?

Shrugging it off Tony deleted the text without reading it and turned back to the television. By the time there were only crumbles left of his sandwich Tony was feeling a slight buzz from the alcohol. He was two episodes into the season when Tony heard another beep.

Fuck, that girl was stubborn. Tony reached for his phone again, with the intention to shut it off. That didn’t happen when the name on the display wasn’t ‘Catherine’ but ‘Prince Charming’.

A smirk appeared on Tony’s face and Fargo was completely forgotten. Now look at that. One day without him texting the prince and he was already missing him? Understandable, Tony got that reaction a lot. Alone here, in the perfect safety of his penthouse, hidden from demanding and curious eyes, Tony would even listen to the quiet voice in the back of his head. Merely a whisper, telling him that it was quite astounding that the prince would even waste time thinking about him now that Tony had left Asgard.

Not because Tony wasn’t worth thinking about. Without wanting to be arrogant (or maybe just the tiniest bit), given his position, status, background, education and his savoir-faire in how to amuse himself… there were few people who could claim to be equally as interesting as Tony Stark. Ask his Wikipedia page, that thing was bursting with exciting facts.

Enough of that pondering. Tony opened the text message.

I read that you were involved in a car accident. I hope you are alright. Best wishes. His royal highness, the Duke of of Glæsisvellir, Loki Búrison

And where was the fucking royal emblem to make this the most perfect, atrocious joke that Tony had ever heard? Or seen in this case. Wow, that guy had some nerve. Why not just send him a pre-written letter and sign it with a stamp? Oh, that guy was good. A real opponent.

Tony had grown up among men in suits who would shake your hand and behind their back they were already holding a knife. More than ready to ram it into your neck. Just as ready to keep it behind their back for all eternity. Whatever turned out to be more profitable. Those guys had been scumbags who Tony had learned to detest, but he could admit that they had been fantastic teachers. Tony could tell when a smart insult had been wrapped in a compliment to make it. Not just that, he knew when somebody was trying to provoke him when other people would mistake it for politeness.

A tango needs two and Tony was more than willing to put on his dancing shoes. This was going to be fun. His thumbs were flying across the display.

Awww, you are worried about me. Did you send me flowers? Don’t worry, darling. I’m fine. Just a few scratches. Do you want a nude photo of me as proof?
Yep, good enough. Leaning back Tony relished the feeling of being incredibly content with himself. Almost too much. Well, he had always enjoyed being smug. To be honest Tony didn’t expect the answer to arrive… instantly?

A soft and very pleasant shiver was running down Tony’s back. So they were going to play right now. Excellent. Hopefully the prince wasn’t going to disappoint him.

*When you hear a person you know got into an accident, you ask how they are doing. If they are not dead or a drooling paralysed mess. It’s called human decency. Not surprise you haven’t heard of it before*

Now the grin was pretty much glued onto Tony’s face. Loki snapped pretty fast, hadn’t he? His name had a lovely exotic sound to it, but Tony preferred to refer to him as the prince. Made it sexier. That thought made Tony wondering what name the prince called him. Definitely not Tony, that was for sure.

*You read that I was in an accident, so you also read that I am fine. Admit it, darling, the second I crossed the border you felt your heart breaking. Is your pillow wet from so much crying?*

Tony had the slight suspicion that he wouldn’t get to see a lot more Fargo tonight. What was the time difference anyway? It was 11:30, so it was 5:30 in the morning in Asgard. An okay time for a prince to be awake. He was probably going to start his working through his schedule in half an hour or so.

*I must admit that there was a distinct feeling of complete indifference*

Disappointed. Very disappointed. Tony was able to evoke a lot of feelings but not indifference.

*So indifferent you texted me… right… Didn’t you claim to be a good liar? Newsflash – you suck at it*

This time the prince took a little longer to respond and Tony’s fingers were itching.

*I didn’t even know you were gone. Another thing that might amaze you, but there are other things that demand my attention*

Tony softly laughed at that. No, that didn’t amaze him. Not really.

*Yeah, like your dad’s and brother’s car being hailed by foul tomatoes? That can’t be as interesting as me. Bad day for cars, isn’t it?*

That was nice bait, Tony was going to appeal to his vanity. One second with the prince would have been enough to realise that he was vain. Also Tony would have fun poking a sleeping dog. Bad metaphor, Loki was anything but asleep.

*Maybe the tomatoes were directed at you and they just got the wrong car*

Now that was just weak. Seriously…

*You’re really not living up to my expectations. You had such a decent start. What happened? Are you only using one hand to text or why can’t you come up with something better?*

The response was in about five seconds later.

*Strange, I remember surpassing your expectations in every imaginable way. I didn’t have to use my hands to reduce you to a drooling, almost paralysed mess. Why should I bother to try now?*

A rush of heat went through Tony’s body. It didn’t even need an actual memory, an allusion was
enough. That was so much better, way more fun.

*Maybe because you desperately need someone who gives you shit*

Instant response. Very short. Insultingly short

??

Fine, since it was the prince Tony would gladly explain a few things.

*Gorgeous, rich, powerful, snarky, the most wanted bachelor of the entire country – nobody rolls their eyes at you, tells you to shut up or that not every word coming out of your lovely mouth is pure brilliance. By the way – not every word coming out of your mouth is pure brilliance. With your dad and brother pushing that policy through, you're definitely Number 1 on the ‘Most popular royal’ list. Even less people now who have the balls to call out your bullshit or tell you to get down on your knees. Which is a shame, you look great on your knees. Darling, you just want somebody to push you around a bit, so you can push back*

The prince took so long to respond that Tony’s attention was back on Fargo by the time his phone beeped again.

*Not every word has to be brilliant as long as it's still smarter than everything anybody else has to say*

Tony smirked and decided to let it be. The prince now had enough to think about for a day or two and Tony’s eyelids were getting incredibly heavy. Time to catch some Zs. Tomorrow was that fucking gala that didn’t interest Tony in the least bit, but he would attend it any way. Loads of people to mess with. Not as much fun as the prince though.
The assistant of the tailor was new and the way she looked at Loki made him think about how much time had passed since he had last been with a woman. 10 years? That seemed about right.

Dark eyes, lingering on him way too long, shockingly out in the open. Usually it took a lot to make Loki feel uncomfortable, but now he was constantly forcing himself to not look at her. Nevertheless he could feel it on his skin, her eyeing him. Something you shouldn’t do to anybody, especially not to a prince. She was out of line and Loki would have her removed from his service.

Loki could deal with open staring, a wink, a flirty remark or a soft whistle. Those were things he would probably even appreciate, because they were straight forward, without fuss and they needed some guts. This kind of looking, that would never lead to anything, that Loki couldn’t define, it was putting him on the edge. No, she wasn’t trying to read him, people were doing that all the time.

It upset Loki that he couldn’t put a finger on it why he felt like squirming with her eyes on him like that. Almost enough to make his skin crawl.

“We’re done, your highness.”

Almost sighing in relief Loki dropped his arms when the tailor had finished taking his measurements. As size hadn’t changed one bit, this was just his way to flatter Loki. All that tennis, your highness, your arms have become so much more muscular. Bullshit.

“Thank you.”

Nodding softly Loki rushed out of the room, still feeling embarrassed and slightly angry about his own discomfort. Why was this getting to him? He could rack his brains out later on, now he had to get ready for the dinner.

That seemed like a thing he was doing a lot. Getting ready. Preparing. For dinners, meetings, events… so actually Loki was doing nothing. Nothing of worth. A thought that didn’t put him in the mood to spend another evening like this. Especially with all the delegates and diplomates. At least one Ymirson would be present which meant Thor would be agitated all night and sooner or later tensions would rise. They always did. Normally that would be something Loki enjoyed thoroughly, but right now he didn’t feel on top of his game. Because of a look that he couldn’t quite interpret.

His clothes were already laid out ready on his bed and Loki inwardly told himself to get a grip. Everybody had to do a few thousand things that they didn’t want to do every day. Gladly, the stuff he was confronted with was definitely more important, but other people had to put up with way worse.
Sitting down in front of a mirror Loki brushed his hair a couple of times, then put the brush down and picked up the black eyeliner to frame his eyes. Normally Loki didn’t do that, but he couldn’t resist the temptation to make the ambassadors shift from one foot to another, not knowing how to act around him. So blatantly easy. Those Midgardians. A little bit of colour in your face, that was already too much to handle for them. Loki couldn’t quite wrap his head around what was alienating them so much about that. It was fun to play with anyway.

When Loki was done his eyes looked bigger, wider and in his opinion that only emphasized the already most beautiful part of his face. He wondered if Balder would like it, then quickly shook his head at this silly thought. Other things to do. More important things.

After slipping into his suit Loki checked his watch. Too soon. To pass time Loki pulled out his phone and checked his messages. Nothing new. At least nothing of importance. Since he couldn’t reply to anything, Loki went over the names of all of the delegates and diplomates who were going to be there tonight.

No point in that, Loki knew them all by heart. Instead he let his thumb hover over the display of his phone, not quite knowing what to write or if he wanted to write something at all.

He didn’t type a single word.

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“Tony! How lovely to see you!”

“Yeah, I know. Everybody feels that way.”

“Tony, about time.”

“Tony, come over, have a drink.”

Why were they always saying his name? Trying to prove that they knew who he was? How couldn’t they? At these events the hierarchy was very clear. Whoever got the biggest wallet was the important person. Ergo – Tony was god.

Unfortunately god came up with a severe case of boredom as soon as he waltzed into the penthouse. Why were these parties always on the top floor of some high-rise? So the waiters could immediately throw themselves off the balcony when they’ve had enough of these rich bastards’ affectation. Tony was already feeling sympathy for them.

Anyway, where was the wine? That was the only reason he was here.

Leaning against the counter of the bar Tony gave the waiter a little sign. A young man, in his mid-twenties probably, kind of cute actually. Because of the working uniform it was hard to tell, but his beard made Tony think of a hipster. Student job? Unlikely, not at that kind of event.

“Sir?”

Tony ordered a glass of white wine, told him to get the good stuff, not some bottle of overpriced shit that they slapped a French label on. With immense satisfaction Tony could see the corners of mouth twitch in amusement. Yeah, definitely cute. So there was already a back-up plan if the night turned out to be complete shit.

“Mr. Stark. What a pleasure to have you here among us. We were worried that your stay in Asgard would take longer and you wouldn’t be able to make it.”
So they were already getting started on the chit-chat? Tony would have loved to go on without that. For now he didn’t bother to try to put on a smile, instead he went for a cheeky grin. “Nothing could have kept me away.”

Except for pretty much everything else in the world. Tony was merely here to piss as much people off as he could. Sometimes things really were as simple.

Miranda Garland was pretty much American royalty. Technically such thing didn’t exist, but she came from an incredibly wealthy family. The bad kind. Tony’s father had made his fortune by creating and selling weapons, so Tony was allowed to judge. To be honest he had forgotten how exactly that family had become rich and to be even more honest, he didn’t give a damn. Then again, he was pretty sure that it had something to do with cotton and underpaid black workers.

The good old days, right? Now the Garlands were in charge of an empire in the textile industry and 65 year old Miranda was the matriarch who ruled with an iron fist. That old, sweet looking, a little plumb lady with too much red lipstick made Maggie Thatcher look like a little school girl. Tony thought she wasn’t half bad. He had seen her tearing business partners to shreds, but she always called the waitress ‘my dear’.

“What a joy. The last couple events have been such a bore without you. Let’s have a drink and you tell me about your trip to Asgard.”

Now that was a subtle way to ask for details how it was like to fuck actual royalty. Not some guy who let slaves work on his fields while he was counting his money. Great, now Tony was dying to say that out loud.

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“Is that really necessary? You look like death himself.” Rather openly Odin looked his son up and down, not hiding his displeasure. Loki responded with a grin, spreading his arms and spun around on his heels. Never miss a chance to show off. “I thought I get myself dolled up for the occasion.”

“I do not doubt that for a second.” Odin tilted his head to the side, but he didn’t shake it. Loki’s actions were easy to look through, at least right now. Self-awareness was the key to pretty much everything. You could never be better than everybody else if you didn’t realize that you could never hold a candle to them.

To the rest of the world they were an alien culture. Isolated, unorthodox, maybe a little bit outdated. Or at least the west thought so. Their values were unknown and therefore people expected them to be weird, strange which offered Loki so many possibilities. The prince of this country is wearing make-up? Is that normal here? Was I supposed to wear make-up? Say something? Would that be offending? I better don’t say anything.

Loki was always struck by this strange notion that you couldn’t ask questions. They were foreigners in a country that hadn’t introduced most of the traditions that formed the everyday life in western nations.

‘Hey, I’m not from here… is that normal?’ – Was that so hard? Obviously yes, so Loki would amuse himself. Dressing in a pitch-black suit, with a black shirt and a black tie wasn’t quite as impressive as the eyeliner, but Loki liked to paint a big picture.

Unlike his father Frigga didn’t say anything, she merely smiled and kissed Loki on the cheek, giving him a look that said ‘I know what you did there’.
Loki winked at her and then turned around to join the other guests in the orchid salon. The dinner for the ambassadors and diplomats working in Asgard was an annual tradition and if Loki dared to say it – an almost casual affair. Sure, people got to dress in a fancy way, but there was no strict protocol or process. Frigga liked it that way, her ideas of making the diplomates comfortable and feeling welcome.

Well, they didn’t have to agree on everything, right?

The master of ceremonies wasn’t even there to announce Loki’s presence, which was a perfect opportunity for him to mingle among the guest. Sneaking up on them so to speak. Where to start? Loki had enough of the Americans for a long time although they were the most fun to throw off their game. Because it was so ridiculously easy. So, what was he…

“Your highness.”

So somebody else was already making the choice for him. “Étienne. Lovely to see you. Don’t you look good enough to eat?”

It was always entertaining to flirt with a Frenchman, but it was every give and take. There was nothing you could shock them with. Gay? Oh, please, we did that kind of thing even before you. Eccentric behavior and clothing? We host the fashion week, think of something else, idiot.

Étienne de la Croix has been the French ambassador in Valhalla for over three years now and he was one of the few diplomates that Loki actually liked. Easy to talk to and joke with, but from second to another he could turn completely serious and he wouldn’t let you fuck him over.

“Don’t you say that to all the ambassadors?”

“Caught me again, didn’t you?”

It took them about another three seconds to start talking about the trading agreement with the Americans. Terrible idea. What was your father thinking? I hope that won’t have any effects on the prosperous relationship between our two proud, grand nations. We should definitely work together as a united Europe.

No matter how much they agreed on everything, Loki didn’t want to talk to him right now. Their conversation only reminded him of his failures. Then again, nobody could afford to lose an ally like Étienne.

They ended up chatting for several minutes and then Loki continued his tour around the salon. Great, the German ambassador straight ahead. 57 years old, very old fashioned and he never looked quite at ease when a couple of the same sex exchanged tender gesture in his presence. Not because of contempt, no, he was a good guy. Just stuck in his own beliefs that had been born in another place and other time. Loki could respect that, but he was also going to use it for his own amusement.

While greeting the ambassador Loki made sure to touch his arm, letting his fingers a bit, engaging into more physical contact than what would be considered appropriate. It was so hard to suppress a chuckle while watching him squirm.

That was fun for another 15 minutes, until Loki spotted a shock of blonde hair in the crowd. Huh. Excusing himself Loki slipped away, searching for a quiet corner to observe the American. By the third time you meet somebody, it was obligatory to remember their name.

Steve Rogers…
First the wedding, now the dinner? Somehow Loki doubted that Fury would have brought the DS agent along, so Thor must have invited him. Two major events, stocked with royalty and important political figures. It also seemed like a game of ‘Find the piece that doesn’t belong here’. Loki’s eyes followed the blonde man around and by now it wasn’t a surprise that he saw his brother talking to the agent. Thor was all smiles, jovial like always and if Loki could trust his gut feeling, he would say that Rogers was feeling completely awkward next to Thor. No, Loki was fairly sure that he hadn’t missed out on anything important, but it was always better to check. The American didn’t interest Loki in the least. One conversation had been enough. Plain and completely devoid of charm. It made Loki think of Jane. Well, now he really had to ask. Time to crash another…

“Loki.”

Why was everybody sneaking up to him toni… Oh.

Until this very second Loki had moved around the salon like he owned the place, which he did. Out of a sudden a tiny little bit of his immense self-confidence faded away. Just the smallest bit and it was enough for Loki wanting to smash his head against the wall, because he was so much smarter than that.

Turning around Loki was faced with Balder’s sweet smile. It was so disarming Loki wanted to slap him. Although not really. Not at all.

“Balder, I wasn’t sure you were going to be here tonight.” But he had expected it, Frigga was having an agenda and she was pushing it.

“This year your mother decided to also invite some representatives of the eight regions. So here I am. You look…” Balder cocked his head to the side, he was clearly taking his time to think about what to say. “…beautiful, but it’s a very interesting choice of wardrobe.”

“Black suits me.” Loki put on a grin and Balder uttered a soft, bright laugh. “Yes, it does. Maybe too much of a good thing though.”

“Are you criticizing my appearance? I am deeply hurt. You’ve just shattered my self-confidence.”

“Is that even possible?” Balder was amused by their banter which was a pleasant surprise. “Would you like to have a drink with me?”

Why not? Loki nodded, trying not to think about his mother being in the same room and watching them.

***

Change of plan. Since no waiter had thrown himself off the balcony yet, Tony would have to be the first one. He was so bored, he was seconds away from falling asleep.

“We did such amazing work in Africa. These kids are now going to school and they’ll have a real chance of changing the country.”

“Amazing. It’s so worth admiring what you’ve done there.”

“Well, somebody has to…”

Oh, fuck all of them. Tony downed the rest of his champagne in one big gulp and then ruined the entire evening for group of dense, self-complimenting women who had somehow ended up being so wealthy they didn’t know how to use a vacuum cleaner.
“Which country?”

All eyes were instantly on him and the bimbo, who had just boasted herself for single-handedly making sure that every single undernourished kid in Africa was going to have a future, was now looking at him in open confusion. Good lord, somebody was actually asking a question and not instantly patting her on the shoulder for being such a great person. Helen. Tony thought her name was Helen. Not that he gave a flying fuck.

“I beg your pardon?”

“That question only consisted of two words, what was so hard about it to understand? I asked in which country your foundation is doing its work.”

“Uhm, we’re involved in a lot of projects all over…”

“Yeah, thought so.” Tony rolled his eyes and put his glass on the tablet of a waiter who happened to walk by. Another one of those idiots who didn’t even know that Africa was a continent and not a country. Why bother, it’s all a dry desert anyway. “You know that it’s a waste of money to feed those kids or send them to school. You could just burn the dollar bills and it would have the same effect.”

Shocked gasps all around him. How incredibly tasteless and repulsive. Not a single one of them was using their brains. Why had Miranda Garland left him alone with these hyenas? Oh, she must hate him.

“How can you say something like that?”

“I’m trying to give something back after being so lucky to…”

“Yeah, but you don’t even know which country your pumping the money into. You’re not doing anybody a favour. Eritrea? Sudan? Gambia? You’re probably funding a dictatorship.”

“I assure you, our funds go directly to the ones who need it.”

Tony snorted. “Bravo, great. The government lets the country starve to death and they can do that, because the west sends money to feed the poor. So why should the government bother? You’re strengthening their position. First it was imperialism and now there are new ways to keep that continent down. The warlord is laughing his ass off, because he can do what the hell he wants, foundations like yours will make sure the country doesn’t collapse completely. Well, it should collapse. Then it would have a chance to get back up. Instead you treat them like a little child. You build them a road and when it’s ruined one year later, no problem. We can some more donations and we’ll build it again. Over and over again. While the government can save up all their money to buy weapons from a soulless arms merchant. I must know, I’ve sold the weapons to them.”

Of course they weren’t getting what he was trying to say. All they heard was ‘letting poor children starve to death instead of sending them money’. No way they were getting the big picture. How so? They were all bored trophy wives who didn’t give a damn and needed a hobby to pass them. Why the hell did all of them choose philanthropy when they were only making things worse?

And why was Tony still standing here wasting his time? God, he should have taken the cute bartender hours ago. Coming here Tony had thought that he would at least find some pleasure in annoying people, but now it was the other way round.

Making a dismissive gesture Tony let them stand there, struggling what to say, deeply offended by his carelessness. Another drink then he would be out of here. Something stronger though this time.
“Now that was an inspiring speech.”

Couldn’t they all just leave him the fuck alone for five minutes? Tony didn’t need more to get shitfaced and to slip the bartender his home address.

“I can’t stop my wisdom from flowing out. Anything I can help you with, Pym?”

She wasn’t even narrowing her eyes at him, Hope had heard way worse from him over the years. “It’s van Dyne.”

“Right, I always get that one wrong.”

“I’m wondering why.”

Tony took a good moment to take in her appearance. Hope van Dyne, although being younger and definitely more beautiful than most women here, she had a habit of dressing rather simple and plain. Sure, she had a natural elegance to her, but her dresses never showed any kind of cleavage. Tony was a superficial guy, of course he noticed that kind of stuff. Maybe she did it to differ herself from the bimbos around here. Completely unnecessary. Hope only had to open her mouth and even the most dumb-witted guy had to realise that her mind was as sharp as a razorblade.

“I know you don’t have much of a reputation to ruin, but do you really have to try that hard?”

“Other people are just better at pretending that they are stupid. Please tell me you’re not another one of these girls who are trying to save the world or I’ll let myself out.”

Hope gave him a small but biting smile. “What is so wrong about wanting to save the world?”

“Everything when you think you can do that by telling South Asian countries to improve their working conditions instead of fighting the laws that allow American and European countries to produce their shit there for less than a buck. Nobody is trying to save the world here, they are trying to pass time.”

“Well… still a good way to pass time, isn’t it?”

No, it wasn’t. Not when you weren’t doing it right.

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“Don’t you think you are a little hard on them? They’re just doing their job. It’s always hard to live abroad and you are intentionally making them feel uncomfortable.”

“Yes, because I’m sick of diplomates acting like they’re doing us a favour by respecting our culture. They don’t care and they don’t have to. It’s our culture, not theirs. I hate it when they feign interest or tolerance. If you are weirded out by the trúa, please say so, but don’t keep nodding your head mumbling ‘That’s such a unique perspective on life’. I hate that…” Loki grumbled and took another sip from his glass of wine.

Balder clearly wasn’t sharing his opinion, but strangely enough Loki didn’t mind, because Balder didn’t pretend to. “I hardly think that somebody could be weirded out by the trúa, but let’s assume that they are… would you really prefer it that they outright… reject it? That would be like… accepting that people are narrow-minded.”

“I don’t think so. It’s our culture, not theirs. They aren’t immigrants. They are not here to stay. Sure, if you want to live among us, be part of this country, it’s necessary… it’s your duty to respect our
traditions. They are foreigners and of course I prefer it if they found our culture intriguing and fascinating… but lots of them don’t. Yet they plaster a smile on their face, because they fear we’d lose it otherwise. Look at them… how they’re so desperately trying to not step on anybody’s toes… as if we didn’t know why. They’re after our gold and our oil. As if we’d throw it after them if they’re only being nice enough.”

Now he was starting to rant, only making his bad mood worse. Wonderful, Balder had to think that Loki was the worst company ever. So why was he smiling again. “Maybe you give people too little credit?”

“No, this is politics. You always have to expect the worst from people.”

How was it possible to be always smiling? Even worse, Balder looked like he meant it, as if it wasn’t a chore for him. Unbelievable.

“You should not be thinking like that all the time. It will make you bitter.”

For some reason Loki was rendered speechless by that. Another smile and Balder told him that he was going to get them two new glasses of wine since Loki had finished his.

While Balder disappeared into the crowd of people Loki looked after him, wondering how anybody could have been born into a noble family without becoming a complete cynic. Or maybe it was just him. Thor told him to smile more. Why? Especially at this kind of event where they were all pretending to be best friends while their father was selling them out to the highest bidder. Loki was so sick of it. Sick of the talk that they had been isolated long enough, that it was time to step onto the global stage. What for? To live up to somebody else’s standard? Most of this planet’s problems got started by too many countries getting involved into things that were none of their business. Then everything ended up in a huge mess, nobody knew how to get out of it and then chaos for the next 50 years. Asgard has always been thriving on its own. Nothing was broken, no need to fix it.

Looking at them Loki was feeling disgust. Some of them had honourable intentions, but real diplomats were hard to come along nowadays. They were a small nation, incredibly rich and isolated. Naturally the big players would think they could be pushed around easily. As it turned out, they were… all the United States had to do was to wave with a trade agreement and everybody would fall over because of the influence of the industry and the possible loss of their investments. Or in Thor’s case… out of fear of being labelled xenophobic or backwards. Did his father really think that he was strong enough to keep the Americans in check now that he had opened the door? Or that Thor would be able to do it when he was going to be king?

Was that what Frigga had alluded to? Loki’s role as advisor in what was about to come? They were the gateway to Russia. Sooner or later that was going to come up and then… Why was Loki supposed to smile more?

“Vanaheim and Asgard. Together again. How nice and not at all surprising. One could say… almost shockingly predictable. When are we going to hear the happy announcement?”

Pulled rather violently from his thoughts Loki looked up at the man standing right in front of him. Representatives from all the eight regions. Of course. Loki felt himself straightening up rather involuntarily. Charisma ran in the family, that much was for sure. Only Laufey was a lot more subtle with his insults than his son.

“My lord.” Loki said drily and Helblindi bowed his head. “Your highness.”

“I’m flattered that you seem so interested in my personal life, but Balder and I are not dating.” Not
that it was any of Helblindi’s business, but Loki wanted to make it quite clear. Although it felt weird saying that to such a striking man. Blue eyes that were so intense, they made Loki understand the old stories.

“You aren’t? That’s a shame… He would be the perfect choice. From Vanaheim. Influential, yet calm and definitely easy to manipulate. Popular. A lot of support from his people behind him. Rich. A the qualities a king’s consort needs to have.” Helblindi offered Loki a smile like Balder had before, but it was so completely different. Beautiful but biting. Letting Loki know that Helblindi could look right through him or at least he thought so. Loki wasn’t quite sure.

“What are you even talking about?”

The Jotun clicked his tongue, his eyes fixed on Loki’s face and Loki could feel his heart beating faster, just because he didn’t know what to expect. Helblindi leaned against the table like Loki was doing, letting his eyes swipe across the room. “I cannot help but wondering what you write in the letters to your ancestors… or what you think when looking around in a place like this. Aren’t you just screaming inwardly? Cursing the fact that you aren’t the first-born son.”

All while talking to Loki Helblindi had moved closer, almost whispering the last words directly into Loki’s ear. The impact was strong enough to evoke a physical reaction. Loki winced, taking half a step back and Helblindi was smiling again. Knowingly.

“You are out of line to talk to me like that.”

“Do you think I’m trying to mock you? Believe me, I am not. Even though you were born into a long line of usurpers, I would prefer to see you on the throne to your brother or father. Because you are smart and you know that. So don’t pretend that you aren’t aware of that. That you would be a so much better king than they could ever hope to be. You see all the things you could do, change, improve… right in front of you and yet your hands are bound to do anything about it. Because of such a minor details. It must drive you insane.” Helblindi laughed silently, then shrugged. “You are almost like me.”

Loki swallowed, his skin suddenly feeling too tight for his body and yet there was a strange excitement to hear these words spoken out loud. They weren’t true. At least not completely. “There is one big difference.”

“And that would be?”

“I’m in the actual line for the throne. You aren’t.”

Casually Helblindi noted. “Very true. Isn’t that strange? Even though I am the rightful heir to the throne…”

“Are you trying to prove my brother right? He already believes that the Jotuns always try to create new conflicts. What are you doing right now?”

Only now Helblindi seemed slightly surprised by something Loki had said. “I complimented you. Your intellect. Lord Balder is a smart choice, your highness. Noble, Asgardian, a public sweetheart. While your brother is choosing an American, although the people are already throwing rotten food at his vehicle. Your pawns couldn’t be in a better position. How are you going to set things in motion? I would go for the American. First the king sells our nation to the States, then our future king plans on marrying one. How can we trust him after that? A king under so much foreign influence… when we have such a wonderful alternative…” He trailed off and Loki was staring at him, the ability to speak having been robbed from him.
Yelling, screaming, anything. Treachery. How could he even… Yet it made sense. Helblindi was an Ymirson, how could he see in Loki anything else than a traitor, a usurper. It was in his blood.

“By the sweet Lopthæna… did I just render you speechless, your highness? I thought such a deed unachievable…” Obvious amusement filled his voice, but there was no cruelty to be found. Softly he grabbed the prince’s hand and Loki’s heart made a leap as Helblindi touched the bracelet around his wrist with his forehead. When their eyes met again Helblindi muttered a few words in Jǫtnar before addressing Loki directly. “I am curious to see what you still have in store for us. Your highness.”

Seemingly without a care in the world Helblindi turned around and let Loki standing there. His heart was still racing in his chest when Balder came back and Loki only noticed his presence when Balder put a concerned hand on his shoulder.
“This was your idea, wasn’t it?” Odin subtly nodded towards their youngest son who was still wrapped up in a conversation with Balder. Frigga turned her head, her eyebrows raised since she didn’t know yet what her husband was referring to. When recognition set in a pleased smile appeared on her lips. A content that Odin swore he had rarely seen before. “I do must admit that I am guilty of charge… I had some distinct hopes when I asked Loki to take Balder under his wing. He is such a splendid young gentleman. Reasonable and with a calm temper that Loki desperately needs. Always so driven. I worry one day he might just burn up with nobody to cool him down.”

The fears of a mother and in a certain way, they weren’t unknown to Odin. Both of his sons were like open books to him. Whenever Thor was upset or felt treated unfairly, he would open his mouth and protest. Not always in the appropriate way. That had always been one of his flaws, from the early beginnings of his childhood. A child so eager to please his peers. A loud child, everybody in the palace had been perfectly familiar with Thor’s growl.

Loki could easily give you a similar impression, but only if you didn’t know him well enough. Their youngest was no fan of silence. Everybody at court had been amazed at how fast the prince at learned to talk and Loki obviously still enjoyed it. Proud to possess a vast vocabulary that would make anybody’s head spin. How much he loved to use it. Not a shy bone in his body Loki was quick to give a sharp answer to anybody’s question. Countless diplomates had called him insolent, because Loki had very clearly called them out on their stupidity and other times they had blushed feeling flattered by the most colourful terms he had used to describe them. Sometimes they hadn’t realized that he was mocking them, his sarcasm clad in sweet words.

So yes, it was quite easy to believe that Loki was the kind of person who would say anything right into another person’s face. Most of the time he did, but Odin knew that his son could keep his lips sealed shut if he thought it to be the better way to handle things. Or if it wasn’t the right time. Loki could keep things bottled up for an eternity if he wanted to. Not a very healthy thing to do, but smart.

Confronted with his mother Loki liked to bottle things up. Odin didn’t even want to know how he might have reacted to Frigga’s barely disguised attempt to find him a husband. Outraged, of course. Not because of the nature of the matter, no. There was no reason to doubt Loki’s understanding of his situation, he had been raised with the knowledge that the choice of his future spouse might not be an entirely romantic one. Nobody could force him, but in Loki’s case that wouldn’t even be necessary. His pragmatism was too advanced for that.

Marrying for political reasons and ensuring the stability of the nation – sure. Getting in a relationship to find emotional support and comfort that only a romantic partner could provide - no way. There was a good chance that Loki interpreted Frigga’s wish as an insult. How could he ever need anyone?

Hey everybody,
Loki is still in shock, but he is trying to work it out :)
Have fun
And why did his mother think that? Odin was absolutely sure that Loki had smiled and sweetly pointed out that he didn’t need his mother to find him a spouse. Inwardly he had been screaming.

Looking at his son now, standing there with the young lord, Odin could understand his wife’s idea very well, he definitely supported it, but he couldn’t help but feel disappointed. “Splendid is about right. His family is almost as old as ours, I highly respect his father. Everyone he talks to falls for him. There is no guarantee that Loki will do the same. Until now he has fancied a rather different type of men.”

“I know, but I trust our son to realise that whatever excites him enough to spend a day, a night or a week with someone, is probably not the same thing that will ensure a fulfilled life together. Although that realisation cannot be achieved in one day.” Frigga continued to smile and Odin wished he could be as confident as her concerning this matter.

Glancing at his son Odin saw him and Balder still talking. “Do you think they will take a liking to each other?”

“Oh, Balder already has. How could he not? Loki is lovely and charming. He would very much like to be given a chance.”

So it came back down to what Loki wanted and that was often quite hard to figure out. Even for himself. It would be a most delightful development. Nonetheless Odin couldn’t help but sigh, because it perfectly put that immense missed opportunity on display.

Naturally Frigga noticed and for once the happy expression vanished. “Is there something wrong?”

“No, I was just reminded of how such a spouse would be perfect… and necessary for Thor.”

“Our son has made his choice and we don’t have the right to question it.”

“I disagree, I do believe we have the duty to question his decisions and if they are in the interest of our nation. Look at Balder. His family is as Asgardian as anyone ever could be. They have close relationships with all the other lords, business associations and so on. Our people appreciate him, they would value his opinion. Influence and appeal that cannot be underestimated. All qualities a king’s consort should possess. You are better aware of that than anybody else, my dear.”

Frigga gave a soft nod to show that she was indeed of aware of this most important point, but in her next sentence she continued to be a mother. “I know and so does Thor. Yet he has made the decision to follow his heart. I am convinced that the young woman is going to charm the masses just like she charmed Thor.”

His years of experience made Odin seriously doubt that. “You would be able to do that. Her? I don’t think so. She is a nice girl, but she lacks the charisma. Unfortunately we have also seen that the people have trouble accepting the new policy. Given her nationality… she will cause Thor more trouble than do him good. That’s not what I want for my son.”

Touching his arm Frigga gave him a soft, somewhat defeated smile. “But it’s what your son wants for himself. Thor is a good man, he knows how to talk to the people and she will learn. There will always be Loki to give him advice… and with a bit of luck there will be Balder to make sure that Loki won’t burn up.”

The entire situation was frustrating beyond words. Odin would never understand why Thor was willing to complicate his life and his future reign for a woman that didn’t seem all that special. Not for Odin to judge, naturally, love was indeed blind.
“… I just bit my tongue and pretended that I could still stand on my own two feet. I was constantly leaning against things and I’m pretty sure he knew. I slept 15 hours through and from thereon I kept my mouth shut.”

To put it lightly – Steve was amazed and completely taken aback. Arriving at the palace he had feared the entire affair would work out like the wedding. Completely on his own, having no idea what was going on and a prince making fun of him.

Tonight was playing out very differently. Unlike the first time he had invited him to something, Thor was actually taking notice of him now. Not just a short ‘hello’. Steve had been greeted with a big smile and that had been 30 minutes ago. They were still talking. Actually talking, having a conversation.

The surprises weren’t going to end, because Thor was funny and uncomplicated. Steve liked him. The blond didn’t make him feel like he was walking right into a trap. During the last couple of minutes Thor had told him about his time in the army. So Steve had just found out that both princes had served and had a military rank. It was rather amusing that Thor so openly talked about how he had been surprised that he hadn’t been as fit as he had thought when he had absolved his first military training. The conversation was so light-hearted Steve almost couldn’t believe that he was having it with a prince. That he made him laugh.

“So how long are you going to be in Asgard? Your stay is limited, isn’t it?” Thor looked genuinely interested and Steve finally thought that he didn’t have to be careful about every word that he was uttering. “About a year… maybe at the end of the term I get to decide if I want to stay longer, but usually after a year we get to spend some time back at home.”

Thor nodded in understanding. “I see… That’s something I don’t really understand about diplomacy. I mean it’s hard to wrap my head around it. Spending so much time away from home. I cannot imagine doing that. Especially if you have to switch places over and over again.”

“Well… I admit it can get tiring, but it’s an important job and I enjoy doing it… most of the time.” Steve smiled coyly. “Sometimes I do think it would be so much easier if I were at home, because living abroad can be quite confusing.”

Laughing softly Thor shook his head. “Asgard confusing… No, don’t worry, I am merely kidding. Our traditions and our way of living are quite different, that’s for sure.”

“Actually it’s the language that I worry about most… I got myself a book to learn about the basics, but it feels like running against the wall.”

“Doesn’t the embassy get you a teacher? They should do that… I’ve never thought about how hard it must be to learn for a foreigner… but it must be easier to have somebody explain things to you… not learn it by yourself.”

Suddenly Thor looked rather pensive and Steve got the feeling they weren’t talking about his difficulties with the language anymore. Then he remembered the rumours about an American girlfriend, so Steve decided to not say anything. Better change the subject. Unfortunately Steve wasn’t too gifted when it came down to make an interesting conversation.

“You may think that living abroad is difficult, but honestly… I kind of amazing that people can handle this….” Steve gestured around the room “… on a regular basis. So many events and everybody wanting to talk to you… Oh, I’ve noticed that a couple of guys are pretty much walking
in circles around us. I’m sure you have some more important people to talk to…"

Thor dismissively moved his hand. “They can wait their turn… This is supposed to be a rather casual affair, but I guess such a thing doesn’t exist in politics and whenever I or my father talk to somebody… it’s always politics. Which can be tiring. Sometimes it’s nice to talk to somebody who doesn’t care about all of that.”

Another comment that made Steve think about the girlfriend and for the first time he actually thought about what it must be like to be royalty. There was more glamour to it than to being an elected leader. Steve didn’t understand why, but it was a fact that couldn’t be challenged. Since there was more glamour to it, the press was more interested and that interest was probably going to follow them around until the rest of their lives. Galas, dinners, conferences, parliament meetings, representation. That part didn’t sound worth aspiring. Especially not when Steve was looking around, seeing all these men in suits that were more expensive than sending a young kid to college. They were lying in wait and for sure everybody had some goal to reach which were impossible to realise. All of that several times a week? Also Steve couldn’t imagine that anybody would be interested in the private life of a delegate or a typical politician. Typical… in their 50s, almost bald and heavy-set. That didn’t apply to Thor who had quite an impressive figure, he actually reminded Steve of a football player. There was no doubt that a lot of women would consider him a prince charming. Considering that they were in Asgard a lot of men were probably thinking the same thing.

Thinking about all that attention Steve even felt a little bit sorry for Thor. He seemed like a very laid-back, relaxed guy. Actually like the kind of person who Steve would like to spend time with.

“Yeah, I guess it’s hard to meet people who don’t have anything to do with politics or… well, you know what I mean.”

“More or less…” Thor shrugged and took a sip from his wine. “Even if I take a run in the park and meet something new, they naturally want to talk about the palace, my father… or Loki. Mostly Loki.” A grin appeared on his face and Steve noticed that he felt slightly uncomfortable just hearing the other one’s name. The younger brother was around too, Steve had seen him a couple of minutes ago. He could do very well without talking to him again.

“You’ve met my brother before?”

Steve winced, thinking that his face might have giving something away. Not really the best idea to show Thor that Steve thought his younger brother was an incredibly unpleasant person. “Yes, I have… shortly.”

To Steve’s surprise Thor chuckled in amusement for some reason. “He has quite a gift at leaving a terrible first impression. Don’t worry, he actually is a nice person… he just doesn’t want people to know that.”

Yeah, that sounded about right, at least James had been saying the same thing. Still Steve had trouble believing it.

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“You are pale… paler than usual. You are sure that you are feeling alright?” Balder was looking at him with real concern, it was easy to see that and yet Loki wanted him to step away.

Helblindi’s words were still ringing in his ears. The allusions to Loki’s and Balder’s non-existent relationship. The heinous talk about treachery and… No, Loki was actually feeling sick. Too many people were around. They couldn’t see and Loki couldn’t just leave. They would notice.
After taking a short breath Loki grabbed the glass Balder had brought him and took a quick sip before putting on a smile that seemed most fitting for the situation. Soft, slightly embarrassed, not too much. “Completely sure. It’s about time though that the food gets served, I’m dying of hunger.”

Balder’s eyes made clear that he wasn’t buying it. Maybe not so naïve as Loki had thought. “Drinking wine may not be the best idea then.”

“You’re probably right…” Loki muttered and tried not to watch Balder too intently. What was his opinion on all of this? Was he merely spending time with Loki, because Frigga wanted it that way? Or was he genuinely interested in Loki? Political play – an old alliance reformed? Asgard and Vanaheim, together again. Damn the Jotun and his words.

Loki needed time to think, probably a couple of minutes alone to make sense out of what Helblindi had said. With Balder’s attentive gaze on him that wouldn’t work. Loki’s thoughts were racing, heading into different directions, already trying to explore things. It was all about motivation. Helblindi wasn’t stupid, cleverness ran in their family, so he wouldn’t just say these things to mock Loki. Not somebody in Loki’s position.

Balder was pulling his eyebrows together, for sure wondering why Loki wasn’t saying anything. No, this wasn’t going to work out.

“Will you excuse me for a second? I need to go to the bathroom to freshen up a bit. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

A very weak excuse, but it served its purpose. Again, Balder mumbled something about him being sure that he was feeling okay. Despite the unleashed chaos in his head Loki couldn’t help but notice that notice that he was indeed sweet. Quickly Loki slid through the crowd and gave one of the guards a little sign who immediately opened one of the side doors for him.

Good, the guard wouldn’t let anybody in, so Loki had a moment to himself. Leaning against a counter Loki looked at himself in the mirror, annoyed that he did indeed look pale. Turning back around Loki crossed his arms in front of his chest and tried to make the connection. Helblindi was Laufey’s firstborn, the future lord of Jotunheim, so there was no doubt that Laufey had raised him with a set of very clear beliefs.

Búri and all his forsaken spawns had robbed them of their heritage and possessions. According to this belief Helblindi was the heir to the throne of Asgard. The Ymirsons loathed every descendant of Búri, the man who overthrew them. Loki was part of that family, so there was no way Helblindi would ever think fondly of him in a position of power.

Loki’s eyes darted to the silver bracelet around his wrist. Only slowly the immense scale of what the Jotun had done dawned on Loki. It did not make sense. Why on earth would Helblindi do that? In sight of everyone? Almost choking on the shame Loki remembered how he hadn’t been able to breathe when Helblindi had touched the bracelet with his forehead. Why would a Jotun, an Ymirson, ever show him such a profound gesture of respect? And could Helblindi be so extremely careless to ridicule an almost sacred ritual.

Sadly there was no other explanation for it. He was trying to put a very dark thought into Loki’s head.

An attempt to put a strain on the tight bond that held together their family. Nobody could be so naïve to not see that Thor would face severe troubles as soon as he would ascend to the throne. The new policy and the choice of his spouse were a very bad mixture. Frigga had already made allusions to it, Thor would definitely need Loki’s support. Why should she be the only one who realised that?
Helblindi was definitely smart, why shouldn’t he have figured it out too? Not the worst way to try to sow discontent and distrust. Did he really believe it was that easy to turn two brothers against each other?

No, there was definitely more to it. Helblindi wouldn’t make such an obvious move, right? That sharp Jotun was definitely up to something and Loki wasn’t going to be manipulated that easily. No, he was going to be manipulated at all.

Suddenly it made Loki so mad that he even was here, in a bathroom, to ponder about what the son of lord had said to him. Damn, it was more than likely that Helblindi had seen him leaving the main room. Probably he was feeling quite a triumph right now.

Not going to happen. Turning around Loki took another look at the mirror, content to see that his expression was hard and stoic. Good, he could work with that. Nobody should get the satisfaction of knowing that they had got to him. Especially not Helblindi. Although now that he had looked through him, Loki couldn’t deny a soft tingle of excitement. Maybe for the first time he was dealing with someone who could create actual intrigue.

Just as Loki was about to turn around to leave he heard the door being opened which could only mean one thing.

“Hey, don’t tell me you’re hiding from Balder?” Thor was walking in with a dazzling smile on his lips and Loki rolled eyes, unable to not smile himself. “No, I’m not.”

“Yeah, sure… he’s looking like a lost puppy. Really cute.”

If Thor decided to tease him, Loki couldn’t resist. “Since we’re already talking about significant men in our lives. Do you have something to confess to me?”

The smile was replaced by a frown. “Huh? I don’t see…”

“Blonde is not really my type, but if you’re into that…”

Thor was still frowning, making a gesture with his hand to indicate that he had no idea what Loki was referring to. Fine, he could spell it out. “Rogers. If you are going to invite him to every event that you have to attend… I’m asking myself the obvious questions.”

Huffing softly Thor put his hands on his hips, looking at him in a scolding way that only a big brother could. “Very funny. He helped me out, so I wanted to be nice. It’s you who’s constantly flirting with a DS agent. Not me.”

“Right, I tend to forget that…”

“Come on, let’s get out of here. I have a feeling that the Italian and the Spanish ambassador are going to rip each other’s throat out. We wouldn’t want to miss that.” Thor showed an almost childish glee and wrapped an arm around Loki’s shoulder. Then he suddenly became serious again. “It wasn’t a joke, you know? I can’t imagine you hiding from a guy and you can take care of these things alone, but… if you feel uncomfortable with Balder around, I can talk to mother.”

Loki expected to get angry, he hated it when people were offering to fight his battles for him, but Thor’s rather clumsy attempt was endearing. “Thank you, I can deal with him.”

After giving him a small nod Thor squeezed Loki’s shoulder, then let go of him and they left the bathroom. Immediately Loki’s eyes darted around, looking for Helblindi who was so easy to spot due to his striking physique. He was talking to a Danish diplomat, obviously feeling Loki’s eyes on
him. Helblindi’s answer was a smile and Loki felt a shiver running down his spine.

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Tony was moving his head to the rhythm of the music, his pencil scratching over the paper. Way too fast, not precise enough. Only a very first sketch. There were so many flashes in his brain of what he wanted to create and he needed to immortalise every single one of them before deciding in which direction he could actually go.

There was no haste although Tony yearned make his idea reality. This was a feeling he would like to keep. Complete relaxation, a calm state and yet he was buzzing with energy. A shame that he had almost forgotten about that. Doing something that he was actually enjoying, something important. That wasn’t tainted by the touch of greasy, greedy hands.

Tony snorted just thinking about them. They would roll their eyes and call it a childish dream that was more or less a waste of time. No dream was a waste of time when Tony’s fingers were trying to make it real. They still hadn’t learned that there was nothing that he couldn’t do. No, it was for the better. Also a lot more fun to see the look on people’s faces after they’ve underestimated him.

Another sketch was done and Tony put the pencil away to take a look at it. Better. Not quite there yet. Rubbing a hand over his eyes Tony tried to chase the fatigue away. His damned body wasn’t agreeing with his mind which was still wide awake. Glancing at the screen next to him Tony groaned when he saw that it was already after 8 pm. Another night without sleep.

Casually Tony clicked on the screen to check the security cameras. A nice view. Still sleeping in his bed, only partly covered by one of the sheets. Time to call Happy to get the car ready. Tony thought giving somebody money for a cab when you had a personal chauffeur wasn’t very classy.

Well, it wouldn’t be necessary if your one night stand had his own driver. Thinking of that… Tony took a look at his phone, but there were no new messages. Really? Was Tony supposed to do everything?

*I’m single-handedly changing the world. What have you been up today?*

Tony had finished two new sketches when the screen of his phone lit up.

*So humble. Made a new enemy, I think. Something you should be familiar with*

Hard to tell who was enjoying that more.
It was about time to get into bed and sleep for maybe 10 hours. Unfortunately they weren’t there yet. Maybe two hours more of smiling, listening to people sucking up to him. Balder had excused himself about half an hour ago, he had an appointment tomorrow morning. Loki was kind of sad to see him leave, now everybody was all over him, although nobody was saying anything important. Merely trying to get into his good graces, because he could be useful to them later on. That could work the other way too. Tonight the first changes had already become visible.

Sure, the majority of the diplomates were buzzing around Odin, but it couldn’t be missed that a good junk was shifting their attention towards Thor. Why shouldn’t they? Everybody who closely watched the political developments in Asgard was well aware of the fact that big changes were upon them. Better start whispering into the new king’s ear soon. Oh, weren’t they pathetic? Loki had already formed a list of who he would have to keep an eye on. Always be careful around those with the most ambition, Loki knew, he was one of them.

“A most entertaining dinner, don’t you think, your highness?”

Loki couldn’t help it, he always had to smile when he met Karlis. The Dane had a calm temper that Loki had come to admire, since he wasn’t boring but easy going and charming in a quirky way. For a man past 50 he was still in extraordinarily good shape, his rough face had also a strange handsomeness to it.

“Immensely. Good to see you, Karlis.”

The Dane kissed him on the cheek and bowed his head. “Nothing as exciting as watching a couple of foreign trying to enjoy Asgardian cuisine.”

“Are implying that it’s bad?”

“No, just very hard to get used to. It was amusing thought to watch ambassador Fury strategically eat around the fish on his plate.”

Loki didn’t think it was necessary to answer, so he merely rolled his eyes. Not the most elegant move, but he knew that Karlis would be amused. “Still no fondness in your heart for our American brothers and sisters?”

An opportunity to be a tease, how Loki enjoyed that. “My heart is overflowing with fondness for them. Especially when they are attractive, available and leave the next the -day.”

“Now that is just a very cruel way to describe your future sister-in-law.”
Loki did his best, even bit his lip to not burst out laughing. “Turning my own words against me. No wonder you are a politician.”

“Speaking of which…” Karlis leaned a little closer which meant they were now going to talk about whatever had made him approach Loki. “Obviously Asgard has been very busy during the last couple of months to come to an agreement with the Americans. Negotiations between Asgard and Denmark about the bilateral tax agreement have gone into hibernation. The Danish government would like to change that and put the agreement back on the agenda. Actually my superiors would be very pleased if the agreement could be signed by the end of the year. I can assure you that the contents would be to our mutual benefit… unlike other agreements that were made in the past.”

Karlis was talking in a low voice, close to Loki’s ear. Not enough to make it sound like a conspiracy, but he clearly did not want anybody else to hear it.

The second time that night that Loki was confronted with an emotion that he loathed with every fibre of his being. Confusion. Loki knew that Karlis was intelligent, he respected him and therefore he couldn’t really understand his move. Yes, Loki was person with influence, but the American policy had proven that it was very limited. Why was he the first one to approach?

“I think you might be talking to the wrong person.” Loki replied softly, his eyes darting to Thor at the other of the hall. Surrounded by various different nations who were either already pushing their agendas or sweet-talking him. That was the way to go.

When he looked back to Karlis he found that the man was still smiling. “Actually I think I am the only one talking to the right person.”

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Even without the alarm Bucky woke up at 6 o’clock and almost immediately jumped out of bed when he remembered that it was his day off. Those were so rare that it was pure bliss to just stay in bed and look at the ceiling for a couple of moments. It wasn’t in Bucky’s nature to lie around and do nothing, so naturally the whole day was already planned out. Just a few minutes to relax and enjoy that he didn’t have to get up instantly.

Eventually Bucky more or less rolled out of bed and started his work-out. Half an hour later he entered his kitchen to have a short breakfast and study the papers. He always had two, the New York Times and an Asgardian one. Even now it was still kind of hard to get through an article. Asgardian journalists loved metaphors, images and an overall complicated language. Add the runes to this and one article about an accident on the highway could take up quite some time. At least the headline was easy to understand.

*Where is our secretary of state?*

Yeah, that was already taking ages now. Bucky scanned over the article, but it was nothing new. The journalist expressed his impatience which was definitely shared by the population. There was also some speculation, because it was taking so long. Wasn’t Leifsson going to be secretary of state after all? Impossible, he was the candidate with the most experience and with the most support behind him. So why was the king taking so long?

Sighing softly Bucky continued to scan over different articles and eventually his eyes settled on a picture of Jane Foster next to the crown prince. Walking around Valhalla. Great, now that would dominate the news for the next days to come. Sighing in annoyance Bucky pushed the newspaper away and instead read up on what was going on at home. Democrats and republicans still at each other’s throats? Check. Budget cuts all over the place? Check. Obsession over Beyoncé’s
pregnancy? Check.

On days like these one should really skip the news. Bucky slowly finished his short breakfast before hitting the shower. Before lunch he had to get some groceries and a card to accompany the birthday present.

Slipping into jeans and a t-shirt Bucky grabbed his keys and left his apartment. The store was merely a few steps down the street and since Bucky went there almost every three days he wasn’t an unknown face. The employees who recognized him, offered him a smile and a “Heill ok sæll”. During his first weeks in Valhalla Bucky hadn’t thought it possible, but now he was perfectly used to the huge variety of vegetables and fruit. Bucky served himself and then tried to choose the right birthday card. The same problem as with the newspaper, the style of these few lines was typically exalted and eloquent. Sometimes Bucky thought that there was no casual talk in Old Norse. Eventually Bucky chose one of the cards and walked to the cash register. He had seen the cashier several times before, an attractive young man who always tried to make conversation with him. Casual things, the weather, if Bucky had seen some new movie and then he would complement Bucky on his Old Norse.

Adorable but Bucky knew that he was exaggerating. Today wasn’t any different. “Are you going to join the festivities?”

Strange, there had been so much talk about the festivities at work, that Bucky was almost surprised that normal people were also affected by it. Only a couple of weeks left, the city was slowly starting to buzz and Bucky couldn’t deny that he was looking forward to it. “I’m afraid that I’ll have to work during the main event.”

The cashier showed real disappointment. “Oh, that’s unfortunate. It’s going to be extraordinary. Missing it would be a shame.”

Bucky smiled apologetically and handed over a few notes to pay for his things before he said goodbye. Another short stop at home to put the groceries away, then Bucky wrote a few rather clumsy but heartfelt words on the card before leaving his apartment again and getting into his car. It was a Thursday and Bucky had to get to the other end of the city, so that was definitely going to take more than 20 minutes. In this aspect Valhalla wasn’t different from any other major city in the world – traffic was hell.

Bucky turned on the radio, started humming to the first song that came up. He was going to be on time, there was no rush and Bucky enjoyed the mere knowledge that he didn’t have to go to work today. Which didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to see the embassy, it was on his way to the restaurant. Bucky glanced at the building while passing by and he wasn’t surprised to see a small gathering in front of the fence. That was a very normal thing now, an almost daily affair. Non-violent and organised protests. Bucky forgot them as soon as the embassy wasn’t in his field of vision anymore.

Thanks to a new construction site Bucky needed 10 minutes longer than planned, but at least he instantly found a good parking lot right next to the restaurant. After getting the present out of the trunk Bucky entered the restaurant, looking for his friend.

“Bucky, here!”

Already here, of course. Now Bucky was the unpunctual American. “Hey, sorry for being late.”

Enar made a dismissive gesture and kissed Bucky on the cheek before sitting down again.
“I know it’s a little late, but here’s your birthday present. Happy birthday again.” Bucky placed the little bag on the table and Enar immediately broke into a soft smile. “Wow, thanks. I guess I am supposed to say that you shouldn’t have, but I love presents. Especially when it’s cards for the Depeche Mode concert.”

“You could just pretend for one second that you don’t know what I got you?”

“No.”

Bucky smiled to himself, enjoying the happy expression in Enar’s eyes. “Alright… how are you doing? And how is Ginna?”

Hearing Bucky’s question Enar smiled brightly. “I’m good, thanks. Things are great. We had a check-up last week, the baby’s doing fine.”

Good news all over, Bucky was glad. “That’s great to hear. Still no idea if it’s going to be a boy or a girl?”

“No, we don’t want to know.”

“You mean Ginna doesn’t want to know.”

“Exactly.” Enar sighed dramatically, but then smirked. “Doesn’t matter anyway. He or she is doing fine, that’s the most important thing. How are things for you?”

To be honest, there was nothing new to tell. “As always pretty much. I’m doing fine. I wouldn’t say no to a week on a Caribbean island, but that’s about it.”

Enar reacted with a soft laugh. “Well, who doesn’t?”

It was real bliss to hang out with Enar again, Bucky lamented the fact that they rarely had the opportunity to spend time together. Enar was the first Asgardian friend he had made and Bucky was eager to catch up with him. As it turned out Enar hadn’t so many new things to tell, the most amazing thing that was going to happen to him was only two months away, so at the moment Enar’s life consisted of waiting for the baby. Which was a very good way to pass time. Bucky liked listening to his excitement that was also clearly audible even when he wasn’t talking about Ginna or the baby. He was completely wrapped up in telling Bucky about the new bicycle which he had bought when the waitress was serving them their meals.

Bucky raised an eyebrow at how much meat there was on Enar’s plate. As far as he knew Enar had never been a vegetarian, but he was under the impression that he was a very healthy eater. A lot of green stuff. Enar must have noticed something about Bucky’s expression, because he laughed and sheepishly shrugged. “Ginna takes healthy eating during the pregnancy extremely serious. She has hundreds of list what she can’t and what she can eat and how many vitamins are necessary… I know that stuff is important, but… it’s a chore. I can’t eat whatever I want either… at least not right next to her, because that would upset her. So whenever I am out, I eat all the stuff I don’t get at home.”

“I see. She takes this very seriously?”

Enar had already shoved a fork full of his meat into his mouth and by glancing at his plate Bucky could see that it was definitely cooked rare. Sure no pregnant woman would go near that. Bucky wouldn’t either, he didn’t like the taste of blood while chewing on a steak.

When Enar had swallowed his big bite he pulled a face, which had probably nothing to do with the food. “Yeah, it’s kind of strenuous. Sure, I want her and the kid to be healthy, but before every meal
and every shopping trip it’s an endless discussion. Ginna worries a lot and with the… You know, let’s not talk about that.” Bucky could obviously see him biting his tongue and that had never happened before. Over something as trivial as food? “No, come on, what were you about to say?”

Bucky was trained to notice suspicious behaviour, but pretty much everybody would have been able to tell that Enar was feeling uncomfortable. “It’s just… with the new trade agreement with the US Ginna is worried about what might end up in the supermarkets in the future. Genetically modified vegetables or that this stuff might be used to feed animals that end up on our plates. She’s right, you know. That’s probably going to happen and it’s pretty worrying. Especially since we’re going to have a kid now…”

Shifting in his seat Bucky knew that he was acting ridiculous, he personally had nothing to do with the policy, but since he was American he instantly felt uneasy. “I see… uhm… but there is no guarantee that the food safety regulations are going to be altered.”

“Oh come on, Bucky. That’s nothing against you, but we got fucked over by the States in this agreement. We gave the companies a whole lot of influence over our laws and it’s business – they are going to use it if they can make profit. It sucks and now it’s weird, because you are working for the embassy. Let’s talk about anything else but stupid politics and start eating your food. You’re missing out. It’s delicious.”

Nodding Bucky did just that, but he nevertheless couldn’t quite shake off that feeling of discomfort. Technically Bucky had nothing to do with all of these developments and yet he wouldn’t be surprise if not all people were going to differentiate.

“So what are you going to do tonight? I’m probably going to rub my wife’s feet, tell her that she looks fantastic and then spend another night without sex. Not complaining, only stating facts.”

Bucky swallowed a laugh and he definitely wasn’t going to ask any questions. Sometimes Enar liked to randomly say things like that, something that Bucky had gotten used to. It was an Asgardian thing, they were very open about their private lives, at least among their friends. “Not quite how I’m planning to spend the night.”

“Uh, care to share?”

“No, I’m not really doing anything.” Bucky shrugged, absently poking his food with his fork and quickly stopped that as he realised what he was doing. “Just meeting another friend tonight.”

“Say that again without torturing your food and look me in the face?”

Feeling like he had been caught lying Bucky met Enar’s eyes, not missing the amused sparkle in them. “Okay, it’s kinda strange. I don’t know… It might be a date, but probably not.”

Enar frowned in response. “Alright, I have no idea how that works for you guys. All I know from American… dating is what I’ve seen in movies. Here we’re pretty clear about if we’re going to meet to hang out or to have a date.”

“Yeah, because to you is almost worse than a crime to date two people at once.” Bucky knew it was a bad joke as soon as the words had left his mouth. He should know better, had had been living here for over a year.

Naturally Enar looked dead serious when he answered. “Because it fucks up your luonto. Anyway, you have to give me a little bit more information. Is it a date or not and why aren’t you sure?”

Bucky used his hands to indicate that he had no idea. “We’ve already met a couple of times and
usually I’m good at reading signals, but… I can tell if he is interested or if I’m just interpreting things wrong.”

“Kind of wishful thinking?”

“Might be. How did you ask Ginna out?”

“I didn’t. She walked up to me in a club and told me that she already knew exactly how our markings would look like when we would get married.”

“That’s… kind of creepy.”

“I know. Had to invite her to a drink straight away.”

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Bucky checked his watch although he already knew that he was too early. Not too much of a bad thing, since most tables of the bar were occupied. It was always a busy place, far away from the tourist areas, which Bucky liked a lot. The more time he spent in Valhalla the more he enjoyed hanging out with the locals. Well, obviously there were always exceptions. For a couple of weeks now Bucky was playing the thought of requesting to spend another term here. A rather unusual demand. Then again, nobody was waiting for him back at home and there hadn’t been a day in Valhalla that Bucky hadn’t got at least some enjoyment out of.

Sitting down at a small table Bucky gave the waitress a little sign. She instantly came over to him and asked him what he wanted. Against his better judgement Bucky ordered a beer and he didn’t miss how the waitress raised her left eyebrow when she heard his accent. Well, Bucky was probably never going to lose it, so much about that.

The service was very fast, so Bucky was sipping on his beer only one minute later and now all he could do was wait. Unfortunately that was one of the things Bucky had absolutely no talent for. Yet he didn’t want to be that person who was constantly staring at their phone or to pretend to write messages, so other people wouldn’t get the impression that he was lonely or sitting here alone, depressed, getting drunk. Instead Bucky let his eyes travel across the bar and he quickly focused on the table right next to his own.

Five men in their forties, everyone a glass of beer in front of them, talking loudly and with big gestures. After work meeting? Bucky couldn’t help it but to catch fragments of their conversation. They were talking really loudly and passionately. That was a good way to pass time and language training. Leaning back Bucky brought his glass to his lips and tried to make out what they were saying.

“… all about money. All I hear is ‘Good for the economy’. Economy. Economy. Economy. Fuck that. You gotta look after your people first. If we’re doing fine, the economy is doing fine. I’m so tired of hearing it’s good for the average guy when only big companies are profiting from it. As always.”

“Exactly. I’m not going to be able to buy a bigger car, but my boss will get another Mercedes.”

“A fucking car is the least of my worries. Yesterday I’ve read that article in the Morgenrot and I still can’t wrap my mind about it.”

“What about?”

“About how the elimination of costume duties. The author explained how US-products are going to
flood our market since they’re way cheaper and it could lead to a lot of small factories and companies going out of business. Asgardian farmers will get the worst of it. Pretty much to look forward to. Then he explained how American companies have actually gained the right to interfere with our laws. Give me a second, I need to remember that correctly… Right, the example was about Uruguay where the government did everything to make their people stop smoking, so they made it incredibly expensive and made it illegal to sell cigarette packages without gross pictures on it that show what smoking can do to your lungs. Well, turns out they probably won’t be able to do that any longer, because of some stupid bilateral agreement Uruguay and Switzerland… Philip Morris was able to sue the entire country, because they were doing damage to their business. That’s what’s going to happen to us too. It’s all about allowing big companies to make big profit, so they will invest in Asgard. Nobody cares that they are going to destroy our own businesses and rewrite our laws…”

“It’s a disgrace.”

“The king must be getting senile…”

“I have as much respect for the king as everybody else, but let’s face it – he is old and he doesn’t have the power anymore to stand up to real challenges. Just look at the Jotuns. He either has to get them under control or give into some of their demands. They aren’t going to stop on their own. Yet nothing is done about it. With the Americans, it’s exactly the same. They smelled the money and Odin just doesn’t have the strength anymore to keep them in check. There could have come some good from the agreement, but he rolled over…”

“I don’t think so… about the agreement, I mean. We had no reason to revitalise the relations with the Americans. Nothing good ever comes from them.”

“Now that’s an exaggeration.”

“Really? Didn’t you listen to anything we’ve said? The standards in pretty much every public sector are going to crash down, but I’m exaggerating…”

“And we still don’t have a new secretary of state…”

“Yeah, wonder why… Guess the king didn’t want anybody to voice another opinion until the agreement and the arms deal were through. Believe me, in three days, they’re going to announce the new secretary.”

“Another opinion… everybody has another opinion than the king on this topic.”

“Odin’s a good king, he did a lot for this country for the last 40 years, so it’s a shame that this is probably going to be the last meaningful action of his reign.”

“Maybe things will change when he steps down.”

“Unlikely, the crown prince isn’t of a different stamp. I wouldn’t be surprised if a lot of the new American friendly sentiment comes from him.”

“He’s already in a relationship with an American, he’s only going to be more influenced than his father.”

“Where did he even meet this woman?”

“Who cares as longs as she stays out of the affairs of state?”

“Well, I’m hoping that Thor as king will be more inclined to listen to the Duke of Glæsisvellir. At
least one member of the royal family with some common sense.”

“That’s a reason why I am slightly optimistic. The princes have a good relationship, that could lead to a more balanced…”

Somebody stepped up to his table and Bucky winced, taken out of the conversation that he hadn’t even been part in.

“Hey, I’m sorry I am late. I couldn’t immediately find the place.” Steve looked slightly out of breath, his cheeks were flushed as if he had run from the parking lot until here. With a smile on his lips Bucky shook his head. “Don’t worry. You’re here now, right.”
Hey everybody,

Loki has an eventful day... and it's still the last day of relaxation that he'll get :)

Have fun

The alarm clock was beeping and Loki hit it with his bare hand. How long had he been already awake? Hours? Probably. Sleeping was overrated anyway. Rubbing both hands over his eyes Loki got out of bed and headed for his bathroom. His reflection greeted him and that wasn’t a nice sight. Loki was only 28 years old, one sleepless night shouldn’t cause such dark shadows beneath his eyes. Taking off his clothes Loki stepped under the shower and hoped that would make him feel more like a person. That took a bigger effort than usual.

After finishing his show Loki got dressed and another look showed him a slight improvement. They probably had to put some make-up on him before he was going to visit the school. Thor was probably already waiting for him and Loki hated showing up late. Loki didn’t meet a single soul on his way to the dining room, normally the palace would already be buzzing with life. That was never a good sign.

Thor was indeed already sitting at the table when Loki joined him. “Morning. What is father doing?”

“Good morning. What do you mean?”

“Did you see anyone around? Usually it’s only this quiet if father demands their attention or if they are avoiding him.”

Shrugging softly Thor reached out for his cup of coffee. “I don’t know. I haven’t heard anything and I haven’t seen an article in the newspaper that could potentially make him mad… Sit down, you’re making me weary.”

For once Loki did was his brother told him, the exact same second one of the maids entered, bowing her head and giving Loki a smile. “What may I get you, your highness?”

“The usual. Thank you very much.”

“We didn’t have time to talk yesterday. Did anything special come up?” Thor made it sound so casual, but Loki’s reaction was anything but. Those piercing blue eyes came to his mind, the soft yet deep voice and all the words that had left his lips. Loki’s chest got a little tighter. No, his heart wasn’t going to beat faster now.

“Nothing of importance.” That wasn’t a lie, not really. “Karlis talked to me. The Danish want to get the tax agreement back on the table.”

“Yes, that sounds reasonable. The Italians were chewing my ear off for the most of the night. Casual affair, right… I’m so glad that there is nothing on my schedule today. I’m going to spend the afternoon with Jane, she wants to check out the museum to learn more about our family.”
Banning the blue eyes from his head Loki smiled. “How convenient that we have a museum for that… I have a lot of work to do, unlike you.”

“You are visiting a school for hearing impaired children. It would be shameful to complain about that.” Thor pointed out and Loki rolled his eyes. “I am not complaining, I am… Sorry.”

“It’s also shameful to not turn your phone off when you’re having breakfast with your brother.” Thor’s good mood was almost too much for Loki to take right now, especially since he had just received a text from Balder.

“What’s wrong? You’re making that face. I can never tell what it means, so you gotta help me out.” Still amused while Loki put his phone on the table, debating whether he should actually tell Thor. No, Loki did want to talk about it. “It’s Balder.”

He could see Thor biting his lip to not make a stupid comment with the only goal to make Loki blush. “What did he write?”

“According to you… He thought I looked a bit… pale yesterday. Checking on me I guess… I hate that.”

“Yes, because you are crazy. Were you feeling bad last night? You didn’t say anything?”

“I was perfectly fine… Okay, maybe I felt dizzy for a second and he noticed. That’s it.”

“So he is looking out for you, that’s nice. He’s into you and at some point you gotta find out if you’re into him too. That’s what mother wants, isn’t it?” Thor winked at him and Loki snorted. These guys in a relationship were always talking about the love life of other people in the most condescending way.

“I know that’s what mother wants, that’s the problem. He is sweet and it’s impossible to notice that great waist… but the second I agree on dating him… We can’t just wait and see if it works out. Mother hasn’t said it out loud, but she wants me to marry him. Imagine how this goes down if I decide one month later that it’s not working out. Which is a very realistic possibility.”

Now Thor was smiling at him and Loki wouldn’t admit it, but it was somehow reassuring. “You told me that father couldn’t force me to end my relationship. It’s not any different. Nobody can force you to stay in a relationship if you don’t want to. You never bothered with that kind of stuff before.”

“Yes, because until now it was me who chose my boyfriends…” Loki knew he was grumbling and that was childish. Looking at the situation from another perspective showed clearly enough that he was acting like a jerk. Balder was worried about him and Loki owed him a response. He felt rather clumsy when he started typing a response.

Don’t worry. I feel fine

The second Loki put his phone back down, it started buzzing. Thor reacted with a mischievous grin and Loki narrowed his eyes at him. “Don’t even start.”

Glad to hear that. I’m going to check out the new impressionist exposition at the Donnar today. I’d be very happy if you joined me

A shiver was running down his spine, one that wasn’t quite able to define. Good or bad. Excited or scared. “He wants to visit the impressionist exposition with me.” Loki mumbled inaudibly and Thor didn’t have the decency to not start laughing. “How dare he to invite you to the exposition you said you wanted to visit only a few days ago?”
“I wish he’d be clear about it. Is this a date or not?”

“Since when are you so slow to pick up on things? Yesterday he barely left your side and when he did, he was always looking at you. Yes, Loki, it’s a date. He likes you and it’d be only fair to decide what you want. It’s just a date. Maybe he’ll end up deciding that you aren’t that great to begin with. Yeah, I know, what are the odds?”

Thor had a point, it wasn’t all up to Loki. Even if Balder was interested now, that could immediately change if he noticed some of Loki’s darker habits. Like being a sarcastic asshole. “Okay, I guess you are right… He is indeed sweet and… harmless.”

“You say that as if that was a bad thing.”

There, first proof of Loki being a bad person. Sometimes you had to jump over your own shadow. Loki’s thumbs hovered over the screen of his phone, hesitating another second. I would like that. 3 o’clock? Meet you there?

Balder must have been waiting for the answer, because he responded immediately. Great, I’m looking forward to see you.

Biting his lips Loki took a breath. “Okay, let’s see how that goes down…”

“You know… it’s kind of cute to see you like this. No guy has ever made you act that awkwardly…” Thor was in luck that Loki’s breakfast was served that moment or he would have heard some very unflattering words.

About one hour later Thor was off to spend a nice day with Jane and Loki was staring out of the window of the limousine. It wasn’t like he was dreading the meeting with Balder. Quite the opposite. Spending time in his company was nice and fun, but Loki felt his mother’s expectations every time Balder was with him. Weighing him down.

As if that wasn’t enough. There was Helblindi’s attempt to confuse him and Karlis’ claim that Loki was the person to go to if he wanted to discuss state matters. Had the Dane noticed something that Loki wasn’t aware of? Was Helblindi telling the same story? In the end, none of that mattered.

An almost unknown feeling spread inside his chest, nagging at his insides. Why hadn’t he told Thor about Helblindi’s statements? Whatever the Jotun was trying to achieve, Loki was already playing into his hands by keeping things from Thor. So why was he doing this? Loki couldn’t act like none of it mattered, he was constantly thinking about it.

His thumb was running over the edge of his phone, itching to write another message. To talk about this with someone. Obviously he couldn’t.

Can I ask for a piece of advice?

Was everybody just dying for a text message from him? Even the biggest weapon manufacturer in the whole world?

The answer is yes, low-cut jeans would look amazing on you

Snorting Loki shook his head. How on Earth are you a certified genius?

Everybody who enters college at the age of 17 gets that label. You should try it

This was probably a waste of time, but Loki couldn’t help himself. Do you always get what you
want? Loki had to think of the arms deal and felt sick to his stomach.

Yes, not a single thing left on the bucket list. How are your scrapped knees btw?


Aww, cute. Are you confused?

Forget it

I ask for it. People tend to instantly say yes

That couldn’t be the case all the time. Really?

Believe me, I once met a real prince and told him that I wanted a blowjob. He was like – okay. All you gotta do is ask. It helps if you’re extremely handsome. So you should be fine.

Well, that wasn’t surprising. And except for sex?

Easy – you have to go after it. Most people don’t actually do that. I am shocked that you don’t know that

To be completely honest – Loki was shocked too.

Thanks, I guess

I’ll let you know how to repay me

Proving his point already.

The limousine stopped and Loki’s guard opened the door. Time to focus, the kids were probably excited to see him, so they deserved all of Loki’s attention.

Although Loki’s visit was only supposed to last about two hours, he doubled the time. Looking at himself Loki didn’t see a person who was especially good with kids, but they were charming, showed him around the school and even taught him to say a couple of things in sign language. That felt the slightest bit awkward, but overall it was one of Loki’s duties that he found rather enjoyable.

Unfortunately he only realised on his way back to the palace that he had hardly any time left to get ready for his… meeting with Balder. Within half an hour Loki took another shower and got lost in his wardrobe. Why was he going through this again? It was ridiculous that he even thought more than two seconds about what he was going to wear. Casual. Jeans, a green t-shirt and a black shirt over it. That would more than suffice.

During the drive to the museum Loki kept his mind busy by studying the newspaper, this way he was completely relaxed when the ride had ended. “Would you mind to become completely invisible inside the gallery? More invisible than usual?”

The two guards nodded and Loki nervously tapped his fingers against the door before getting out of the car. For now one of them was in front of him, the other one behind. Loki felt sorry for the lady behind the reception whose eyes grew ridiculously wide as she recognized him.

“Your highness” She breathed out shakily and Loki offered her a smile to put her out her misery.

“I’m just here to look at the artwork. Please, no attention whatsoever.”
“Of course, you’re highness, but… I have to inform the director… he would be furious if he didn’t know about your presence.” Her eyes were pleading and Loki understood that he had to help her out, although he really didn’t want to. Although it might be easier to talk to the director straight away. “Alright, I’d like to see the director, but I’ll join him in his office.”

“Whatever you desire, your highness.”

The director of the museum was of course so immensely honoured by Loki’s visit and it was such a shame that Loki hadn’t called before, they could have cleared the gallery for him. Exactly what Loki didn’t want. He was just here for the art, a visit as Loki Búrison, a private person. Not the prince. It was impossible for the director to hide his disappointment, he would have loved to show Loki around personally, but he was polite and promised that Loki could mingle with the other visitors.

When that was done Loki was already 10 minutes late. Fortunately he found Balder in the first room of the exposition and Loki was glad that he wouldn’t have to do a lot of explaining this way. “Hi, I am sorry, I got held up.”

No way Loki would have expected Balder to upset about him being late, so the sweet smile was no surprise. By now it was hard to think of Balder without it. “Just glad you could make it, I know you are very busy. How are you?”

Loki felt soft lips brushing over his cheek and for a second he let his thoughts wander and trying to imagine it. The support would be there, the possibility to slip into bed, talk about what had driven him up the whole, what was causing him to burn and to hunger and the comfort would be guaranteed. But the understanding? The challenge…

“I am doing fine. Thanks. Let’s take a look at the paintings?”

Balder nodded and Loki was determined to concentrate on the art, he had been looking forward to visit this exposition. Loki didn’t have a real affinity for paintings, but impressionism was exactly after Loki’s taste. A style that could produce something incredibly beautiful with very little.

The first room was dedicated to Gustave Caillebotte and Loki slowly moved from painting to painting, admiring the works for looking so realistic although you could see every stroke of the brush.

Only when Loki walked into the second room he noticed that nobody had spoken up him. Not Balder, not one of the other visitors. Looking around Loki saw Balder standing in front of painting that showed the coast of a southern country. Fields to be harvested were surrounding it and it instantly made Valhalla seem so much colder.

“It’s marvellous. I dunno, I’ve always preferred scenery to portraits. It makes me want to catch the next plane to go to Spain or Southern France…” Balder turned to Loki who nodded. “Yeah, that would be nice. After all that time in England, Russia and now in Valhalla… do you even remember how the sun looks like?”

“Hardly…” Balder laughed and then shrugged. “But it’s home, so it’s not too bad. Don’t feel like getting out of here every once in a while? Just lying at the beach. Sipping a drink and letting the sun shine on your face?”

A nice thought if a giant flaw. “I would get sun burnt instantly… and I actually like the cold. Also I suck at beach volleyball… the humiliation of my 243 defeats against Thor still hurt terribly.”

Balder smiled in amusement. “Keeping count?”
“You bet. Thor feels nowhere as comfortable as on the beach… I was waiting for the winter so I could do some biathlon. Instead of volleyball where I always fall on my face.”

That was enough to cause Balder to laugh and there was a gentle glimmer in his eyes. “I could teach you, you know? I am pretty good at it.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

Balder shrugged. “I was never any good at shooting… I didn’t have to serve unlike you. Also beach volleyball is far sexier than biathlon.”

Now that was hard to debate and a grin made it on Loki’s face, eager to have some banter. “I look amazing in my biathlon gear.”

“I wouldn’t dare to doubt that for a second.” At first there was some flirtation audible in his voice, but then the change was immediate and couldn’t be missed. The softness in his gaze was almost too much to bear for Loki, something he hadn’t experienced that way before. “You are always lovely.”

“Thank you, I…”

They got interrupted and Loki inwardly cursed his guard, but he had no idea what he would have said. It would have been spontaneous, honest and now he was clueless.

“I am sorry, your highness, but your location has been tweeted and shared a few thousand times. Like this we might not be able to guarantee your security.”

Just wonderful. Loki sighed and Balder wanted to know if Loki wanted to leave. A security risk, sure, but Loki had walked around the city alone before. Granted, the atmosphere hadn’t been that tensed at the time. Balder was here with him and next time Loki would try to stay undercover. “I guess that would be a good idea. Sorry.”

They made their way towards the exit, Loki now with Balder again between the guards. The car was parked in front of the main entrance, a few people had gathered there, nothing Loki would usually worry about. Most of them instantly made a step aside, bowed his head to him and the car door was already open when…

“Your highness!”

“Jöfurr!”

A word that sounded different than anything else, so clearly Jotun. Loki’s head turned around while his guard had already taken a new position, hindering the two young girls from getting any closer to him. They were panting, out of breath, as if they had been running for quite some time.

“Stay back.”

Ignoring the guards the girls still tried to approach him, waving sheets of paper at him. “Tell your father we have a right to our own language!”

“We are not Valhalla’s slaves!”

“Son of a thief!”

The guard put his arm against the car door, to block all access to Loki when one of the girls made another attempt and her face was suddenly right in front of Loki’s although the door was between
them. Wide blue eyes, tousled black hair and she could only be 19 years old. She held up the sheets while the second guard shoved Loki into his car. The door was slammed shut and the car started moving.

Loki’s heart wasn’t beating any faster, at no point he felt afraid, the girl clearly hadn’t had any inclination to hurt him. They had wanted him to listen. Looking down at the sheet in his hand Loki witnessed another cry for Jotunheim’s independence. Technically the sheet only talked about their right to teach Jǫtnar, but Loki could read between the lines.

A wince went through his body when he felt another hand on his wrist. “Are you okay?” Balder’s blue eyes were looking at him with concern and Loki could only think about another pair of blue eyes. So much more intense and filled with guile.

“Yes, I’m good.”

Balder didn’t take his hand away for the rest of the ride and Loki couldn’t say that he minded.

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The ache in his shoulders was the testament to a very long day and yet Loki wasn’t done. Dinner was going to be served in an hour and Loki had invited Balder to join them. Until then Loki had a few moments to himself and he desperately needed them.

Sitting down at his desk Loki rubbed his forehead, discarding the sheet from the Jotuns in the dustbin. He felt a headache coming up, his skin was a little too tight and his hands bound. It would be so easy to fix, if only somebody was going to hand Loki a hammer and some nails.

Shaking his head Loki reached out for his quill and his writing paper. There was somebody he could talk to after all.

_Heill skaltu for-eldra,_

_To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,_

_I know my place, the responsibilities, the limits and the power. Though I cannot move my hands right now, I know it will not stay like this forever. Things are about to change and they have to._

_I look at my brother and I don’t want the role that was chosen for him and at the same time I find myself thinking that it would be so much easier. Would it?_

_Arrogance is a vice that one can hardly be cured of. Until yesterday I’ve looked down on all of them. So easy to read and to play or to upset. Especially to upset. Then one second later it turns out I am one of them, I have strings around my wrists and ankles that can be pulled and I want to cut myself loose and I don’t know how._

_Even now I get angry with myself for thinking about it, for wasting my time. Everybody’s time. Things are changing, my mind should be on that, but I am distracted. Which was the plan. That’s not the role I have chosen for me._

_It is not._

_Yet the words that passed the Jotun’s lips will not leave my memory. None of it. Just a couple of words and eyes blue as ice are enough to make me crumble. Like everybody else. Although I can_
look right through him and his obvious intentions, they still hit their mark.

I catch myself thinking about the possibility that I want more. It’s a scary thought. Wanting. Makes you vulnerable, weak, inattentive. It distracts you from the things that you are responsible for. I know that and I still can’t stop wanting.

I know my place

Please, strengthen my luonto and send me my fylgja to guide me

Your son, Loki

Loki put the quill away and put the letter into an envelope. Slowly he made his way through the palace until he stepped outside, into the most private part of their garden. A short path until he reached the shrine entirely made out of marble. Loki gritted his teeth while pushing open the heavy gate. The cool air inside engulfed him as Loki kneeled down in front of the black plaque, his eyes only absently scanning over the names of his ancestors. Softly Loki mumbled the salutations and the oath of obeisance. Eventually he put down the letter, feeling immediately lither.
Hello everybody,

22 chapters of build-up is enough, don't you say? :)

The situation in Asgard gets rather serious and Tony stops working for a couple of moments

Have fun

It was a bad sign when the number 68 turned into 686668668 within a single second. Maybe, just maybe Tony was in need of some sleep. Well, there was only one way to go about this. Make more coffee.

Half-heartedly Tony got up from his chair and walked over to the coffee machine. No more clean cups. Not that much of a surprise. Unbothered Tony put on some coffee, rubbing on hand over his face to find out that his usually nicely trimmed goatee was now surrounded by a rough stubble. Nobody was going to see him in his workshop anyway.

The coffee was hot enough to burn his lips, but that would only help him to stay awake. Sitting back down Tony took a look at his work so far. The prototype was still far from finished. Until now Tony was content with what he had created. Despite never making a mistake Tony had double checked all of calculations. The possibility of the reactor not going to work was zero.

Tony was an expert in making mistakes. His entire vita was full of it. Sleeping with a woman who had been working for the New York Post and not calling her the next day. Mistake. Not that Tony would have liked to see her again, but his life would have definitely been a little easier without a reporter out for his blood.

No, scratch that, there were hundreds of those. Scorned blonde women who also happened to be a reporter and who had a left-wing agenda. Hadn’t stopped her from jumping into bed with him.

These were the kinds of mistakes that Tony made over and over again. Or telling business associates that they could shove their offers where the sun doesn’t shine. It was fascinating how Pepper always managed to clean up the mess he left behind. Anyway, yes, lots of mistake, but never when it came down to his work. Nothing Tony had ever created had been less than perfect. Even his father had known that although he would have been never able to admit that.

The old scumbag. Howard had always desired a child prodigy, so he could claim that his intellectual superiority was indeed in his genes. Then Tony had proven himself to be brilliant in every existing field, earning praise and frustration equally from his teacher and Howard had snarled. Too bad when you had to realise that your child was going to be even a bigger genius than yourself. That had been too much to take.

So Tony had no reason to doubt his newest creation. The statistics were definitely in his favour and yet he looked at the reactor and couldn’t fight down the lump in his throat. This was something else
entirely. Nothing about this little thing on his desk was lethal or meant to take anybody’s life. Quite the opposite. Why shouldn’t Tony be capable of creating just that? There was nothing he couldn’t build and changing the world should be the smallest task for a Stark.

If he wasn’t going to be constantly interrupted.

Colonel Rhodes – incoming call

Naturally, when Tony was in his workshop, only four different people were able to reach him and he was still annoyed by the interruption. After Tony had clicked on the icon and a new window popped up, revealing Rhodey’s face. “What’s going on? I haven’t heard from you in days.”

“And people still claim that it’s me who has bad manners. Normally a conversation is started by ‘Hello and how do you do?’”

“No need for that. The bags under your eyes have already told me that you haven’t slept in like… three days?”

“Damn, not even scratching at my own record there.” Tony replied casually and took a sip from his coffee. The disgusting liquid was burning down his throat.

“Seriously, Tones. Before you went off to Asgard, you told me that we were going to meet up when you’d be back. You still owe me dinner for keeping Ross of your back.”

“That man is even more unpleasant company than me.”

“We’re not talking about the general, we’re talking about you and how you’ve decided to drop from the edge of the earth. I hate it when you do that. You have a phone, use it. I don’t even insist on a call. Send a fucking text.”

Sure, Rhodey was pissed at him, but not more than usual. He had known Tony all his life, he knew that it was completely normal for him to look himself up for a couple of days and to only come back out when he had achieved whatever he was trying to do. Next thing on the agenda – changing the world.

“Sorry about that, but I have a new rule. Only texting with princes.”

Rhodey let out an annoyed sigh that Tony only knew too well. “At least you’re fine. Better than your RAisierer. What happened to it? Did it explode? Or your bed? Did it burn down?”

That speech also sounded quite familiar. “No, my chair is just way more comfortable. No time to sleep. Can’t you anything yet, but believe me… a few hours of sleep lost over this… completely worth it.”

This was the part where there actually conversation was going to start. Rhodey slightly quirked an eyebrow. “You’re working on some new designs?”

“You could say so. Definitely something new.”

“Something the military might be interested in?”

Tony snorted in response. Of course that question had to come. Rhodey was a military man with all his heart and he had been vital for Tony to get some of his most important connections. That didn’t mean that everything Tony built had to be a weapon. Well, nobody but Tony might think so, but his own opinion mattered the most.
"I got it. Any chance you are going to take a break tonight? I want to devour a steak and catch up. You're in?"

"Sorry, Teddy Bear, you’d have to drag my cold dead body out of here. I’ll call you when I’m done."

"That could take weeks with you."

"36 hours. Tops. It’s just a prototype." And it already looked beautiful. Some people were actually visiting the museums for art. Tony had art right here in front of him.

Rhodey pulled a face, clearly displeased. "Sure, if you say so. I know the drill. Do me a favour and don’t forget to eat."

When Tony opened his mouth Rhodey wouldn’t give him the opportunity to speak. "Coffee does not count as food."

"Fine, food. It’s on the list. I’ll call you back, revolutionary work has to be done and it won’t do itself."

Again, Rhodey didn’t look happy, but he knew Tony too well to argue. He was a lost case, both of them knew that. "Take care and if I don’t hear from you in 36 hours – I’ll knock down your door."

"Noted. Bye."

Tony ended the call and went back to work. The coffee had done its job, Tony’s vision was now perfectly clear and it took about two seconds for him to be back in the zone, completely lost in what he was doing. There was nothing as satisfying or as captivating as his own vision become reality, gaining shape and an actual body. Marvellous.

It felt like being pulled from a most wonderful dream when that nagging ringing made a second appearance. What the hell. Rhodey had called him about two minutes ago and now…

Oh, the digital clock on the screen told him that four hours had passed. Another thing that happened all the time. Tony’s hand was already on the mouse to reject the call when he saw the ID of the caller.

Tony froze, his thoughts already circling around what kind of emergency might have occurred to have the kid calling him at half past nine pm. Sitting down Tony answered the call. "What’s up, kid? Shouldn’t you already be in bed? If I remember correctly you have a big day tomorrow."

The first glimpse of Peter’s face told Tony that he was no going to get a lot of the teenage angst that he would have loved to avoid. Peter was gnawing on his lower lip, holding his phone to close to his face, so Tony could see every single pore. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Stark… do you have a minute?"

"Kid, you’ve already consumed 50 seconds of my precious time. Since I’ve told you to only call me personally when shit is hitting the fan, I hope the world is ending. Is the world ending, Peter?"

The teenager visibly swallowed and Tony had to search in his deepest memories to remember if he had ever seen somebody who was feeling so obviously uncomfortable. In all honesty Peter was looking terrified. Which was okay, he was 15 years old, Tony had to remind himself of that. Patience wasn’t one of his virtues and most of the time Peter needed exactly that.

"No, the world is not ending… I mean… Mr. Stark, I’m freaking out. Seriously I’m going crazy. I don’t know if I can do this."
If there hadn’t been a camera Tony would have rolled his eyes. Was there anything that he despised more than humbleness. It was good for nothing, didn’t evoke respect and allowed other people to walk right over you. In Peter’s case though it wasn’t quite the same. Too young, still so unsure when it came down to his abilities. Not a hint of arrogance. Tony wasn’t going ruin that, but it worried him just the tiniest bit.

“Okay, slow down. You can’t do what?”

Peter lowered his eyes, Tony could see how his cheeks flushed from embarrassment. “I can’t talk to the dean. I’m going to make a fool out of myself. I’ve looked at the designs again and it’s complete crap. I’m not going to impress anyone with that, I have no idea what I am doing…”

Two steps away from a complete panic attack, Tony got that. Which wasn’t good. Tony could do the compliments, petting somebody on the shoulder and saying ‘great job’. Comforting a kid and making him feel good about himself wasn’t something Tony was supposed to do. That could only end up in disaster. Breathing in softly Tony tried to keep his voice perfectly calm and perhaps even a little bit smoothing.

“Listen, Parker, you are talking nonsense. I looked your stuff over and what did I call it? Did I call it crap?”

Peter was shifting around before slowly shaking his head. “No, you didn’t.”

“What did I say?”

“You said they were good…”

“No, which words did I use? Come on, spit it out, I know your memory is perfectly fine.”

Peter cleared his throat. “You said they were fucking awesome.”

“Exactly. Do you have any reason that I wasn’t serious? Or do you think that I am wrong? That I can’t tell if they’re good or not?”

That was just mean, he was giving Peter a real heart attack there. “No! Of course not! If anybody knows… Look, I just… I’ve never done anything like that before and instead of starting small… I have to talk to the MIT. What if I mess up? I’ll ruin my big chance and…” Peter’s voice turned into a whisper and once again he wasn’t able to meet Tony’s eyes. “I don’t want to make you look bad for even getting me the appointment…”

Now that was almost cute. Almost.

“Parker, I wouldn’t have got you the appointment if there was only the slightest bit of a chance that you might fuck it up.” That was true, Tony had no reason to doubt the kid’s abilities. Even if Peter was going to have nervous breakdown tomorrow and stormed out of the presentation, Tony would still be able to fix things. The kid had Tony Stark as a mentor. The absolute get out of jail card. Or into MIT.

“Thanks…”

Now the kid should feel better. He didn’t sound better though. “Something else you want to say? Spit it out.”

“There is nobody else I can talk about this. You know… nobody who would understand the mere concept. I feel stupid repeating the same stuff over and over again in front of the mirror. Could we…
Moments didn’t exist with Peter. He was going to be brilliant, but he would still feel unsure until he would have explained the entire concept to Tony. It didn’t matter that both of them knew it by heart. Tony glanced at the reactor on the table. Saving the world. Getting back in the zone. Doing what he wanted to do.

Unable to suppress a sigh Tony rubbed one hand over his face and shifted on his chair, so he would get more comfortable. “Okay, let’s get started.”

Peter’s eyes grew unnaturally wide. “What? Really?”

“Get started before I change my mind.”

***

A REM song, Thor was almost sure. There was a line about counting somebody’s eyelashes. Thor had never thought about that before. Some exaggerated lyrics about how it felt to be in love. At least Thor would have thought that some time ago. Now with Jane still fast asleep next to him, it made perfect sense. In this moment Thor felt completely content, just lying here and watching her sleep. The soft features of her face and how much he enjoyed her being close to him. There was no need to get up or to do anything else. Thor didn’t dare to reach out and touch her face or to do anything to wake her. Right now was one of these rare moments which definitely weren’t supposed to end.

So Thor started counting, realising that Jane had indeed lovely eyelashes.

Eventually Jane’s eyelids started to flicker and Thor realised that the moment wasn’t over, although she was awake now. “Morning…”

Sighing softly Jane stretched her arms and then smiled at Thor. “Good morning… these palace beds are really comfortable.”

Laughing Thor nodded. “Glad you like it. I would like you to spend a lot more time here…”

“Last night you were still worried about what your dad was going to say… about me spending the night here.”

True and that detail lay still heavily on Thor’s mind, but what was he going to do? One day Jane was going to be his wife and Thor didn’t need his father’s approval for that. Sure, he longed for it, but he would marry Jane even without it. Her staying at the palace was just the logical first step.

“Maybe, but now I can see how perfectly you’re fitting in here. I don’t think I’m going to let you out of here any time soon.”

Smiling Jane snuggled up to him, putting her head on his shoulder and Thor noticed once again how small she was. Almost tiny. Precious. “What’s on your schedule today?” Jane asked, not making any attempt to hide or suppress her yawn.

Schedule. That word was horrendous, it didn’t matter in which language. Normally Thor didn’t mind to go after his duties, but today he would love to spend the entire day in bed. Counting eyelashes. “Today is the meeting with the ministers of the parliament. They weekly present the agendas they’ve been working on to the king and he decides what to do about them. I need to be there too, because… yeah, that’s going to be my job.”
Thor was about to add the word ‘someday’ when he realised that it would sound too vague. Like something that maybe wasn’t about to happen. Thor would be king. Perhaps sooner than they all expected. By the end of the year?

There were endless rumors flying around and Thor didn’t know any more or less than the average Asgardian who was reading his newspaper every morning. It would be easy to simply ask his own father about his plans, but Thor didn’t dare to. He feared it would make him look eager when he wasn’t. His time would come and it definitely wasn’t that far away anymore.

Jane next to him shifted slightly around to get a better look at him. “It’s still kind of weird… knowing that you will rule an entire country one day.”

One day…

“Good weird or bad weird?”

“None of that. Just weird. Kings. Princes. Politicians. Those are the people you only ever talk about. You don’t expect to meet them. Least of all to fall in love with them. Those things don’t happen at all. Or they happen to someone else. Here we are.” Her smile was sheepish and incredibly sweet and Thor could not imagine being this close to anyone else.

“I’d like to tell you that it’s just a job, but it isn’t… It’s time consuming and demands one’s entire attention, every single bit. My father still managed to be a great dad and a good husband. I want to be a good king, I wanna be there for my people, but I’m also going to dedicate time to every other part of my life… Does that sound weird?”

Jane’s lips formed another smile and she shook her head. “No… it sounds good. I’m sure you’re going to be a good king.”

She kissed him and Thor pulled her close, ready to spend the time before breakfast the best way possible when his phone went off. Sighing in frustration Thor reached out and took a look at it.

Conference room – urgent

Meeting with the king

Within a second Thor was sitting up straight and opened the attachment. An urgent meeting with his father so early could only mean… Thor’s eyebrows shot up, for now he didn’t quite believe what he was reading. A definite surprise and it would have consequences. Of the worst kind.

His guts were twisting and Thor couldn’t deny a tingle of nervousness, thinking about joining his father to discuss this matter.

“What’s going on?” Jane was sitting up too, pulling up the sheet to cover herself.

“My father named a new secretary of state. I gotta talk to him… You’ll have to have breakfast without me. I am sorry.” Leaning over Thor kissed her before getting out of bed and heading for the bathroom. There was no time to take a shower, so Thor quickly got dressed, splashed his face with water and rinsed his mouth. Really not how he wanted to start the day, but a lot of other people weren’t going to leave him much of a choice.

Back in his room Thor kissed Jane one more time before rushing out. This was going to be bad. Right now Thor couldn’t see why his father had made that decision. Odin would definitely explain it to him, so it would make perfect sense, but in this moment Thor could only see a chain reaction of disaster.
The guards instantly opened the doors when they saw Thor approaching. Odin was sitting at the conference table, only barely looking up when Thor came towards him. “Father, I don’t…”

Instead of giving him the opportunity to embarrass himself Odin indicated Thor to sit down which he instantly did. Ever so casually Odin slid over a sheet of paper and Thor’s eyes took it all in.

An email. The emblem of the Ymirson family in the right top corner.

Yes, Thor had feared that would happen.

To his Royal Highness King Odin IV of Asgard,

The humiliation you bestowed today upon a fine and candid man cannot be interpreted as anything else than an insult against every child and adult that has been born a Jotun.

The patience and the endurance of the Jotun people is without limits, but after feeling this latest stroke from your whip – do not expect us to seek out another one.

The Lord of Jotunheim will always feel a stronger obligation to his people than to the king of Asgard.

Yours sincerely,

Laufey Ymirson, Lord of Jотuneim, descendent of the Lopthæna, Queen of Jотunheim and Asgard

Lowering the paper Thor found his father looking at him expectantly. His eyes weren’t giving anything away, almost as if the message didn’t evoke any sensation at all. Thor couldn’t claim the same. Using the phrase ‘yours sincerely’ in a letter to the king was an outrageous display of disrespect, but Thor knew that he couldn’t focus on merely the tone.

“What do you think of it?” Odin asked calmly and Thor cleared his throat. “It’s incredibly… theatric. Talking about a whip… I guess he means they are fed up… Laufey is taking your decision personally… which is ridiculous.”

Odin nodded slowly. “So what are we going to do about it?”

This was a test. Like everything else. Thor’s future and he would have to learn it right now. “Write a response. Not an excuse or explanation. Merely letting him know that the king’s decisions have nothing to do with him and that he isn’t in the position to question them…”

“Good, but we can’t expect him to not…”

The words died on Odin’s lips and it was the same reason as most of the time. Doors were flying open and Loki was bursting into the room, still in his fencing gear. Now there was no chance left to have a civil conversation. Face flushed, his hair a complete chaos and his green eyes were wild.

“Loki, you aren’t…”

“Why do I have to learn about this through a news app on my phone? Why would you choose another secretary of state than Leifsson? The Jotuns are already…”

“Have you forgotten how to enter a room, Loki? Your lack of manners is astounding.” Odin
interrupted him rather drily, his expression clearly showing how displeased he was and clearly Loki didn’t care. “I’m going to knock later. Father, this is absurd. The entire country was expecting Leifsson to be the secretary of state. Why would choose…”

“Am I obligated to fulfil the people’s expectations or to do what I think is the best for them?”

“He was the obvious choice!” Loki gesticulated wildly with his hands. “He has the experience, the connections… everybody is going to assume that wasn’t made secretary of state, because he is Jotun.”

“And they aren’t far off.”

“What?” Loki blinked and their father sighed. “You are smart, Loki, you should be able to see it. A Jotun in this position- every single one of his decisions or ideas that I don’t agree with would be a scandal. Jotunheim wouldn’t let us hear the end of it. One month and there would be chaos…”

Thor had to frown while Loki’s eyes grew wide. “So you don’t give him the position at all, because it might get complicated? The Jotuns are already protesting!”

“So am I supposed to make my decisions based on what might please the Jotun population?”

“No…” Loki almost whined. “He was the best candidate. He would have done a great job and the Jotuns would have been pleased. They haven’t been pleased about anything in… ages. Now they are going to… I have no idea. People are not showing up to work, they’re protesting in front of the town hall. It’s not even 9 o’clock and there are already over one hundred people.”

Loki had his own way of saying things and he was out of line. Which didn’t change the fact that he was right, although Thor wasn’t eager to admit that. “I agree with Loki. Leifsson is a competent man and now… Laufey is not going to let an opportunity like this pass.”

Normally Thor loved to be right, but this time, he would have been perfectly happy to be dead-wrong. Merely one and a half hour later the house Ymirson gave a live press conference. Thor started nagging on his lower lip when the camera was focused on Helblindi, not his father.

Everything about this appearance was planned and so obviously staged. It made Thor’s stomach clench how much symbolism they had cramed into the set-up. The flags of Jotunheim and the house Ymirson in the background, Helblindi wearing the same frock coat like his father when Odin had summoned him. Dark blue and black Jötunar runes. And of course there was Helblindi himself. Thor wanted to grit his teeth when the first thought that came to his mind was that it was almost ridiculous how beautiful Helblindi was. Especially since he was so Jotun. The black strands brushed back behind his ears, perfectly pure, white skin. These blue eyes. Not even the TV screen could diminish their intensity. Probably they had chosen him to speak because of his looks. Beautiful people were easy to listen to.

Then Helblindi started talking, senseless words were leaving his mouth, impossible to understand. A translator began to talk over him and how could it not be worse than Thor had expected.

“My beloved countrymen. Despite our differences and our culture, Jotunheim and Asgard have always been one. We are brothers and sisters. There is more to unite us than to break us apart. Yet for over several hundred years the monarch of this beautiful nation has not treated us as his brothers and sisters. We’ve had our parliament closed, our language banned, our laws altered and then replaced completely and they’ve given us coins with the face of our suppressor on them, so we never forget our place. These days Odin IV of Asgard is proud to celebrate that his family has reigned over this country for 500 years. Instead of celebrating with every citizen and ending the oppression that
has lasted for 500 years the king has decided to show us that a Jotun is not equal to any other Asgardian. He rewarded the exceptional work of an upright and fine Asgardian citizen, a Jotun, by humiliating him. No reason was given why Þórfreðr Leifsson was not made secretary of state. Why did this man not become the first Jotun minister? His credentials are without a single flaw. Every political expert of this nation called him the best choice and he wasn’t considered because he is one of ours. Which is not a surprise, but it shows us that nothing has changed in these 500 years. While the king will not even grant us the right to our own language, he invites a foreign nation into our land which he will pay with money from Jotun goldmines. Our oppression ends right here. With this statement I will let the king of Asgard know that Jotunheim will not bow its head any longer. We have a right to our own language, a right to our flag, a right of bigger and better representation in Valhalla, a right to gain back the autonomy that was taken from us. The Lord of Jotunheim is going to inform the King of Asgard about our demands and if they aren’t going to be fulfilled – Jotunheim and Asgard are no longer going to be one. My family is no longer going to tolerate the oppression and discrimination of our people or the attempt to destroy our culture heritage. May your fylgja guide and protect you.

The transmission ended and Thor closed his eyes for a second. This was unbelievable. Still, it hadn’t been Laufey who had said all of this. Could it even be considered official? Did Helblindi even have the authority to make such a statement?

“How can they do that? Holding a speech in front of the people without informing the court or the king beforehand? Why was it even Helblindi?” Sure, Thor was grasping at straws, but what were they supposed to do in such a situation?

“Because he is brilliant…” Loki mumbled under his breath before turning to their father. “So what are we going to do now?”

***

*Just watched the news. So what’s going on in your country? People getting a bit rebellious?*

*There is nothing funny about this*

*Politics are always funny, because they’re absurd. You gave the US a fuck ton of money, so just give them their… language?*

*I am not the one to make that call*

*But you already have an idea?*

*I’m not discussing matters of the state with you*

*Pretty please? L*
Good night, Mr. Stark

Oh, you so have a plan. Looking forward to see on the news tomorrow

Do you ever shut up?

No, good night darling
“It’s outrageous…” Thor was shaking his head, eyes still going through the demands, probably getting more tired and frustrated with every line. Loki’s approach was a bit different. “It’s remarkable.”

“The demands they’re making are so far-fetched.” Clearly Thor wanted Loki to give him that much, but Loki merely felt inclined to shrug. “Of course they are asking for way more than they will ever get. It’s a very basic strategy. They know they won’t get everything they ask for, so the ask for way too much. Hiding what they really want between the lines.”

Thor let out a grunt that contained every little bit of his repugnance. “They are not asking. They are demanding. It makes quite the difference. This whole thing reads itself as if they were in the position to make demands.”

Finally Loki put down the documents, looking across the table to search his brother’s eyes. Fascinating how they both felt so completely different about the very same thing. For Thor it was a tedious chore and he couldn’t see how it was worth the time they were spending over it. Hadn’t he said as much one second ago? The Jotuns weren’t in the position to make demands. Why even bother to read this outrageous list?

“They aren’t? Helblindi made himself very clear. They are going to declare their independence. To me it looks like quite a good position to be in.”

That was enough to attract even the last bit of Thor’s attention that hadn’t been on him. “Sure, this is what he is saying, but they can’t actually do it.”

“Why not? They would not be the first one to do it. To my knowledge it doesn’t require much. A bunch of lawyers to set up a new constitution and somebody has to declare an independent nation. Surprisingly simple.” Loki pointed out and that thought made him slightly nauseous. 500 years and it should be now that Asgard was falling apart? What a legacy.

Thor was definitely on the same page and perhaps a couple of steps ahead of him. In the wrong direction. “They can set up all the constitutions they want. Asgard still needs to accept and we definitely won’t.”

“How do you want to stop them? Send troops into Útgarðar?” Loki huffed when he saw the expression on Thor’s face, followed by a gesture that said ‘for example’.

“There is no coming back from that. Once the military gets involved, there is no more chance for a compromise with Jotunheim.”
“Loki, they obviously aren’t looking for a compromise. As a last option it might help us to get the situation back under control.”

“No, it would help to completely escalate the situation. We’re talking about Jotunheim. They have their own resources, troops and a very strong will. We send as much as one man with a gun and they will resist. Things can turn violent within a second. We don’t want that, we don’t need that.” Loki should be damned if Asgardians were going to start attacking other Asgardians.

“Okay, let’s abandon the worst case scenario for a moment… I have my doubts that they have the guts to go through with it. You’ve said it, founding a nation on paper is rather simple. The act of becoming a nation is anything but. They would have to support themselves completely on their own.”

“If any part of Asgard can do that, it’s Jotunheim. They have the industry, the have the gold mines… they are one of the richest territories. Also, the Ymirson are good leaders and statesmen. I wouldn’t be too worried about them…” Loki couldn’t help but smile at the awkward conversation and when Thor didn’t answer immediately, he knew that he had understood. “Fine, no troops. Negotiations. What are we going to do then?”

That was the one question. In a couple of years in the future historians would call this moment a crisis Asgard had gone through. It was up to them to figure out how to overcome it. Tapping his pen against the paper in front of him Loki bit his lower lip. “There is something we cannot dare to forget. Helblindi said as much. Laufey said it too when father summoned him to the throne.”

“What do you mean?”

“Asgard and Jotunheim are one. They will always be one. There is more that unites us than what separates us. The Jotuns don’t want to be their own nation. Yes, I know, a lot of them demand the separation, but most of them just want equality. They don’t feel like equals. If we give them what they want or enough of what they want… they will not want to leave.”

That answer definitely didn’t please Thor, but he nodded. “The language act?”

“Exactly. Father has to abolish it. Completely.”

“Completely? Isn’t that a bit…”

“They won’t be content with anything else and it has lasted way too long anyway. The language act is of no other use than oppressing them… Everything else on their list can be talked about or wait. We have to give them the lessons, the books, the street signs, the laws and the permission to use Jǫtnar in all administration. No restraints, no backdoors.” Loki noted a couple of words on the paper and he could already feel how Thor was putting up resistance. Despite knowing it, Loki couldn’t understand. Maybe it was indeed fear? Fostered by old legends that kept a tight grip on their family. What did they matter? Loki could perfectly remember how Frigga had brushed his hair behind his ears and had told him that these were only stories and that ‘Frostgiants’ was only a word invented by feeble men to describe other men that were probably better than them.

“Giving in completely would make us look weak. We can’t afford to show that kind of weakness to Laufey or his son.” Thor determinedly shook his head and that statement frustrated him beyond compare.

“Why? Why on earth would that make us look weak? Policies are changed all the time. This one
needs to be changed, it’s not just about what the Jotun want. Are you afraid that the Jotuns won’t respect us if we’re giving them what they want? They don’t care! They want their language and an end to the suppression of their symbols. It’s not strength to cling to something, because we are scared of changing our ways.”

Thor’s face was so easy to read and for the first time in his life Loki wondered if other people could see it too. Did only he have that gift, because they had grown up together? Because Loki knew all of Thor’s different expressions and the varying degrees of annoyance and repugnance. If other people could see it too, Thor would have a rough time as a king.

“I am not worrying about the general population, but about the Ymirsons. We give them a finger, they will take the whole arm.”

Releasing a long breath Loki fought down the urge to tell him to stop being a little boy. Sure, a big part of ruling was about displaying strength, but not in this situation. “Why do you think that? Despite them hating us they have an impeccable reputation. They aren’t liars or thieves. Nor Lord is as beloved by his people as Laufey…”

“Indeed. They hail him a king. They think that he should be king. Not just of Jotunheim, but of the entire country. Tell me, do you really believe that Laufey doesn’t think the same? That he isn’t of the absolute conviction that he is the rightful king of Asgard?”

Loki lowered his eyes and forbid himself to acknowledge the shiver that was running down his spine. The memory of Laufey’s cold gaze. Him calling Odin a usurper. There was no doubt about this. “To Laufey we’re all just a long line of thieves and traitors.”

“Exactly. He’ll use anything he can against us.”

“No, he won’t.”

“What makes you think that?”

Smiling softly Loki shrugged. “Because we are not the most important thing on Laufey’s mind. Sure, he’d like to see father gone and put the crown on his own or Helblindi’s head, but he cares more about his people. Laufey wants them to have their language and to prosper. I am well aware that he isn’t going to make it easy for us, that he is going to try to get the best for his people out of this. We should do the same thing. Abolishing the language act doesn’t hurt us in any kind of way, it would mean a lot to the Jotuns.”

Not even Thor was going to argue with that and Loki felt a little tingle of satisfaction. Maybe they were getting somewhere.

“It’s not going to end there. Let’s assume we give them the language act… they are going to demand something else. Something that probably won’t be that easy to hand over.”

Loki glanced at the document, but he couldn’t bring himself to care, so he merely shrugged. “Then we should get used to the idea of giving the Jotuns back a lot of things that former kings took from them.”

Thor huffed, displaying a mixture of annoyance and disbelief. “Where is this sudden sympathy for the Jotuns coming from? Not everything that was ever done to them was without reason. Even the language act was supposed to make the communication between the regions easier.”

“It was installed after a rebellion. Sure, it had practical effects, but it was definitely meant to humiliate the Jotun population. We’re among ourselves, Thor. It was our family who did this. We have the
archives, the private correspondence and the diary entries. We know what it was all about…”

Sighing Loki shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong, we are not going to give them everything they ask for, but… I feel like they have been put down for centuries because…” How was he going to say this without Thor getting mad or thinking that he was a fool?

“… because they were afraid of them. Not of a pending rebellion or any of that sort. Our family climbed to the throne after another family died out. Almost died out. Búri didn’t inherit anything, he took it. Our family has been ruling Asgard for 500 years now, nobody disputes the legitimacy… but the first Búrison kings might have doubted it themselves. It’s different to be born into a position or seizing it. Especially when the original family is still around. I can imagine somebody doing that to make themselves feel better… Putting the other one down, so it would be easier to tell yourself that they aren’t worthy of the position… but you are.”

When the last word had left Loki’s mouth he was already regretting them. No softness to be seen on Thor’s face. “You are talking about our own kin, Loki. Not every king has always made the wisest decision, but all of them did what they thought best for Asgard.”

“A very noble thought. Noble indeed…” Loki muttered and decided against telling Thor that noblesse and naivety were close together. “Father’s meeting with Leifsson will soon be over. We will talk to him then. He will agree that the abolition of the language act makes the most sense.”

At the end of this very long day Loki couldn’t sit down or stand still. He felt the desire to tear down brick walls and at the same time suffered from his inability to do so. It was disgusting how powerless Loki was. In every sense of the word. So many titles, so many eyes that saw up to him in complete awe and yet Loki was utterly useless. Born to be a back-up plan. Which was fine, everybody had a role to play and a lot of times Loki flattered himself. So wicked and smart… What for?

Cursing loudly Loki threw his jacket onto the couch, then continued to pace around the room. Hours and hours of debating, shouting, negotiating and pleading even. All in vain. Tonight would be a good night to get drunk or to have meaningless, unsatisfying sex. Anything to clear his head or to actually do something.

Not quite knowing what to do with himself Loki lay down on the carpet and began doing sit-up at a fierce speed. Something to do. Anything. After half a minute he realised how ridiculous he was acting. He was still wearing his silk shirt. Standing back up Loki ran both hands through his hair and sucked in a long breath.

Unfortunately he wasn’t going to tear down walls. Slowly Loki sat down and rested his head against one of the many cushions on the couch. It would be best to probably just fall asleep, but Loki already knew that sleep was very far away. Instead he reached for the remote, hoping that the sound of the television would drain out his thoughts.

A very bad idea. He should have known.

“I think I am of the same opinion as most people in this country. No group has the right to receive special treatment, but I don’t think the Jotuns are asking for that. Nonetheless the situation is very worrying. Maybe the young Lord of Jotunheim should have chosen some less… provocative words.”

“Lord Helblindi was rather restraint. I almost expected him to talk about how the crown treats their own people while bowing in front of the Americans. I understand that the Jotuns are furious. Leifsson is a critic of the new policy, so he didn’t get the position the entire country wanted to see
him in. In the meantime the crown prince is dating an American. Yes, the situation in Jotunheim is critical, but I do believe that the growing American influence on the crown should alarm every single citizen.”

“It’s shameful. The situation in Jotunheim has only worsened to this point, because the king until now preferred spending his time selling Asgard to the United States. I would be very surprised if the king was now willing to make concessions.”

Swallowing a bitter laugh Loki turned off the TV before the debate could continue. The public opinion was quite clear and it would be very smart to listen to it. That last statement was absolutely true. Loki didn’t want to believe it himself, but Odin was not willing to make concessions. At this point it seemed like a family tradition – Jotunheim needs to be put into its place.

Only that this time they weren’t going to back down. No, the Jotuns had never been good at that. Especially now when they had… Loki wasn’t going to start thinking about him now. Those blue eyes and a mouth that could twist words like Loki.

Helblindi had seen this coming. Of course he had. Laufey had known it too, he had said as much. At the wedding, Laufey had said that Leifsson was never going to be secretary of state. No Jotun was ever going to be a minister. Father and son knew, the announcement hadn’t come as a surprise. Everything that was happening right now was perfectly calculated.

That fucking son of a bitch. Damn him and his sharp mind. This man was obviously capable of planning ahead. Loki was convinced that Helblindi had deliberately talked to him. That every single word had been chosen with special care.

It pained Loki to admit that somebody had played him. And so well. Helblindi had wanted to distract him by putting ideas into his head. Ideas… He had been right. Now Loki was sitting right here, knowing what to do and nobody would let him.

Damn the Jotun and his blue eyes…

Loki winced when his phone vibrated in the pocket of his trousers. More bad news from Jotunheim probably. Hopefully the situation wouldn’t escalate overnight, now that Odin had decided to let them wait. The message hadn’t been sent by his secretary or a minister.

Your brilliant plan didn’t work out yet?

Gritting his teeth Loki fought the urge to delete the text. For the first time in ages he didn’t feel like having some banter. Somebody had outsmarted him, Loki was going to be damned if Stark was going to put some salt into his wounds.

Loki had no explanation why he was texting back.

I am not discussing matters of the state with you

Dry and matter-of-fact. Perhaps that would be enough to turn him off.

Obviously not.

Ouch. You failed?

Putting the phone away Loki cursed himself for his own stupidity. Yes, he was failing. Utterly and completely. When it should be so easy.
The phone vibrated once more and Loki ignored it, staring up at the ceiling. Naturally he didn’t find any answers there. How to get his father to listen to him? Laufey obviously listened to Helblindi. Another firstborn. What had that to do with anything?

His phone moved again and Loki regretted not having his phone number immediately changed after receiving Stark’s first call.

Despite himself Loki checked the message, now fully intending on deleting it. For the first time ever Stark made it to take him aback.

*srsly, how are you doing?*

A simple question and Loki didn’t know how to answer it or if he even wanted to reply. Had Stark ever asked a legit question? One that wasn’t supposed to make him feel uncomfortable or to make fun of him. Granted, Loki only paid attention to Stark, because of his insane personality. If Stark started being nice… Should Loki feel weirded out by that? Today the world was turning the wrong way around. Perhaps Loki should just try to hold on.

*Okay enough. You?*

Stark had definitely been waiting for that, he was incredibly quick to answer.

*Spectacular. A bit bored in between. Do you ever get bored?*

Loki could perfectly imagine Stark being bored. Him sitting there, shifting around on his chair like a little child, whining. Quite a picture and surprisingly amusing.

*Never. All the time*

Tapping his finger against the phone Loki didn’t have to wait long.

*Thought so. What do you do when you get bored?*

Was this an actual conversation? One that didn’t have to have a point? Several wiseass responses came to Loki’s mind and he was already typing one of them when he decided against it and started all over again.

*Fencing. Riding. Capoeira. Reading. I read a lot. I’m learning Portuguese at the moment. I annoy reporters by tweeting about some location I’m currently checking out. When they hang around there all day, I don’t show up*

*Fancy :D*

*What about you?*

Now was the perfect time to come up with something stupid or funny.

*The usual. Mechanics. Changing the world. Buying overpriced art. Hooking up with people way younger than me*

Loki felt his lips forming a little smile. At least that man knew about his faults.

*How old are you?*
You still look good for a man your age

I can’t tell if that was a compliment or an insult

Before Loki could do anything about it a soft laugh escaped his lips.

Compliment. Treasure it, I hand them out rarely. Do you get bored often?

All the time. Never

Great choice of words.

I know I am a genius. Texting is getting annoying. How about we have an actual phone conversation?

Too old and too tired to text?

Just old-fashioned. Thought you liked that kind of thing.

That was right and Loki despised the fact that they lived in a time where an actual telephone conversation could be considered old-fashioned. Stark was a man of his word, Loki’s phone started ringing only mere seconds later.

Why not?

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

***

After a short night with even less sleep Loki ignored his tired muscles and bones and took a longer run than usual. The cold air cleared his head, slipped into his lungs and it made Loki feel like not everything was falling apart or radically changing.

One look at the newspaper this morning had worsened Loki’s mood, since he hadn’t been able to see the latest turn of events coming. Of course the media was all over the Jotun ultimatum. How could they not, it was a national crisis and Odin refused to treat it like one.

Loki had known all of that last night. What he hadn’t expected was the spotlight that was suddenly cast upon Thor’s relationship with Jane.

Sure, not official yet, but nobody cared, because everybody knew. Now the journalists were voicing doubts if Thor was capable of handling the Asgardian conflicts when he was under the constant influence of an outsider. Loki wished that he could roll his eyes over that idea, since Jane had no political agenda. Then again, sometimes an agenda wasn’t even necessary.

The people were angry about the policy and now they were worrying and the Jotuns had the most wonderful arguments. While they were dealing with oppression that had has been lasting for centuries, the crown had made the most wonderful and one-sided agreement with the United States. The shameful deal had nothing to do with Jane, but Loki couldn’t blame the people for making the connection.

The atmosphere was tensed, the general public sympathized with the Jotun cause. Thor’s relationship was critiqued and Odin refused to make a single step towards the Jotuns. In the meantime Loki was just sitting here with bound hands.
Loki stopped to catch his breath and heard some steps right next to him. “Mother, it’s not nice to sneak up on somebody.”

“As a child you were of a different opinion.” Frigga touched his arm and offered him a soft smile. Nothing about it was forced, it never was. Even in this kind of situation. Loki sometimes asked himself how his mother could always keep this attitude. A constant happiness. It had to be wrong to envy your own mother.

“Your skin looks grey. Did you sleep at all?”

She shouldn’t be able to read him like that, nobody should. “Hardly. I would be surprised if any man interested in the state of our nation got a lot of sleep tonight.”

Frigga nodded lightly. “I know… these are difficult times which is why I have to talk to you.”

“I am listening.”

“Let’s take a few steps.” Still smiling gently Frigga linked their arms which meant that Loki’s run was finished. “I am sure you have already studied the newspapers and seen that your brother is getting caught up in the crossfire.”

“Yes, I have read it.”

“It is horribly unfair. Your brother fell in love with a woman, not caring about her background or nationality. He is right, because it doesn’t matter. Now Jane has become a liability which she clearly shouldn’t be. Your father has been rightfully worrying about this possibility. You will agree with me that we have to present her to the public as soon as possible. The people have to get to know her like we did, then they will see her as the lovely innocent girl that she is.”

“And what am I supposed to do?”

“I think it would be a good idea if you were with them when they have their first public appearance together. You and Balder.”

Loki stopped dead in his tracks and stared at his mother, not really sure if he had heard right. “Balder and me are not dating.”

“You bring him to family dinners, you go to art galleries with him.”

“Mother, you asked me to spend time with him…”

The way Frigga looked at him made Loki feel again like a little boy who needed to have lovingly explained the most basic things to him. “Loki, you have the brightest mind I know. You realised immediately why I asked you to look after him.”

Not knowing how to react Loki huffed and then shrugged. “As I’ve said before… I am not dating Balder… or not yet. I don’t know. I cannot make an official public appearance with him. Why should I?”

“Jane might be a sweet woman and I am sure our people will see the same qualities in her that Thor does… she will never be Asgardian. Given the unpopularity of the new policy she might never fully win the people’s hearts. Some might even feel threatened by her presence, fearing the American influence on our family. Seeing you with Balder will dispel their doubts. He is a wonderful man and he adores you. You must have noticed that by now.”
“Sure, yes… but I don’t know if I am ever going to adore him.”

Frigga continued to smile and brushed his hair back with a gesture that couldn’t be any gentler or filled with more care. “You really are a special prince, Loki… You put up your defences when I tell you that I want you to have somebody to support you and to care about you… the tables have turned. I still think that Balder is a great man who would be perfect for you. Now it’s not just about you anymore, but about the entire nation. Another thing that’s not fair, but I know you. You will always put Asgard before yourself. It’s not emotional anymore, now it’s political.”
Defiant little child

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Loki tries coming to grips with what is asked of him and Odin eventually wants to talk to his son

Have fun :D

The guard ever so slightly narrowed his eyes at Bucky. It would be easy to miss and Bucky pretended that he hadn’t noticed, so the moment would hopefully pass a little faster. None of this was pleasant which wasn’t a surprised since the guard was definitely trying to make Bucky feel unwelcomed. This one had probably seen him before and thought that Bucky had no busy here when he wasn’t on duty and the American delegation wasn’t anywhere near the palace. Nothing like that had happened the last time Bucky had been here to play tennis with the prince. The consequences of the new policies were pretty much everywhere.

“You may follow me, agent Barnes.”

Quickly nodding Bucky did as he was told. Truth to be told, he was as surprised as anybody else that he was here today. Jotunheim had forced an ultimatum on the king only yesterday and today the prince wanted to play tennis with him? At first Bucky had thought that it had to be a joke, but far from it. Did that mean the royal family had already sorted things out with Jotunheim? Why else should Loki pass his time in any other way than joining in on the negotiations? No, Bucky didn’t get it and he began feeling a little uneasy, thinking about how Fury or Coulson might be interested in his meeting with Loki. Especially now that the political situation in Asgard might suddenly change.

It was his day off, Bucky didn’t like to think too much about work and until now the prince had always been easy to make conversation with. Hopefully today wouldn’t be any different. Bucky was still pondering when the guard led him into the indoor tennis court.

“The Duke of Glæsisvellir will join you in a moment.”

Then Bucky was left alone and he dropped his bag to the floor. It was weird to already be in someone’s house and to still be waiting for them. Even if said place was a palace. With an indoor tennis court. Not quite knowing what to do Bucky started pacing around.

A moment could mean anything. 30 minutes or five seconds. He didn’t think that the prince would let him wait on purpose, but things were happening all the time, so Bucky would be almost surprised if the prince showed up at all.

“Agent Barnes, how lovely to see you.”

Startled Bucky turned around to come to face with said prince who was smiling sweetly at him.

“You look lovely.”

Bucky blinked, but then quickly sobered up and bowed his head. “Your highness. Thanks for the invitation.”
The prince continued to smile and shrugged. “It was overdue. I thought we might play outside, but the rain makes that look like a bad idea. Inside it’s cosier anyway and there are no curious eyes to watch.”

Only the second thing that the prince had said so far and Bucky was already horribly confused. Normally the prince liked to tease him when other agents were around to put them on the edge, but not when they were alone. Also the prince’s good mood was off-setting. Why would he be happy after what had happened yesterday? Then again, this was prince… Bucky didn’t think for a second that he was able to look through him or which game he was playing.

Tennis – that would be a good game. “I don’t mind… I am kind of surprised that we’re playing at all. I thought you might have a pretty busy schedule.”

That short comment was enough to change thing severely. A little wince, barely visible, but Bucky was trained to see these kinds of things. Of course something was wrong and it was definitely none of Bucky’s business. Matters of the state.

“Like I’ve said – the rematch is overdue. Maybe you’ll let me win this time.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t like that.”

The prince smirked crookedly and gestured towards Bucky’s bag on the floor. “Get your racket.”

Bucky returned his grin and did once again as he was told. The second hint that something was amiss came only seconds later. Something about the prince’s style had changed. The last couple of times he hadn’t put that much force or power into his service. Getting hit by the ball would hurt like a bitch. Unfortunately the prince’s service was quite powerful, but sloppy. Bucky’s winning streak wasn’t going to end here, that much was for sure. Last time Bucky hadn’t been able to help himself, he had often commented on the prince screwing up, but now he was definitely biting his tongue. He had no interest whatsoever in opening that can of worms.

The first set was won easily and Bucky thought that he was supposed to gloat a little bit. He had always done that. “You need a break, your highness?”

“Oh, you wish.”

“Fine, then let’s continue.”

Maybe something clicked, but things changed again incredibly quickly. The prince calmed down and his play instantly got a lot better. The second set went on for a long while, Bucky had no idea what time it was, but he eventually won the second set 13:11. Both of them were sweating and panting by the end of it and the prince raised his hand. “I think I might take that break now.”

“Oh, definitely.” The prince walked to the side and grabbed a bottle of water from which he took a big gulp.

Sweat was dripping down Bucky’s eyebrows, threatening to get into his eyes, so he quickly grabbed the lower part of his shirt and wiped his forehead with it. When Bucky raised his head again he caught a glimpse of the prince looking at him. Gaping.

His cheeks were already warm from the exercise, so Bucky couldn’t tell if he was blushing. It didn’t matter anyway, because he couldn’t deny the incredibly pleasant feeling of having a prince checking him out. That definitely didn’t hurt his self-confidence. Turning around Bucky picked up his towel and now properly cleaned his face before drinking half of his own water people. He could hear the prince approaching and turned back around to face him. “You are sure you want to continue? I think
by now it’s obvious who is going to win the third set.”

“You are terribly full of yourself, aren’t you, agent Barnes?” His lips were forming an honestly amused smile and Bucky made a vague gesture. “The slightest bit, but I know that you are too.”

“No, actually you are the first one to ever point that out.” The prince looked dead-serious and Bucky would have almost believed him. Almost.

“May I ask you a professional question, agent Barnes?”

Someone asking for permission before asking a question was never a good sign. Especially not with such a forth-coming and direct person. “Sure, go ahead.”

“What was your answer when your superiors asked you to manipulate me when they found out that you were spending some of your time off with me?” The prince said it with a straight face and his voice was even. Not emotionless, rather curious. Almost as if he hadn’t decided what to think about it yet. Which was absurd.

The acceleration of Bucky’s heartbeat had nothing to do with the tennis and he cleared his throat in a weak attempt to win time. “What would make you think that anybody asked such a thing?”

Smiling way too sweet for this kind of situation the prince cocked his head. “Oh, agent Barnes… you still have to learn how this works. Never answer a question with another question. It only makes it blatantly obvious that you are trying to stall.”

Swallowing softly Bucky had to inwardly admit that this hadn’t been the smartest move. One didn’t have to be a genius to figure out that the ambassador would like to take advantage of this situation. “Your highness, I am…”

“You might call me Loki. There’s only the two of us.” Some of the sweetness was gone, but whatever had replaced it wasn’t threatening or mischievous. The prince was having fun and Bucky was squirming. “I can’t… that wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“I insist. If you want to only here, among the two of us. Now, please, continue.”

“Listen, your… I swear there was no talk about manipulation. I admit that… there was some interest. Especially after you… after the episode with Tony Stark. If you might… Listen, the whole thing is ridiculous and I am merely here, because I enjoy playing tennis with you and I am enjoying your company. That is all.” There wasn’t much more what Bucky could say. Not without breaking every rule of his job. Hopefully the prince would take mercy on him.

It didn’t reassure him when the prince laughed softly and then shrugged. “I see… It is quite obnoxious to be a pawn in someone else’s game. Isn’t it?”

“Your highness, I am not sure I understand.”

Groaning in annoyance the prince raised his hands. “Enough with the ‘Your highness’. You aren’t that adamant about etiquette when you are kicking my ass during a match. Don’t start now. It’s terribly annoying…”

“I’m sorry if I upset you… Loki.” The word felt strange on his tongue although he had said it before, never to the prince’s face though. “My name is James, by the way.”

“I know. It doesn’t suit you though.”
“Friends back at home called me Bucky.”

“Now that’s even worse.”

“Those are the only two names I have. I guess you have to choose one.” Bucky felt the tension leaving his shoulders and it was easier to smile now.

Loki chuckled and shook his head. “Or I could ask you which one you prefer. What would you like me to call you?”

That was taking Bucky aback. “Uhm… Bucky, I guess. Only of course when nobody is around…” As soon as the words were out in the open Bucky realised how strange that sounded. Like they were having secrets or doing things that nobody was supposed to witness.

“Naturally.”

Not knowing what to say Bucky downed the rest of his water and expected them to return to the game, but the prince didn’t seem interested. No, that was the wrong word. He did seem very interested but not in tennis. “I have another question. I think you are a very candid man and those are hard to find these days.”

“I’m flattered and terrified at the same time. What is your question?”

The prince came a step closer and Bucky hoped that he wasn’t gaping right now. It was so hard though to not notice how much more intense the prince’s green eyes were when his hair was completely out of his face.

“What would you define as your worst quality?”

Why couldn’t that man do anything even slightly predictable? Bucky definitely hadn’t thought that they would discuss anything that personal. “Why would you…?”

“Are you stalling again?”

“No, just wondering.”

“At the moment I am very self-critical and I want to know if I’m maybe… over-reacting.” The prince’s eyes drifted off for a second and Bucky could see again that something was wrong. “So what is your worst trait of character?”

This time Loki didn’t complain that Bucky had thrown back the question right into his face. Instead he answered and Bucky could feel that he was being honest. “I was raised a certain way. To always keep a cool head, to act responsibly and yet… I am defiant and sullen, almost like a child. I’ve always been like that… I got scolded for something and I would think about ways how to do it again… just with a slightly different touch, so I would get away with it and still upset everybody… Here I am, almost 30 years old and I am still… defiant. Doing what I shouldn’t do, for no actual reason.”

Now they were getting somewhere, Bucky could hear it in the vibrations of his voice. Bucky wanted to ask, but then the prince would probably think that he was only fishing for information to hand it to the embassy. Nothing could be further from the truth. The prince was good at reading people, he would see that it wasn’t about that.

“What is it that you shouldn’t do?”
A wicked smile. “Inviting a gorgeous American to the palace, send all the security away and tell them that I don’t want to be disturbed.”

Now the colour was definitely draining from his face. “You’re… you’re really making me uncomfortable here.”

“Now that’s a disappointment. Until now you were the only one of the agents who wasn’t going to start squirming whenever I opened my mouth.” The prince continued to smile and he was definitely too close. Or was he?

“I am not squirming. I merely want to know where you are going with this. What ‘being defiant’ actually means.”

“To be honest, I am not so sure myself. I am already getting what I want, because you are here and the doors are closed. I don’t know where we go from here. Play the third set?”

A nice way out, served on a silver plate, but Bucky realised that he didn’t want that. Sure, it was stupid and reckless. Nonetheless it was better than running against walls like he had done for the last couple of weeks. For once it would be nice to hear somebody say what they were thinking. Or what they wanted. “Yeah, the third set… or what?”

Green eyes bore into his and Loki let out a soft sigh. “I’ve had a very bad day yesterday… and the day before yesterday. Given the political situation it would be a really bad idea to go out and get drunk. Nobody wants that headline… I miss 5 years ago… when I was still going to university and everybody expected me to do something stupid.”

“That’s what you want? To do something stupid?” That shouldn’t sound as appealing, but the straightforwardness was still a relief.

“You could say so.”

For a couple of seconds there was complete silence between them. Then a hand suddenly fisted in his shirt and a warm mouth covered Bucky’s. The prince tasted sweet, fresh and definitely like something Bucky should stay far away from. He was sure to remember that for next time. Right now it seemed perfectly reasonable to kiss him back. Or completely stupid. At least it was straightforward.

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The tiles felt cold against Loki’s forehead while the hot water was pouring down on him. Hot and cold while he was somewhere in between. Tilting his head up Loki closed his eyes, letting the water directly hit his face. It didn’t wash away agent Barnes’ taste and Loki wasn’t even sure he wanted that.

Bucky. Even in Loki’s thoughts it sounded horrid. But very American and wasn’t that the point? Damn it, Loki was indeed acting like a child. Making out with a guy that should be off-limits, because he was… angry?

Had Loki ever felt more pathetic? No, acting out hadn’t made him feel any better. Sure, the kisses had been nice, but Loki was still in the exact same place as the day before. He was organising his love life while Jotunheim expected an answer till the end of the week. At least that helped him to know his place.

Stepping out of the shower Loki dried himself off, then quickly got dressed. It was about time to stop sulking and to start working on things. He had acted up and now Loki was going to face reality. Which wasn’t that bad actually. Just not how he had imagined things to go down.
In his salon Loki called Leah, asking her to call Balder and invite him over. They needed to talk. Sitting down on his couch Loki ran both hands through his wet hair and forbid himself to think about what he would do. That was exactly what that blue-eyed manipulator wanted.

A knock on the door banished Helblindi’s voice from Loki’s head and he grunted in frustration. “I said ‘No disturbances!’”

Somebody opened the door anyway. “I thought that only applied to the tennis court.”

Sitting up straight Loki stared at his father who casually entered the room. He seemed relaxed and almost happy. Which didn’t make sense. The country was going through a crisis.

“The tennis court. My rooms. I don’t feel like talking to anybody.”

“Except for the American DS agent, I suppose.”

“He’s a good tennis player.”

“And very pretty. You’ve always had a thing for dark hair and lithe eyes.”

“Is there a point to this?” Loki did his very best to sound annoyed and not confused. Odin offered him a soft smile while slowly walking up to the couch. “You’ve always been very good at hiding what you’re really thinking. Even as a child, so hard to figure out. But not when you’re upset. You’ve always been very predictable when you’re upset, Loki.”

Crossing his arms in front of his chest Loki sat up straight, not willing to let this go any further. “Why are you even here? Shouldn’t you be busy negotiating with the Ymirsons? Or is that never going to happen and we’ll watch Jotunheim going into complete rebellion.”

“I am not here to talk about Jotunheim.”

“Of course not.” Loki couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

Slowly Odin sat down next to him. “The Lord of Jotunheim will come to court tomorrow and I will talk to him.”

“To tell him that they’re not going to get anything…”

“We can talk about Jotunheim another time. I want to discuss a matter of way greater importance.”

Loki huffed in response. “Like what?”

His glare was met without any hesitation. “You.”

“What?”

“It was hard to miss that you are upset. I talked to your mother. I can see why she wants you to show yourself with Thor and Jane with Balder at your side.” Odin was carefully stating these words and Loki once again tried to not show any reaction. “She is a smart woman.”

“Indeed she is and so are you. I know how much you love your brother and I don’t doubt your devotion to your country. Balder is a fine man.”

“He is.”

His father put a hand on Loki’s arm, indicating Loki to look at him. How was it possible to turn him
into a little child again with one single glance? “Your brother made a choice. A bad choice and I
advised against it. I cannot force him to change his mind or to make a better choice. You will not be
forced to do that either. You don’t have to get involved with Balder if that’s not what you want.”

Only very slowly Loki could make sense out of what his father was saying. Something he had
already known, but not heard said out loud. When Loki tried to respond, he could feel his heart
almost leaping into his mouth. Swallowing softly Loki searched his father’s eyes and they were
gentle, honest. Sure, Loki had known, but he hadn’t expected Odin to say it.

“I…” Loki’s voice was leaving him and he cleared his throat. “I know that. Why are you saying
something that I already know?”

“Because I don’t think you know. If you knew, you wouldn’t have invited a DS agent to provoke a
reaction. Don’t get me wrong, I would appreciate Balder, he is a formidable young man. If he is not
your choice, then he is not your choice.”

Loki eventually nodded and much to his shame he felt the pressure inside his chest going away.
“Thank you, father. I appreciate you saying this…”

Smiling at him Odin gently squeezed his arm. “Are you going to join us for lunch?”

“Balder is coming over…”

“I see. Just remember what I said. I will see you tonight at dinner.”

His father left him alone again and Loki let his eyes slide closed again. That was supposed to make it
better. Except that now there was only him to make a decision. Well, he had always anticipated a
political marriage, hadn’t he? But not quite like this.

That very thought was shameful. Had anyone even considered Balder’s opinion on all of this? Sure,
had shown interest, but that could be a fleeting attraction.

So Thor’s happiness or the stability of the crown wasn’t a good enough reason? Loki couldn’t stop
wondering about what could actually be good enough.
Hello everybody,

Balder and Loki have a talk, Jane has to face some unpleasant questions and Tony is being Tony :)

Have fun :D

“My Lord, you may follow me.” Heimdall smiled welcomingly at Balder and made an inviting gesture. “Thank you. I am afraid I might be a little too early.”

“The prince asked to escort you to his rooms the moment you arrive. I am sure he won’t mind.”

Balder could still very vividly remember Heimdall and how much he had scared him as a child. A constant stern presence that loomed over them when they were playing in the gardens or running through the hallways. Looking back Balder knew of course that Heimdall had been responsible to make sure that they wouldn’t cause any trouble and more importantly – they wouldn’t get hurt. They had been a bunch of kids, only boys, there had always been a risk of a broken leg or arm. Especially since Loki had loved to talk his cousins and his brother into doing the most reckless and admittedly stupidest things. Like climbing one of the huge statues around the main fountain.

Thor had flashed that cocky smile when Loki had smoothly talked him into it without Thor even noticing. Something about how all kings of Asgard had constantly proven their bravery in accomplishing daring tasks.

Balder had taken a step back, had claimed that this wasn’t a good idea and Loki had mocked him for it. Mercilessly. Not that Balder had cared that much. Loki had always complained about being bored, so being the centre of his attention actually meant something. Thor had started to climb the statue, Heimdall had shown up and reduced all of them to shreds with a thunderous growl.

All of them got punished. Thor for being stupid. Balder and two other cousins for not doing anything and Loki… for causing mischief.

It was hard to think about that little incident while following Heimdall down the halls. Did he remember? Balder doubted it. He had spent very little time at the court even as a kid and Heimdall had been part of the king’s guard for over 15 years. There had to have been way more incidents with the young princes.

When they reached Loki’s rooms Heimdall knocked and then opened the door for Balder. “My lord.”

“Thank you, Heimdall.” Balder smiled back at him and then entered the salon. It was the first time he was in Loki’s rooms and they looked like he had imagined them. Naturally it was hard to personalize a room that was under monument protection, but there were small touches everywhere. Mostly books. Notepads. Not portraits on the walls, but landscapes.

“Hello Balder. Thanks for coming here so quickly.”
Something was off and Balder immediately felt a slight sting of guilt. Loki looked rough, like a person who hadn’t got much sleep. His hair was still wet, he must have showered only a couple of moments ago. The guilt intensified a bit when the thought crossed Balder’s mind that Loki looked lovely nonetheless. Not the right time. Or maybe the best time.

“Your secretary made it sound urgent. Although I would have preferred it if you had called me personally.”

Loki nodded and Balder hadn’t thought that a sheepish expression wouldn’t look completely out of place on Loki’s face. “You’re right, I am sorry. I had a long night and two long days. A bad excuse, I know.”

“It’s okay. A lot of things happened in those two days. You must have a lot of things on your mind.”

“Not too many. I am not really involved in the Jotunheim crisis. Anyway… you want something to drink? I know it’s not even noon. I could use a drink.”

“That’s not a very good sign. A glass of water, maybe?”

Ever so slowly Loki nodded. “Yeah, that would probably be for the best.” Loki left the room for half a minute, then returned with two glasses of water. He handed Balder one of them before they sat down on the couch. Loki downed the glass in one big gulp before putting it on the table in front of them. “Can we… Balder, we need to have a conversation. Can I be completely frank? And I also want you to be completely honest with me?”

Smiling lightly Balder nodded. “Sure… have you ever been anything but frank?”

“Most of the time I am frank…” Loki visibly took a breath and it was so strange to see him nervous or not completely on top of his game. Balder wasn’t sure if he liked it or not. “Okay, listen… do you know why my mother wanted us to spend time together?”

Sure, Balder could put two and two together. “I am sure that your mother can be subtle if she decides to, but in this case… she clearly didn’t. I know she would like us to…” Although the situation was quite obvious, Balder still found it incredibly hard to find the right words. “… she would like us to become an item. It’s very flattering.”

The sound Loki uttered was hard to define. Something between a laugh and a huff. “Yeah, sure… What do you think about that? I know that’s weird, but please say it right to my face.”

Weird wasn’t the term Balder would use. It was direct, bold, not romantic at all and also not the way that he preferred. Also a question like that, Loki’s unusual fidgetiness, those weren’t good signs. Balder smiled nonetheless, it was impossible not to, given the subject. “What I think about that? I wouldn’t have agreed to spend time with you if I were opposed. You wanted me to be frank… It’s you. You are clever, witty and beautiful. I kinda had a crush on you when we were children. So yeah, I would like to take you out on a real date. To see how it works out. That’s what I think about it.”

The fact that there was no clear reaction was deeply upsetting. Balder had no doubt that Loki had already figured out most of this already, so it was nerve-wracking to just sit here and wait for Loki’s reaction. Which could be pretty much anything. With Loki it was impossible to tell. “What is it that you want?”

“To be honest… I have no idea what I want.”

“You asked me to be frank. So please do the same. You put me on the spot, now you have to do
That seemed to surprise Loki, but he eventually nodded. “You are right. What I meant to say is… I like you, but this feels like… something I am being pushed to do. I don’t think something like this can work out. Especially since… that relationship would be under immense pressure and… there would expectations.”

If anybody else had said that Balder would have thought that they were trying to come up with excuses. Loki wasn’t that kind of person. He called a thing by its name. Balder wasn’t that naïve, Frigga hadn’t chosen him without a reason. His family background, the ties to Russia. Balder also liked to think that him being a good person had also played a part. All political ambition aside, she was Loki’s mother, she would want him to be happy. Loki didn’t look happy right now.

“I am not going to make this hard on you. If you aren’t interested, that’s fine. Nothing anyone can do about it. If you want to give it a try, to see how things would turn out… we don’t have to do that in public. This way we’d only have our own expectations to deal with. Nobody else’s.” Balder was surprised and relieved that he made the words sound easy and gentle. Not like he was dreaded the answer Loki might have in store for him. It was important to stay in control, to not get too emotional. At least not now. Especially now.

“Would you consider that fair? Even though I am not entirely sure what I want?”

How could a person so adamant and determined not know what they want? Balder found it hard to believe. “I don’t see how now. That’s now normal people do these kinds of things. They are going on dates without sending out an official statement to the rest of the country. Who’s to say we can’t do that?”

“Most of the time royalty doesn’t work like that.”

Balder felt his lips forming a little smile. “I am not royalty.”

“Nobility is that different?”

“Depends. Honestly I don’t care much about what the other houses do. This is about the two of us. I’m interested, you’re unsure. We’ll figure it out.” The idea crossed his mind to reach for Loki’s hand, but Balder immediately dismissed it. Definitely not the time.

Loki bit the inside of his cheek, obviously letting his thoughts wonder. “Okay… that sounds fair and reasonable… Do you want to have lunch with me?”

The biggest part of Balder was overjoyed, although he disliked just how reasonable this entire arrangement was. If there was supposed to be any little element of romance, Balder would have to take care of it. “Yes, I’d like to have lunch with you.”

“Do you cook?”

That question took him aback. “Uhm… I can’t actually remember the last time I’ve stepped into a kitchen.”

For the first time during their entire conversation Loki’s smile could be seen everywhere on his face. “Well, then we should change that, right? There are at least five kitchens in this palace… I’m sure we can use one of them.”

This was definitely going to be a treat, although Balder had serious doubts that he could be any help in the kitchen. “Fine, lead the way.”
When had sitting still become such a challenge? Jane couldn’t stop shifting around on her chair and whenever she made a tiny move, she instantly stopped, inwardly cursing herself. She was putting her own nervousness so obviously on display. Her attempts to not do so were clearly in vain, but Jane found it impossible to shake off the feeling of discomfort. The entire situation made her want to slip under the blanket of her bed and curl up into a little ball. Preferably with Thor by her side.

Why couldn’t he be here with her at the moment? She needed him here. Without Thor Jane felt completely out of place, although she was the reason and centre of the meeting. The intimidating presence of the person right in front of her didn’t help either. By now Jane should be used to the strange, somewhat ridiculous Asgardian names.

Thor and Loki were wonderful examples.

Nothing compared to Valkyrie. Either their cultures were really that different or her parents had felt the urge to make a very stupid joke. Or they had been capable of looking into the future.

Valkyrie was intimidating in every sense of the word. Her beauty was undeniable, the kind of sun kissed skin that Jane had always admired. A lean face with dark eyes and wild black hair that shimmered brown when the light fell upon it. Jane was yet to see her smile. To her Valkyrie didn’t seem like a person that smiled. Smirks, maybe. There was something stern about her, not stoic but wild. From the second when she had entered the room Valkyrie had been polite but not cordial. A very professional, let’s get down to business attitude.

At least Frigga was here. Without her Jane would have completely disappeared next to such a strong presence. Every now and then Jane tilted her head to glance at Valkyrie’s notes, only to find out that her lessons in Old Norse weren’t sufficient yet to read any runes upside down.

“Very well. Another thing that is going to be scrutinised is your attitude towards religion. A very delicate subject as you can imagine. You belong to which religious affiliation?” With Valkyrie’s eyes on her Jane found it hard to immediately respond, she always needed a second to gather her thoughts. “Uhm… my parents are Christians, but religion wasn’t very present in our home. I am not practicing any faith.”

Valkyrie’s facial expression didn’t change while she tapped her beautiful pen against the notepad. “As I’ve said before, Miss Foster, you need to be way more specific. Christianity is a very broad religion. Which denomination are we talking about? Catholicism? Orthodoxy? Anglicanism… that may be rather unlikely. Protestantism? Anabaptism? Calvinism? Methodism? You see there I am going with this?”

“I don’t really see how it matters since… none of us has been going to church in years.” Jane looked to Frigga for support and Thor’s mother smiled encouragingly. “The trúa plays an important role in any Asgardian’s life. The people will want to know about your own religious ties.”

If Frigga thought this was in their best interest, Jane was going along with it. “Protestants, but that’s only a word on paper.”

“Alright, not ideal, but we can work with that. Anybody in your family who is Mormon?” Valkyrie didn’t sound nor looked interested, so Jane was starting to get especially annoyed at these personal questions. “I don’t see the relevance.”

Casually Valkyrie put her pen down and offered Jane a rather tired gaze. “Miss Foster, it’s not you who will decide the relevance of this information. The Asgardian people will do that. They are very
spiritual, they have strong beliefs and they will want to know about your belief. Journalists are going to analyse your family history and there are a few delicate subjects that we have to discuss before they find out about them. So we’ll be ready to react if they might uncover something unpleasant.”

What would they find? Why would anyone even dig in Jane’s life? She wasn’t important, she was in a relationship with an important person. “There are no unpleasant details…”

“They might not seem unpleasant to you, but to the Asgardian people.”

“What? A Mormon in my family would be an unpleasant detail?”

Frigga joined the conversation and once again it made Jane feel a little bit better in her own skin. “What Valkyrie is trying to say is that the mere idea of bigamy would deeply upset the people. We just want to be prepared if something similar might come up. The people react to everything in a more positive way when they don’t have to learn new information from the press, but from us.”

That did sound reasonable and Jane nodded slowly. “I see… No, like I’ve said. A protestant family, but nobody who could be considered especially religious.”

“Good. Have you ever been married?”

No, Jane definitely didn’t like Valkyrie. Sure, if she weren’t here, somebody else would ask these personal questions that were nobody’s business but hers. “No and I haven’t been engaged either.”

Finally Valkyrie showed some kind of reaction and nodded. Hard to tell but Jane thought she could see slight traces of appreciation. “Good. Have you ever cheated on somebody?”

Just like that. That question didn’t sound any different from ‘Have you tried that new ice-cream flavour yet?’. Jane felt her entire body tensing up and she would have liked to tell Valkyrie to shut her mouth and leave her alone. Instead Jane took another short breath. “I really don’t think that anybody has the right to ask me that.”

Too weak, almost fragile and Valkyrie’s appreciation disappeared immediately. “Miss Foster, I don’t ask these questions because I am interested, but because other people will ask them too and if they don’t get answer, they will look for them themselves. A simple drunken kiss can become a year-long affair in a single second. It’s my job to protect the prince from this and therefore I need to know. Believe me, I am your strongest ally.”

That was most definitely true, but that didn’t mean Jane had to like it. “This must be the most unpleasant conversation I’ve ever had.”

“Jane, it’s important to get this out of the way. As soon as Valkyrie has all the information she needs you can put this aside. I am sure that your past is impeccable, but things do easily get misinterpreted. We want to make sure that this isn’t going to happen.”

Frigga reached out, softly touching Jane’s hand and smiled encouragingly at her. She was right. “No. Nothing like that has ever happened.”

More questions followed, quite bizarre ones, but Jane answered all of them while trying to not sound peeved. Eventually, after what seemed an eternity, Valkyrie had heard enough and packed up her things. It was a relief to see her go. With only Frigga in the room it suddenly seemed a lot friendlier.

“I am sorry, that really wasn’t the best way to spend an afternoon. You want to have a cup of tea? I could tell you about the Ingifastr Dinner. It is a lovely affair. Small and low-key. A perfect opportunity to show yourself with Thor for the first time.”
Jane’s head was still swimming and the last hour had made clear that it wasn’t just going to be one low-key dinner and then everything was going to be fine. Maybe the wrong choice of words. Of course it was going to be fine, but it was not going to be easy. “A cup of tea sounds wonderful. I was hoping Thor could join us now that we’re done with the questions.”

“Unfortunately Thor is still in a meeting with the king to prepare for the negotiations with the Lord of Jotunheim. That may take a while.”

Jane bit her lip and nodded. Nothing she wanted to get used to, but her mood soured anyway.

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“You jinxed me.”

“I am so immensely sorry. I am feeling terribly ashamed. What are you talking about anyway?”

“You said that I was old. Yesterday I found a grey hair. My first one. That’s totally on you.”

“You’re sure it was only one? You’re pretty old. Were you wearing glasses?”

“I look amazing with my reading glasses on.”

“What a great piece of information that I didn’t ask for. Anything else that I don’t want to know and that you’re dying to tell me?”

“No, but something I want to know.”

“Ask.”

“How does it feel when you’re a real prince, second in line to the throne, a scholar in history and politics and the first thing that comes up when someone google’s your name is that you’ve slept with me?”

“Degrading. Now everybody thinks I am into old men.”

“So what are you into?”

“History and politics… and according to my father I have a thing for men with dark hair and lithe eyes.”

“Now I seriously don’t want to ever hear what else you’re discussing with your father. That doesn’t seem to be right. Also that description only fits me to 50 percent. So it’s bullshit.”

“You have the very annoying habit of making every conversation about your looks. Feeling insecure?”

“Sorry, you used a word I’ve never heard before. Inse… what?”

“Your lack of vocabulary is wonderfully sophisticated.”

“I aim to please. Why are you still awake? It’s in the middle of the night in Valhalla. You’re still young, but even you need your beauty sleep, your highness.”

“Another long day, I am tired but too… agitated to fall asleep.”
“Yeah, know that feeling. So what were you doing before I called you?”

“Searching for test cases in the history of Spain, France, Ireland and Belgium.”

“Language politics suck. Sounds like work. Don’t you have TV or video games at the palace?”

“I am more a book kind of person. What about you? Were you bored or why did you call me?”

“I didn’t talk with my father about it, but I also have a thing for guys with dark hair and lithe eyes.”

“And for blondes. Don’t forget the blondes.”

“Hey, I am trying to sweet talk you. Don’t make me look awful in front of you.”

“Compliments are not the way to sweet talk me.”

“Compliments are the way to sweet talk everybody. It gotta be the right ones though.”

“So what would be the right compliments for me?”

“I am perfectly sure that you’re going to knock the Jotun language guys of their feet tomorrow. Good night, your highness.”

“Good night, old man.”
Hello everybody,

I really like this chapter and I hope you’ll like it too :)

Steve learns more about the trúa and the Ymirsons arrive at court to negotiate ;)

Have fun

I know I should probably focus on the life changing political crisis, but damn – the young lord of jotunheim is the fucking sexiest thing that has ever walked this earth

#jotunheim #crisis #helblindi ymirson #fucked up priorities

It was somewhat reassuring that even Asgardians sometimes paid attention to the most unimportant things while drastic political changes were happening. District attorney admitted that he had been accepting bribes for years? Who the fuck cares, there’s a new born panda baby at the zoo.

Steve was having trouble keeping up with what was going on in Asgard at the moment. It made his head spin. The newspapers were full of it, but Steve still didn’t feel confident enough to read a political article in Old Norse. That wasn’t going to work out. Thank goodness that there was an online edition of the Morgenrot – in English. They were going crazy, all of them. Nobody was even trying to downplay the seriousness of the situation. At first Steve had suspected that the whole thing might be a political stunt, a distraction or a bluff. After reading up on it and seeing other people’s reaction, the situation appeared way more serious.

Perhaps his imagination was running wild, but Steve thought that he could feel a strange tension in the air. Last night Sam and him had checked out a bar and the general mood had been sombre. People sitting at their tables with their heads close together, muttering softly and yet clearly excited. In a bad way. Sure, it was more than possible that Steve was misinterpreting things. It was hard though to miss the newspapers laid out on the tables and the constant news footage on the TV screens.

Not to forget the atmosphere at the embassy. Fury wanted to be constantly updated on every bit of news that was related to the Jotun conflict. Nothing strange or unusual about that, except for the... enthusiasm? Steve didn’t want to jump to conclusions too quickly, the harsh gaze of the bartender was still too present in his memory. The American ambassador of course had to know about every new political development in Asgard and how they might affect American interests. Up to that point everything seemed perfectly normal.

Maybe it was unfair to think about a single incident that much, but in Steve’s experience one single spontaneous glance could say more than a whole speech. It had been more or less a coincidence that Steve had been present when Fury had received the information about a new protest in the capital of Jotunheim. Evidently half of the city had put down their work and had riled up in front of the some government building. The news hadn’t talked about anything else the whole day and Steve thought that he had seen legit concern on the news presenter’s face. Not so much with Fury. Just a little glint
in his eyes. Like a man who saw a golden opportunity. It didn’t sit right with Steve, but he could be completely wrong.

The Jotunheim situation was serious, there was no denying that. Given that Steve felt strangely out of place, since he had no idea why things had come to this. Protests, yes, but completely out of context. Unfortunately Steve didn’t know any Asgardians who could explain it to him or Jotuns. Another reminder that it was time to make some Asgardian friends.

Putting that thought away Steve kept scrolling through different articles. The BBC was very helpful, comparing the Jotun conflict to Scotland’s attempts at independence. Only a lot more immediate, urgent and with way more potential to turn violent. Most other sources didn’t go that far and Steve wasn’t sure if he should buy into it. Although who was really able to predict how these things were going to turn out? Protests in the streets, a crowd of people who was already heated up and then all it needed was one crazy person to throw a stone. When had Steve become that much of a pessimist?

Taking a sip from his water Steve read another headline ‘Jotunheim through the centuries – a history of oppression’.

Now that article definitely wasn’t going to be one-sided, right? Nevertheless Steve skimmed through it. The author had created a timeline of events, easy to understand and like this it made an unbiased, very matter-of-fact impression.

- **1517** – *Soldiers of the Búrison family conquer Útgarðar The civil war ends when they take down Ymirson flag and hoist Búri’s banner over the queen’s palace*
- **Due to overwhelming loyalty to the Ymirson family in Jotunheim and open hostility towards him, the new king Búri was in constant fear of a rebellion which caused him to punish the noble families which had offered queen Lopthæna the most support during the civil war*  

Steve felt a little uneasy when he read about how the King Búri had taken the lands and possession of a big part of the Jotun nobility away and gave it to Asgardian families who were loyal to him. According to the author this was the first try to settle Asgardians on Jotun territory to weaken the Jotun unity and identity. There was also a small note that 200 years later relations between Jotunheim and the new Búrison king had drastically improved and he had given back the stolen lands to the Jotun lords. Well, that at least was something.

The dispossession of the Jotun nobility hadn’t been the only repercussion after the war. High taxes were imposed on Jotunheim to pay for the high expenses and new laws were written. Unpleasant, but still rather common consequences after an armed conflict. Even if the loser wasn’t humiliated and severely punished, the winner would make sure that winning actually paid off.

It didn’t go well for long.

- **1542** – *violent rebellions erupt all over Jotunheim in an attempt to put Lopthæna’s son on the throne since Búri is still seen as a usurper who has no right to sit on the throne. The protests are rigorously put down by the new government and as a reaction to the rebellion the first draft of the Language Act was introduced and put into action*  

There was a link to another article called ‘The Jotun Language Act of 1542 – A prime example for failed politics’. Slowly but surely Steve was getting lost in the flood of words and different opinions. Another journalist claimed that the new protests were blown out of proportion and that the Jotun population would have had very legit reasons to protest 300 years ago. Today Jotunheim was one of the richest regions in the entire world. They were enjoying the same standard of living as the rest of Asgard. The Language act had succeeded at turning every Jotun into a bilingual person, but it had clearly failed its main purpose – extirpating the Jotun language. Despite it not being taught in school
and not official signs written in Jötunr, the language was thriving. So why bother?

That idea made Steve’s stomach clench. It sounded so blatantly wrong. So if somebody tries to do you wrong, but he fails at it, that does suddenly make it okay? Or was this another case of Steve not having enough context? Well, he couldn’t learn or read up on the entire history of an entire region in one night.

Steve rubbed his eyes which were hurting from staring at the bright screen for so long. Putting his tablet away Steve glanced at the clock on the wall. Half past ten. He didn’t feel like already going to bed and staying at home tonight hadn’t been his plan anyway. Today he had asked James if they wanted to have a beer in a bar Steve had found, but James had acted weird, he had almost started squirming before telling Steve that he was feeling a little bit under the weather. It sounded a lot like an excuse and Steve couldn’t deny that James’ reaction did upset him a little bit. Or maybe he was again reading too much into it and James had merely been having a bad day. To be honest, he had looked a little bit green. Steve shortly played the thought of calling him or writing him a text to ask how he was doing, but it was already late and that would look strange.

Leaning back in his chair Steve took another look at the clock and decided that he could still go out on his own. Having made a decision Steve got up and grabbed his jacket. The bar wasn’t far away, so Steve could easily walk there.

The cool night hair also helped to give his eyes some rest, they quickly stopped to burn. It was a Wednesday, so the streets were rather quiet and Steve couldn’t say that he minded. Sure, Valhalla was a big city, there was always something going on, but it had nothing on New York. That town would never catch a break and although it was home, Steve was glad that this place way quieter.

Five minutes later he was sitting at the counter of the bar and the bartender was putting a beer down right in front of him. There weren’t a lot of people here and Steve enjoyed the casual atmosphere. It probably wasn’t the best idea and not good for his eyes, but Steve still pulled out of his phone and scrolled through his apps. He had started playing an online quiz against someone else. He wasn’t doing too bad, but every now and then Steve was shocked by his severe lack of knowledge concerning geography. How many rivers were there in Europe? Steve had no idea and he doubted that most Europeans would have any clue.

Nonetheless the quiz kept his thoughts so busy that Steve almost winced when somebody spoke up to him. It was a soft voice, saying words that Steve couldn’t understand and that clearly were Old Norse. Looking up Steve found out that the voice belonged to a young, nice looking man who offered him a smile.

Perfect opportunity to practice the one sentence that Steve could say best. “Sorry, I don’t speak Old Norse.” Steve was sure that the words sounded as clumsy as they felt on his tongue. The young man seemed somewhat surprised that Steve didn’t understand him, but then he instantly continued to smile. “Hey, I asked if I could buy you a drink.”

To say that Steve was startled would have been an understatement. This was Asgard – should he have expected that possibility? Or was he misinterpreting again? No, the reason why you wanted to buy somebody a drink where the same everywhere in the world. So no, Steve wasn’t interested in a drink or anything else. Could he say it like that? Or would that be impolite? The last thing Steve wanted was to do something that would be considered rude or inappropriate. Instead Steve settled for something more neutral. “Thanks, but I’ve barely finished my own drink.”

Smiling coyly Steve gestured at his glass and the other one nodded, not looking too disappointed. “I see. A pity. You mind?”
He pointed at the bar stool right next to Steve to ask if he could sit there. Sure, why not? Steve could always ask him to leave later on. So he nodded, but the young man never got to sit down. The bartender, only one metre away, said something clearly directed at him and it didn’t sound too friendly. For a second the man only stared at her in shock, then huffed in embarrassment before turning around and leaving.

Steve kept sitting there and had not a clue what was going on. So he focused on the bartender, letting his confused gaze speak for him.

She shrugged softly, not seeming bothered by all what had just happened. “I told him to either take of the sweatband or to get lost.”

That didn’t help to get rid of Steve’s confusion and then somebody else wanted a beer and she rushed off. No, Steve wasn’t going to let this go. It wasn’t like he had been eager to talk to the guy, but what had just happened was utterly bizarre. Sweatband? Was that a code for something? Steve definitely didn’t get it.

Eventually the bartender came back, surprised when Steve wanted to engage in a conversation. “I am sorry… What did just happen?”

“I am not an enabler. Guys like that can do that shit somewhere else.” She was pulling a face and Steve wished somebody would actually spell it out to him. “What are you talking about?”

Sighing softly she did a look around if a costumer needed something, then focused entirely on Steve. “You are Midgardian, you don’t know about these things. He was wearing a sweatband. Guys only wear a sweatband in a bar if they want to hide their marriage markings. Any Asgardian would notice, so they like to try and make a move at a Midgardian. It’s despicable. He can go somewhere else and try that shit.”

It took a moment, an embarrassingly long moment, but then Steve remembered the wedding and how the two women, so obviously in love, had drawn something on each other’s wrists. The Russian lady had told him that they were going to get the drawing as tattoos the next day. He hadn’t thought about this aspect before. Through the markings it was ridiculously easy to identify somebody as married. What did they do if they ended up divorcing? Have the tattoos removed?

“Are you saying that he… wanted to make a move on me although he is married?”

The bartender grimly nodded. “Yes, there are people who actually do that… Betraying their loved one and fucking up their luonto for what… I am sorry, you don’t want to hear that. I am ranting.”

“It’s okay. I asked…” Steve shortly considered telling her that she wouldn’t have had to kick him out, since Steve wasn’t interested in men anyway. But James had mentioned that these categories didn’t mean anything to most Asgardians. “I am Steve, by the way.”

“Edda. Nice to meet you. You are American, right? First time in Asgard?”

“Yes, first time but I’ve been already here for a couple of weeks… Still going through the culture shock.”

She flashed him a smile which completely changed her face, making her look quite pretty. “I can imagine. I travelled a month across Eastern Europe… Almost too much to take in. It’s a strange time to visit Asgard… how do you like it so far? I’m really curious.”

“Like I said – culture shock. Most people I’ve met are really nice. The city is beautiful, but there are always things I can’t just wrap my head around.”
“Like what? Example please.” Edda was smirking and Steve felt his cheeks heating up. She probably expected him to comment on their views on sexuality. No, he wasn’t going to open that can of worms. “Like what you’ve said one minute ago. The cheating part, sure I understand, but the luonto stuff? I hear people throwing around that word and I don’t get what it means. You don’t have to explain though, I’m keeping you from work.”

“Nah, barely anyone’s here and they’re all staring into their glasses. You’ve heard about the trúa before?”

Steve nodded. Heard about it, but nothing more than that.

“Trying to explain something so… I’ve grown up with it, you know. For me it’s weird that somebody can’t know about it. I’ll give it a try. Where to start…” While pondering she squinted and Steve found it slightly amusing. “It’s the trinity of the human soul. Everyone’s soul, mine, yours, the guy’s who tried to talk to you earlier… they are all made of three parts. Henki, luonto and itse. Henki is the main force of life. It’s what makes you breathe. When your henki leaves you, you die.”

Again, those were words that sounded so strange spoken out loud. Like made up by a child. Not like the centre of an entire religion that Edda was evidently very serious about. They may sound strange, but Steve nodded, glad that somebody took the time to enlighten him, so he was going to take this as seriously as her.

“I see… I haven’t heard about that one before.”

That didn’t seem to surprise Edda. “Naturally… you only talk about your henki when you’re feeling sick or going to the doctor. Excuse me for a second.”

A second which turned into several minutes, but Steve didn’t mind. She was working and other people wanted their drinks too.

“So, where was I?”

“The luonto.”

“Right… the part of your soul that guards and protects you. The stronger your luonto is, the stronger are you. Your will, your endurance. If you live a fair and good life, your luonto will thrive and grow. If you are a cheating scumbag on the other hand… you’ll deliberately destroy it. It’s such a stupid and… heinous thing to do.” Everything that she said sounded sincere, Steve could hear real disgust at the end and a little part of him thought that this was a kind of extreme mindset. Everyone could make a mistake. Could a mistake really destroy an entire part of your soul? Wasn’t this just a very easy way to demonize people?

If Edda noticed his discomfort, she didn’t let it show, just continued with her explanation. “And there’s itse. It’s created a few days after your birth, constantly developing. It defines your personality and it can get lost. Which results in depression. So that was my little crash course on the trúa. I hope it made at least some kind of sense.”

“Yeah, thank you… my head is spinning.”

“Happens to the best of us.”

***

His hands needed something to do. As embarrassing as it was to admit Thor was undoing his ponytail for about the 10th time, only to immediately tie his hair back together. Thor definitely
needed to stop doing that, since anybody with eyes would be able to tell that he was nervous. He couldn’t be the only one. Before such an important event it was completely normal to show some nerves. At least Thor liked to think so. At the same time he couldn’t imagine his father being anything but completely calm. Rightly so, it was important to keep a cool head. The Jotuns weren’t going to make it easy for them. Thor didn’t doubt that they would find a solution today. First of all they would show the Ymirsons that they were just as strong-willed as they thought themselves. Nobody was just going to roll over and give them everything they wanted.

The Ymirsons had arrived a couple of minutes ago and Odin had made sure that they were welcomed with respect and cordiality. According to their rank as lords. They were being led to the conference room this very moment. It was going to be a long day and Thor wished that it would be already over. A foolish thing to wish for, because he knew how important this meeting was going to be. They would decide about the future of Asgard and Jotunheim. Hopefully together, but Thor doubted that they would be reasonable.

Swallowing softly Thor willed himself to calm down. This was government, diplomacy. His life and his future. Time to get started.

They let them wait. Of course. Like this the Ymirsons wouldn’t get the wrong impression. Although Thor was sure that they already thought themselves in a better position. More importantly, they thought they were in the right.

The king was first to enter the room and Thor could see Laufey and Helblindi over his shoulder. One almost the spitting image of the other, one only so much more striking. So much beauty had to make a man arrogant and Thor could see it right there. Both of them stood up, as anyone would have to in the presence of the king, but they took their time. So much time that it could be clearly seen as insolence.

Odin pretended that he didn’t notice, so Thor did the same.

“Your grace.”

“My lord.”

Respectful words and yet they were devoid of any warmth. Empty phrases.

Everybody waited for Odin to sit down and even then the Ymirsons were back in their chairs way too soon. Thor was sure that the entire conversation was going to be like that. Obvious signs of insolence. Did all political leaders feel that way? That they would rather kick someone out than negotiating matters of the state with them. In the back of his mind Thor hated himself for even having that thought. What was at stake here was definitely bigger than the animosities between two different families. Could it really matter that one side was so clearly out of line when the situation was severe and dead-serious?

Thor jumps a little when Loki slid into the chair next to him. Still capable of sneaking up on him without even trying. Laufey greeted Thor’s brother by softly bowing his head, when his eyes across the short line of people on the other side of the table. Three members of the royal family, the minister of the interior and…

“I am afraid we haven’t met yet.” Once glance that was all Laufey needed. Asking a question and yet letting everybody feel that he already knew what was going on.

“Miss Beyla Lykke. She’s an interpreter.” Words spoken with no hidden meaning or filled intonation. Just facts.
Laufey only merely arched an eyebrow in mild surprise and Helblindi showed his teeth in a crooked, mischievous grin. “How thoughtful of you, but I think we will not need an interpreter. Thanks to the language act my father and I are perfectly able of maintaining a conversation in Old Norse.”

Well, the Jotun might have thought that this was a clever statement, but it obviously proved that the language act had its benefits. Why would some people only see one side of the coin?

Odin was too professional to take the bait. “I do believe that it’s in our interest to avoid any possible kind of misunderstanding. That’s why Miss Lykke is here.”

Helblindi huffed in obvious amusement which immediately rubbed Thor the wrong way. It only got worse when Helblindi leaned over to his father and muttered some soft words, clearly audible for everyone but impossible to understand.

Already, really?

Laufey’s reaction was to softly shake his head and look at his son somewhat reproachfully.

Everybody, including the two Jotuns, turned to look at the interpreter who lowered her head and it was easy to tell that she was completely horrified. Odin made a prompting gesture and she actually blushed. “I’m sorry, your grace… I can’t… The young lord didn’t say anything… substantial. He merely… used a couple of unpleasant words and said that he was curious if I was going to translate them too…”

No, really, how was Thor not supposed to want to throw them out? What made it even worse was the lithe chuckle he could hear to his right side. Of course Loki thought that this was funny.

Helblindi was grinning like a shark, but then Laufey’s cold stare made that expression quickly go away.

Unbothered Odin cleared his throat. “So let’s talk.”
Yearning

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

So, negotiations are going on and nothing goes according to plan...

Have fun ;)

BTW - Don't worry, answers to the comments of the last chapter are still coming ;)

“You’ve been to court before to demand changes enacted upon the language act. I refused. What makes you think that I will react favourably to blackmail?” Odin’s gaze was hard and unforgiving. Loki wasn’t quite sure if he had chosen that way to start the conversation. Not the worst beginning though, showing the other party that they wouldn’t just back up. There had to be a compromise somewhere, but the Jotuns had to know that concessions on both sides were necessary.

“We’re not blackmailing. We’re demanding our rights. What would that even look like? Having to blackmail your political leader into granting you your rights. Now that’s a very grim picture.” Helblindi was smiling and it had such bite to it. In that moment Loki hated him for saying the exact same thing Loki would have said.

“What rights are we even talking about? The list of demands you’ve sent us? Not all of those can be considered rights. Privileges at best. How are we supposed to have a dialog when you’re asking for things that cannot be up for discussion?”

Thor was making a reasonable argument. It was a good start, letting them know that they wanted to have a dialog. So many other people would be affected by this meeting, they had to make an effort. A damn good effort.

Laufey’s grim expression had Loki guessing if he even was capable of smiling. Or had he seen him smile before? Loki couldn’t remember. His blue eyes were focused, vivid. “The right of every Jotun to be treated like any other citizen of Asgard.”

This was the main argument. Precise and meaningful and Loki believed him. He couldn’t quite tell why. Maybe it was indeed the eyes. Laufey was here for his people, the ones he was responsible for, he felt like a part of them. So this wasn’t about him fighting against the family that he still accused of stealing his heritage. His rightful throne. Loki hoped that his father could see it too.

“The constitution of this nation is quite clear.” Odin spoke slowly, probably to make every single word heard and understood. No room for misunderstandings. “Every single citizen is equal before the law. They pay the same taxes, they have all access to health care and education.”

“As lawyer, your grace, I can assure you that some people are more equal than others. Primus inter pares. As in everybody who isn’t Jotun.” The condescending smile had left Helblindi’s face. Now there was open hostility and he wore it fine.

Loki opened his mouth, but for once Thor was faster than him. “It cannot be denied that wrongdoings have been committed in the past. There was also compensation. If we want to find a
compromise we have to be honest with each other. No verbiage. There is no distinction between
Jotuns and other Asgardian citizens before the law.”

Helblindi sneered and Loki knew that he was dying to say something, obviously something very
unpleasant. Probably something true. Yet his lips remained sealed.

“Do you really believe that, your highness?” Laufey cocked his head, his blue eyes now on Thor and
everybody could hear the slightly patronizing tone.

“Yes.”

The next second Loki learned a very important piece of information and he stored it away. Helblindi
didn’t have a lot of patience, but he made up for it with his temper. “Why do I have to listen to the
fool while the smart one who knows what’s really going on is sitting here, keeping his mouth shut?”

Loki clenched and unclenched his fingers, his mind trying to figure the Jotun’s intentions out before
anybody else could respond. The comparison, again. A compliment and an insult. Still trying to
create a divide, but this seemed too clunky. Too obvious. Almost honest. Which wouldn’t make
much sense.

“Have you not taught your son how to keep his tongue in check? I am surprised by his lack of
manners.” Odin didn’t sound surprised at all or bothered. Just like Laufey and Helblindi.

“I taught him to speak his mind, although I don’t always agree with what he is saying. At this point
we have other things to worry about than etiquette.” Laufey responded drily and Loki couldn’t fight
it to feel the slightest bit impressed by how uninterested Helblindi was in Odin’s critic. “You can
quote the law all you want, your highness. It does not guarantee equal opportunities. 500 years and
not a single Jotun minister. Not for lack of qualification. 500 years and not a Jotun working at the
court. Want to lecture me again on how everybody is completely equal?”

The temperature dropped several degrees and Loki forced every single muscle of his body into
stillness. The soft melody of an almost forgotten lullaby was suddenly again present in his mind,
unable to shake off. He couldn’t show any visible reaction. Not a single wince. Helblindi wasn’t the
type of person to miss something like that. Although Loki was sure that he had himself under perfect
control, he felt Helblindi’s blue eyes flicker to him for a mere second. Long enough probably. Damn
it.

Damn him.

Thor didn’t notice any of it, just like everybody else in the room. Except for one. “There aren’t
actually many Jotun applicants for a job at the Búrison court.”

Pushing the lullaby out Loki focused on the here and now. He didn’t like the tone of Thor’s voice. A
bit condescending. Of course not a lot of Jotuns would want to work at the court. Working for a king
they didn’t consider their king. Helblindi wasn’t going to go for that.

“There is a lot of space between ‘not many’ and ‘none at all’.” Helblindi pointed out and let those
words sink in for a moment before continuing. “This is unacceptable. This has to stop.”

“As a lawyer you should be able to voice demands way more precise.”

Now those blue were on the face of Loki’s father and it was the second time that Loki wouldn’t let
anybody see his reaction. That kind of loathing was alien to Loki. Being capable of hating somebody
so much.
“Alright, fine. I am not asking for special treatment, because you’re going to accuse of that in about 30 seconds. Nobody wants a Jotun quota. Just equal opportunity for everybody. No application being thrown into the trash, because a Jotun wrote it.”

“That’s not what has been happening until now.”

Helblindi released a shaky breath and then muttered a couple of words which the interpreter was quickly to translate. “Don’t take me for a fool.”

This was going nowhere, Loki had to change course, instantly. Important matters, but nothing they could write down. Nothing that would make the people get off the streets. Better talk about something that was way more important.

“This conversation hasn’t been going on for 5 minutes and we are already stuck in a circle. You are right, this is an issue, but it only concerns people who already find themselves in an incredible high and privileged position. An issue that will be addressed, but you didn’t make all this way here because of that.”

Loki hoped that this would be enough.

“Exactly. We will have to cut this story short. The language act has to go. Completely. Otherwise we have nothing to talk about.” Slow, calculated and dead serious. Laufey wasn’t here to scrap at the surface.

It wasn’t Loki’s duty to respond, the words were directed at his father and Odin was taking his time. Still strategizing. “A couple of weeks ago you came to me demanding that one single part of the language act should be changed. I refused. Now you ask for its complete abolishment. Just why do you believe that your demands will come to fruition now?”

“Because by now you have used up all the good will and patience that the Jotun people had left. They’ve waited enough and if Asgard isn’t willing to treat us as brothers and sisters, then our time together must ultimately come to an end.” He was so matter-of-fact and Loki lamented the fact that every word was drenched in honesty. Everything would be so much simpler if Laufey didn’t mean it. If he were another old, power-hungry man that felt like history had treated him and his family wrong. Instead Laufey actually cared about what his people were going through, identified with them, feeling like he was suffering under the exact same circumstances.

And this was them, decedents of the men who had created all these problems, because 500 years ago there hadn’t been so many ways to secure one’s power. Especially after the birth of Lopthæna’s son. Still the son of a princess, not the best claim to the throne, but nevertheless the grandson of the rightful king.

To Loki it was still a little bit of a miracle that he hadn’t been killed. After all his birth had made it blatantly clear that Jotuns would never completely accept a king who wasn’t an Ymirson. 500 years ago and nothing had changed.

“Despite what you may believe, a law that has been in action for half a millennium is not that easy to abolish.”

“I disagree. You are the king. You declare it invalid and it’s gone. It takes one signature.” Helblindi pointed out and Loki could feel how badly he wanted another reason to lose his temper. It was right there. Odin had no intention to give into this demand, so Loki had no idea why he hadn’t already said so. Because the negotiations would then be all over? Laufey wasn’t going to roll over and forget about all that he had just said. Over centuries Jotuns had always encountered resistance. They had
never backed down.

Not knowing what his father was stalling for, Loki casually straightened up in his chair. It wasn’t just about what he thought was right. This was politics. “The language act has immense influence on every sphere of public life in Jötunheim. A complete abolishment would be rather chaotic. Especially since not every single person who lives in Jötunheim is actually Jötun. Traffic signs. Administration. Not everything can be changed within a day. It’s your language. Your region, but… There is no denying that the language act was used as a retributive measure. Nevertheless it helped creating a proper government, there has to be functioning communication between the different regions and within the regions. Let’s assume the language act goes away. What would Jötunheim look like then?”

“Better. Happier. Let’s not act like this is an entirely new idea. We have been proposing changes for decades. A lot of road names are going to be changed. The signs are going to be bilingual. Administration completely in Jötunar. Diplomatic correspondence is going to be bilingual. Jötunar and Old Norse are both going to be taught in schools. Broadcasts are going to be in Jötunar.”

Impossible. Odin wasn’t going to go for that. It was too much at once. Perhaps Loki could get them to agree on something less radical to begin with. Administration in Jötunar? Way too big of a step. The street signs and the road names, maybe. Loki might be able to talk his father into that. Except for… Loki wanted to close his eyes in silent frustration when it came to his mind that lots of streets in Útgardar were named after Búrisons kings and events with historic importance to Asgard. Laufey was going to rename them and Odin wasn’t going to have any of it. That was a direct attack on his legacy. Nothing mattered more to old men than their legacy.

“I am sure that we can come to a mutual agreement.” Loki ignored the look Helblindi was giving him and they started all over again. They weren’t getting anywhere. Too many things came up. Búrisons statues and monuments all over Jötunheim that were considered an insult and constant provocation. Flags, coins, holidays. It was too much and so terribly obvious that they had missed hundreds of years to improve the situation even the slightest bit.

Odin and Laufey had to be furious to find out that they had one similar trait. They were equally stubborn. Both of them refused to make the tiniest step back. After five hours Loki was relieved that the Ymirsons hadn’t stormed out and immediately declared Jötunheim’s independence. They would continue tomorrow and Loki was already asking himself what could change their opinions overnight.

Nothing…

Another two hours of discussion between Odin, Thor and Loki which also led to nothing. This overwhelming distrust and the fear that if you gave Jötunheim your hand, they would take the entire arm and Asgard was going to lose the region anyway. Loki couldn’t bring himself to believe that. They were brothers and sisters. Jötunheim wasn’t going to leave if they felt their voices being heard. His father was of a different opinion.

Eventually Loki was glad to get out of that room which by now felt like there was no oxygen at all in it. Back in his rooms Loki collapsed onto one of the sofas and closed his eyes while letting out a long breath. How could sitting around and not moving at all make you so tired? Every single limb in his body hurt. Or maybe it was the knowledge that he hadn’t done anything. A whole day dedicated to the greatest political challenge of their lifetime and Loki hadn’t been able to make an impact. He could have easily taken the day off and it wouldn’t have been any different.

The phone in his pocket started vibrating, it had already done that a few times during the meeting and Loki groaned. Pulling it out Loki tossed it away and then dropped his head back on the cushion. Why not just fall asleep and call it a day? Tomorrow they would do it all over again and Loki had no
idea how this was going to end. Laufey was going to lead Jotunheim away from Asgard and Odin…
Loki didn’t want to think about it right now. Although it should definitely be the only thing that he
should be thinking about.

Loki’s eyes flew open and his hand came up flying to grab whoever was touching his hair. Balder
was smiling sweetly at him, of course and Loki’s heartbeat instantly slowed back down.

“Hey, I didn’t want to startle you. I thought you heard me.”

“No, I didn’t… Were you… Were you already in the room?” Loki was confused, because no matter
how distracted he was, he would have heard the door opening.

“Yes, the guards let me in, so I could wait for you. Nobody had an idea how long the meeting was
going to last. I guess it didn’t go down so well judging by how you stormed in without noticing
me… or how you treated your poor phone.”

Loki huffed in response, but he wasn’t going to deny that Balder was right. So much about just lying
here and trying to catch his breath. On the other end – Balder was a friendly face and Loki felt like
he hadn’t seen one of those in ages.

“It definitely wasn’t pleasant. Way too long without any results and tomorrow it starts all over again.
I have no idea how this is going to turn out.” Loki sighed and Balder nodded softly. “Do you want to
talk about it? Or do you want to talk about anything but?”

Quite surprised himself Loki realised that he was suddenly smiling too. “Anything but… You can
get up to your feet, you know?”

Shrugging lightly Balder kept kneeling on the floor right next to the sofa, his hand placed on the
cushion next to Loki’s head. “I don’t mind… You don’t look like you want to get up anytime soon?”

“What? I just lay down…”

“A pity… I wanted to take you out to dinner and then to have some cocktails.”

Just the mentioning of food made Loki realised that he hadn’t eaten in hours and he did feel a bit
hungry. “I thought we agreed that we wouldn’t…”

“I know, I don’t want to go out. My place? We’ll order in and I’ll take care of the cocktails. I can’t
cook, but I can mix different sorts of liquors together.” Balder somewhat smirked. It was a new
expression and Loki decided that he liked it. “I can’t get trashed, I have an important meeting
tomorrow morning.”

“I didn’t say anything about getting trashed. That’s your interpretation. No, seriously, what do you
say?”

“I say it sounds great. Give me another hour or two? I’d like to take a shower and nap a bit. I feel
bad that you waited all this time, but I think I still need a moment to be presentable.”

Balder nodded in understanding, because of course he would understand. Two minutes later Loki
was alone again, they agreed to meet up in two hours at Balder’s place. Until then Loki had to get
ready and to hopefully feel like a person again. He kept lying on the sofa for about 20 minutes until
he finally got up to his feet. This time Loki didn’t bother to look after his clothes, he just dropped
them right next to the sofa and made his way to the bathroom. The shower was a relief, but Loki’s
thoughts kept drifting back to the conference room and how they hadn’t achieved anything when so
much was on the line. It hadn’t gone down any better with his father or Thor.
Stepping out of the shower Loki wrapped a towel around himself and rushed back into the salon. He could only ignore the sound of his phone vibrating so long. Leah. Huh. That could be pretty much about everything.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, your highness, but it’s urgent.”

Wonderful and Loki was dripping all over the floor. “I’m listening.”

“The young lord of Jotunheim just contacted me. He wants to talk to you and… to quote him ‘without the whole palace immediately knowing about it.’”

Loki froze, taken aback. What was this guy planning now? Was he trying to get Loki instantly after the meeting, because he thought he was still tired and not on top of his game? And he was completely right about that.

“He called you?”

“Yes, just two minutes ago.”

“Anybody else knows about this?”

“Of course not, your highness. The lord was very clear, he only wants to talk to you.”

Which was almost impossible in the palace. Loki had to meet him, naturally. He wasn’t going to miss out on what Hellblindi had to say. It couldn’t be anything good. There was no way in hell he was going behind his father’s back to come to an agreement with Loki. Something else was going on and Loki wasn’t going to trust one single word coming out of Hellblindi’s mouth… and probably vice-versa.

“Tell him to meet me in the garden. Behind the oaks. He can’t miss it. In 15 minutes.”

“Consider it done, your highness.”

15 minutes wasn’t enough to completely dry his hair, but Loki did his best to look at least somewhat presentable. Loki would have probably spent half an hour in front of his wardrobe, but now things had to move along a lot quicker.

Those 15 minutes went by amazingly fast and yet they felt like agony. Loki couldn’t get rid of that unpleasant sensation in his guts. Not such inside him, but also on his skin. There were no words to describe how much Loki loathed the fact that Hellblindi made him nervous. Just a couple of words and Loki was up all night wondering was the Jotun was trying to gain from it. Only to come to a very simple conclusion - Helblindi probably just wanted him to wonder and to go crazy.

Not going to happen this time.

Loki’s steps were slow and he took all the corridors that were usually devoid of people. Nobody needed to see him. Stepping out into the garden Loki was welcomed by the cold air and that was just wonderful. Nobody was going to go outside now. Well, except for them.

Looking over his shoulder Loki made sure that nobody was behind him or at the windows, which was completely ridiculous. Helblindi was probably watching him and laughing his ass off.

Making his way further into the garden Loki slowly walked up to the oaks and then around them to
find Helblindi leaning against the trunk of one of the trees. Glad in a long blue coat that looked fantastic. Loki shouldn’t be thinking that.

“Now those were a couple of hours well spent, weren’t they?”

“You wanted to talk. I am here. What do you want?” Direct, a bit annoyed. Perfect.

Helblindi pushed himself off the tree, burying his hands in the pockets of his coat. “Down to the point, okay. I liked what you said. Not all of it, but most of it. However, your brother is an idiot and your father an old, stubborn man who fears to lose his control over Jotunheim if he loses his grip on it just the slightest bit.”

Loki didn’t even rolled his eyes, he just turned around. “I am not listening to this.”

“Why not? I was just getting started… Haven’t I told you before that you shouldn’t be pretending that you don’t know better? That you aren’t smarter than them? You publicly disagree with your father all the time, you disagreed three hours ago. I also disagree with my father a lot. He thinks that this little circus here is going to lead to something. That he and your father can come to some kind of agreement.”

Stopping Loki merely turned his head. “Isn’t that what we all hope for? To find an agreement that everybody can live with.”

“Sure, but it’s not going to happen. You know that.”

Exhaling loudly Loki completely faced him, wishing that he would get to the point. “So what do you suggest?”

“The older generation isn’t capable of figuring this out. Therefore it has to be us.”

Loki wanted to laugh, because he could see where this was going. All he could do was pushing it down, far away. “It doesn’t matter if you are talking about your own hands or mine. It’s treason either way.”

Helblindi smiled and that definitely was earnest amusement. “Such a harsh word to throw around.”

“Patriotism? Love for my country? Trace my family tree back and you’ll see that I am the rightful heir to the throne.” Loki was waiting for the great speech about thieves and usurpers, but it never came. Instead Helblindi shrugged. “I don’t give a damn. Oh, sure I could correct a lot of things… To be honest I might go crazy just thinking about what I could do. How I could make it all go away

What were they doing here? Was this an elaborate plan? Making it look like Loki was conspiring with him? No, that was ridiculous.

“What would you call it?”

“Patriotism? Love for my country? Trace my family tree back and you’ll see that I am the rightful heir to the throne.” Loki was waiting for the great speech about thieves and usurpers, but it never came. Instead Helblindi shrugged. “I don’t give a damn. Oh, sure I could correct a lot of things… To be honest I might go crazy just thinking about what I could do. How I could make it all go away
with a single gesture of my hand. The oppression my people have been living under. The first thing
I’d do… getting rid of that statue of your great-great grandfather on the main square. I’d tear it down
with my bare hands… but I am not going to be king. It’s been 500 years and your family is couldn’t
be more established or more accepted. It may be my birth right, but I am not an option. You are.”

His eyes were of the most perfect, purest blue and they were staring right at Loki. Through him.
They saw what Loki was trying to hide. That feeling. Pulling it right back up to the surface. “You’re
being ridiculous.”

“You are smart, you have a backbone, the people adore you. The second Thor is going to present his
American… girlfriend, fiancé, whatever… they will beg for you to step up, because you are so much
better suited…”

“Shut up!”

“You are brilliant, you care about the people, you don’t support the American policy, you fuck a
weapons manufacturer and then tell him to fuck off and your lovely, future, completely innocent
spouse is going to score lots of points.”

Loki wasn’t going to listen to this. Why hadn’t he seen it coming? “I’m leaving.”

The second time he turned around and this time Helblindi grabbed his arm, invading his personal
space, his lips close to Loki’s ear. His speech was rushed, grave and every bit of sarcasm was gone.
“Listen to me. Your father and brother still think that this is merely about a grudge, about losing
superiority, a family deposed. My people are oppressed, for 500 years every kind has forbidden them
to talk in their own way. Symbols of defeat are all over the capital and with the American policy…
the king sold us to them. The language act has to go, that’s the only thing that might stop things from
escalating. I don’t want a Jotun nation, but my people can’t do this anymore and they shouldn’t have
to do this anymore. It’s them who decide, not me or my father and if their situation doesn’t improve –
it’s either leaving or… chaos, rebellion, riots. People might get hurt and I don’t see your father or
your brother reacting reasonably in this kind of situation. You could help us to avoid all of this. We
could work together and make this all right. I will be the first Lord of Jotunheim who calls a Búrison
his rightful king.”

Loki stared at him, rendered speechless by him for the second time. Helblindi looked back at him,
firm and unyielding.

After yanking his arm free Loki fled, telling himself that his heart wasn’t racing and that he wasn’t
yearning.
Hello everybody,

Wow, that chapter took ages, but now it's done

Have fun with it :)
Rhodey gave him one of those looks. Like he wanted to strangle him, because he loved him. *I have to smack you, because you are stupid and you are going to hurt yourself and I don’t want that to happen.* Maybe Tony should slow down a bit. Also he wasn’t sure which Rhodey he should be talking to. All three of them looked equally pissed off. After rubbing a hand over his eyes there was only one Rhodey left to deal with. Way better.

“I am getting tired of that question myself, but... when was the last time that you’ve slept?”

“I can honestly answer that I have no idea…” Tony was almost proud. He hadn’t lost track of time like that in ages.

“And you seriously believe that you can still function like that? Yes, I remember MIT, you could leave on pop tarts and caffeine for an entire week and still write the best paper of the entire year. But that was over 20 years ago. Sorry to tell you, you are too old to pull that off now.”

That was supposed to help him somehow, Tony was sure. “Hey, don’t underestimate my ability to fuck up my own body.”

Rhodey knew him, he was well aware that sometimes it was impossible to get a straight answer from Tony. Yet for some reason Rhodey never stopped asking. “Okay, this is getting ridiculous. Just tell me what you are doing, Tones. Then maybe I can understand better what’s going on, then I would stop worrying and stop getting on your nerves. Doesn’t that sound tempting?”

It wasn’t a terribly complicated question, Tony had to give him something. Sure, he wanted to roll his eyes when Rhodey called to make sure that he was fine and eating. It was slowing him down while working, so most of the time Tony just didn’t take his calls. Which had only resulted in Rhodey coming here dragging him out of his workshop by force. Probably for the best, but Tony wasn’t going to say thank you and Rhodey didn’t expect him to. Still, when your best friend cared about your health and state of mind, you should let him know about one or two things that were going on in your life. Or in Tony’s case – the single one thing going on in his life. It wasn’t about trust. Rhodey would be person to call if Tony needed somebody to talk, feared for his life or a helping hand to get rid of a dead body. No, it wasn’t about trust. Tony was superstitious. Right now he was still working on a dream, taking about it would make it real and failure would become a very real possibility.

“What would you say were the 3 greatest events of your entire life until now?” Tony was still chewing on a fork full of eggs while voicing that question.

Again Rhodey wasn’t surprised that Tony hadn’t given him an answer, but he instantly starting thinking which Tony could easily tell by the expression on his face. “Well, off the top of my head I’d say... first time I was flying a plane, naturally. What else? I guess making out with Rita Anderson in the back of my dad’s car. And the one time I beat you at battleships.”

“You know that I let you win, don’t you?”

“I will deny that till the day that I die.”

Tony had to laugh with his mouth still full which resulted in him almost choking. Rhodey gave him a dark look that said ‘Can’t you do anything without endangering yourself?’. As soon as Tony had regained his ability to breathe normally he decided that it was his turn. “For me it’s the day that finally kicked Obie out of the company. The first time I gathered up the courage to tell my dad to go and fuck himself. And the one time I got a prince to get down on his knees and worship me like a god.”
“I don’t need details, thank you very much. So?”

Although by now Tony was somewhat enraptured by the idea of putting his head on the table top and falling asleep, he was going to give Rhodey an explanation. “As soon as I’ve finished what I’m working on… I’ll have to rewrite the list. Which is going to be quite difficult, because the list is amazing. Nonetheless one thing will have to go, because… it’s going to be the most important and best thing I’ll ever create and I’m not going to say anything else, because I’m not going to jinx it. Okay?”

Not totally okay, Rhodey was still frowning, clearly confused, but he was also willing to let it go. “Fine. Just don’t forget to sleep.”

No false promises, therefore Tony merely shrugged. “Food’s great by the way. Thanks for dropping by.”

That honest little comment earned him a smile and although Tony hadn’t felt bad, he now felt a little better.

***

“Here. It’s Spanish, I’m sure you’ll like it.”

Loki was glad when Balder handed him a glass of red wine, with something in his hands he would finally have to stop fidgeting. Embarrassing and so painfully obvious. Balder had a set of eyes, so he had noticed, but since he was this incredibly nice and pleasant person, he hadn’t commented on Loki’s state. No, instead he offered Loki a glass of wine before dinner, because he knew that it would calm down his nerves.

In this moment Loki hated himself. When he was so easily manipulated and confused. By now 40 minutes had passed since the meeting with Helblindi and Loki was still shaking. Nothing had happened. Just a couple of words which didn’t mean anything as long as nobody acted upon them. Loki wasn’t going to do that. He should be able to turn around and forget about them. The Ymirsons hated their family, they would always loathe how history had turned out. That their throne had been taken from them. Their language.

Helblindi was young, smart and from what Loki could tell, he was also reckless. It made sense that he would use dirty methods to get what he wanted. So what did the future Lord of Jotunheim want?

Taking a sip from the wine Loki used it to calm himself down, not really caring about the taste. What would Loki do if he were in Helblindi’s position? What did he even know about him? Quite a lot, Loki had studied the history of every single noble family of Asgard.

“Do you like it?”

Loki turned his head, but Balder had already disappeared into the kitchen. “Yes, thank you.” He exclaimed before looking back out of the window without seeing anything.

They were the same age. Exactly the same age, only apart by a couple of months. Loki had been born in February, Helblindi in November. Despite being older Loki was a second-born, Helblindi the heir to his father’s lordship. According to Jotun belief that made him the heir to the throne. An immensely wealthy family with an impressive heritage. They were proud of it. More than just proud. They weren’t just clinging to this idea because of greed or arrogance. No, this was sheer conviction. Every single Ymirson parent was telling their children the same thing – your birth right is the throne of Asgard. You would be sitting on it right now if it wasn’t for that family of usurpers who wouldn’t
accept a woman on the throne.

As a history scholar Loki could state that things weren’t that simple. They never were and yet Loki had to admit that they had good arguments. The main male line of the Ymirsons had died out, but there had been other relatives. Cousins. Uncles. All of them had been casted aside. Búri had seized control and since then Loki’s family had been ruling Asgard…

And had done everything to keep the Ymirsons small…

A dark realisation manifested itself, although it was anything but new. There was no way Helblindi, Laufey Ymirson’s son and future Lord of Jotunheim, would legitimately want a Búrison on the throne.

Their short encounter replayed itself in Loki’s memory like a video. He perfectly remembered the blue eyes and the expression in them when Helblindi had told him that the throne didn’t matter to him. Sure, he had sounded sincere, but if a lawyer wasn’t a good liar…

“Loki, will you join me?”

Startled Loki turned around and there was Balder, standing by the table, ready to have dinner. Feeling embarrassed by his behaviour and lack of attention Loki quickly made his way over to the table and put down his glass. “This looks really good…”

“I figured everybody likes Italian. I just found this place and they have delivery service. Seemed like the obvious choice.”

Loki felt his lips forming a little smile. Balder was so eager to please him, it was indeed endearing. Perhaps he should concentrate on that. It might clear his head. Sitting down Loki let his eyes run over the table, trying to figure out what to try first. Only now while looking at the antipasti Loki felt actually hungry.

Balder was gracious enough to let five entire minutes pass before speaking up again. By now Loki had eaten a bruschetta and it was delicious. “Do you want to talk about what happened between now and when you left?”

So terribly obvious and Loki winced. “What do you mean?”

Balder gave him a new kind of smile. Like he was being charmed by Loki’s cluelessness. “When I talked to you, you were… tried, worn out… a bit cranky. Now you are… nervous and absent. I know you have a lot to think about after today, but I can tell it’s different. You’ve said at the palace that you want to talk about anything but, so… I am merely a bit worried.”

Naturally. Loki didn’t believe that Balder was completely uninterested in how the Jotun conflict would turn out. Every single Asgardian was interested in that. Scared. Worried. At the moment Balder was more interested in Loki. More worried about him. Loki felt a warm tingle and its mere presence would quickly turn unpleasant. This was stupid. Why would he feel strange about somebody caring? Just because Loki wanted to be strong and independent didn’t mean that he couldn’t enjoy somebody’s affection. It was there. For the taking. Not what Loki was looking for. He hadn’t written to his ancestors about this.

That didn’t mean that it wasn’t right or good. What had Stark said? That Loki needed somebody to give him shit. To wear him down. What did Stark now? A lot… At least he had known how to play Loki’s game and that had been hugely enjoyable. Charm and looks. His mother had told him to look for something more. Loki didn’t quite know what that was supposed to be.
Or why he was thinking about all of this. Why he was here, having dinner with another man when Helblindi was definitely trying to come up with ways to manipulate their entire family and to cut Jotunheim off the rest of Asgard. Loki should be…

“It’s okay if you don’t want about what happened. But we need to talk about something, don’t we?”

Balder was pretty, his smile always reached his eyes. Loki wondered if there was a single dishonest bone in his body. Probably not and that made him vulnerable. Not weak, but easy to attack. There was a good chance that Loki’s snark and carelessness would rip holes into him.

“I am sorry, I am clearly not the best company tonight. I’m trying to clear my head, but it’s pretty hard…”

“I could try to help. You want to hear a strange story about how everybody in this city doesn’t know how to drive?”

“What happened?”

Balder laughed. “Most of them obviously don’t believe in the existence of brakes. Or signalling. I got almost run over twice on the way to the grocery store. Then when I was already scared out of my mind I was patiently waiting at a cross-walk, like any decent citizen would. My traffic light was red, I was waiting. You know what happened then? Car rushed towards the cross-walk, suddenly hit the brakes. Then the driver makes a ton of crazy gestures, indicating that I should finally move… my light was red. His was green and yet he jumped on the brakes and almost starts yelling at me for not crossing the road. Everybody who owns a car in this city is insane.”

The shift of mood was so abrupt that at first Loki could only stare at Balder, his brain needing a couple of seconds to catch up with what Balder had been telling him. “Okay, uhm… I am rather amazed that you actually do your own groceries… Is your blood still blue? You should pay somebody to do that like decent nobility.”

“I can’t tell if you are serious or not that is actually scaring me.”

Despite himself Loki had to laugh and shook his head. “I made an unfunny joke, but… I am still kind of surprised that you go shopping. I think I haven’t seen the inside of store in years.”

Finally, he was giving Balder a reason not to smile. “That’s horrible. I get it, you are a prince, but I am pretty privileged myself and I think this is crazy. Does that mean the staff gets you everything?”

Loki nodded. “Pretty much yeah. I have a private tailor and everything else is pretty much only a phone call away.”

“Come on, there has to be stuff that you get yourself, right? I mean there are always things that you don’t want other people to know about… or at least you don’t want them to see them. Have you never read an embarrassing book or wanted to watch a kid’s movie?” Balder seemed legitimately curious and Loki found that amusing.

“I can still order things over amazon.”

“Great, really. I have an idea.”

“Mind telling me about it?”

Almost teasingly Balder smirked at him. “We’ll finish dinner first.”
This was getting interesting, which to be honest Loki hadn’t expected. So they continued to have dinner and Loki finally complimented on it, because the food was indeed delicious. For several moments Loki was actually capable of thinking about something else than Helblindi’s words.

Eventually they were done eating and Loki was waiting for the cocktails, but Balder instead told him to put on his coat. “I am sorry – what?”

Smiling Balder tossed Loki his coat and nodded towards the door. “I promised you cocktails, didn’t I? My mojitos are amazing, but I just noticed that I don’t have any limes. We need to get some.”

Seriously? “Just make something else.”

“And ruin this great possibility to show you the inside of a store? Come on, I promise your blue blood will still be blue even if you do a chore as ordinary as grocery shopping.”

Loki was confused and because he didn’t have a response, he checked his watch and Balder burst out laughing. Actual, uncontrolled laughter. A bit high-pitched, lithe and somewhat charming. “I can’t believe it, you don’t even know when the stores close!”

“No, I just… Okay, fine, I have no idea. Let’s get some limes.” Should Balder win this time. Loki put on his coat and followed a snickering Balder towards the door.

“I am not walking far, just so you know.”

“There’s a little shop right around the corner. Don’t worry.”

It was cold outside, Loki immediately buried his hands in the pockets of his coat. Like Helblindi had done one hour ago.

Fuck that

Loki was relieved to see that the streets were mostly empty, probably everybody was already had home, having dinner. They weren’t idiots, getting limes. At least the shop was indeed just right around the corner and it was tiny. Loki could tell that from the outside.

“Your highness, move.” Balder pretty much pushed him into the store and Loki found out that it looked any different than he had expected. Lots of shelves, dim light, one counter and a very bored employee, scanning through a magazine. For a second Loki was worrying if a store this small would even have limes, but Balder was already pushing him towards certain shelves.

“Will you stop pushing me around?”

“As soon as you’ve paid for them.”

“Do you really think that I have money on me?”

Balder huffed and pressed two limes and a banknote into Loki’s hand. “Go ahead, your highness.”

This was new and Loki found that he liked it. Sighing in defeat Loki approached the counter and put down the limes. The employee’s eyes darted to the fruit and she muttered the price without looking at Loki. Only when Loki handed her the money. He could see it happening in slow-motion.

First a frown, then her mouth dropped open and her eyes lit up. “Oh shit, you are…”

“In a hurry. Thank you, good night.” Balder’s hand was on Loki’s arm, gently but quickly pulling him out of the store.
“I just remembered why I am not doing my own grocery shopping. People freak out when they see me…”

Balder’s fingers slid down his arm and dangerously close to his fingers. “She wasn’t freaking out. She was amazed. Which is easy to understand…”

“Don’t. I’m already arrogant enough. You’ll only make it worse.” Loki muttered under his breath and they suddenly came to a halt, since Balder simply stopped walking and indeed grabbed Loki’s hand. Confused Loki raised an eyebrow at him and Balder offered him another smile. “It’s not about arrogance. You are constantly thinking about your people, you speak out for them and they know it. That’s why she looked so amazed to see you. That’s something to be proud of.”

No, there was one dishonest bone in Balder’s body and Loki realised this very second that he was playing the thought for the very first time.

Clearing his throat Loki found that his voice was a bit hoarse. “Let’s get back, okay?”

With slow steps both them made their way back to Balder’s penthouse. Loki enjoyed the silence, thinking about the possibility that Balder might be right. Perhaps Loki could allow himself to think that he was a good and attentive statesman. That wasn’t hubris. Not yet. It was different and Loki liked to think that Balder knew him better than Helblindi. He definitely made him feel different.

“Mind handing me the limes?” How many times had Balder today interrupted his thoughts? Now Loki hadn’t even really realised that they were back inside. Looking down at the limes in his hand and felt immensely ridiculous. “Sure, here.”

Hastily he shoved the limes right into Balder’s hands and flinched slightly when the other man curled his fingers around the fruits and the backs of Loki’s hands. His touch was gentle and warm. Like his smiles.

Like his kisses.

***

Heill skaltu for-eldra,

To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul, my mother Fárbauti, gone before her time

Today I sat in a room with a false king and an actual king without a crown. To see him wear his stolen position with such ease and how his eyes drift to father filled with condescendence and contempt. There is not an ounce of discomfort in this man. Not a shred of guilt although everything he owns was stolen.

Today I realised that he doesn’t hate us. We’re not worthy of his hatred. Just an unpleasant annoyance. Like a fly on the wall that wouldn’t stop bothering you. Yet not annoying enough to smash it with your hand. Why not rip its wings out and play with it?

Breathing the same air as him and witnessing how he thinks that he can also destroy our cultural heritage after stealing the birth right of my ancestors… it makes me want to commit the most darkest of sins. A knife to the heart that would not change anything, that would not end Jotunheim’s torment. No, it would worsen it.

Achieve nothing but a short lived moment of satisfaction and revenge. Did they even hesitate before sending a mercenary to murder Jóðgeirr? Did they worry about their souls?
I am in the palace, the very place that has all the answers. Just a couple of hours in the private family archive. The documents, letters, diaries... No more secrets to hide.

It makes me mad that I have to keep sitting here and wait for another meeting with the usurper. Deep inside I know that he isn’t worth destroying my luonto for. Not because of spite or hatred. All life is sacred and I should be ashamed for having these thoughts, but I can’t find it in myself to feel that way.

Father looked at me today. Like he didn’t know if he was proud of me or disappointed. All my life I have shared every single one of his opinions and now I don’t understand him. Everything is going to fall apart tomorrow and then it’s going to be us who has to make sure that Jotunheim will be safe. That’s not something I can do alone yet. Especially since the usurper is not going to let us go... even if he fell down the stairs tomorrow and died on the spot, his son isn’t of a different stamp. I could outsmart him though. Easily. The younger one is a wildcard. I have no idea which road he is going to take and it worries me...

Please, strengthen my luonto and send me my fylgja to guide me

Your son, Helblindi
Hello everybody,

Last day of negotiations - Loki is once again going through a lot of different emotions :)

Have fun :)

The muscles of his stomach were hurting, burning almost and yet Loki forced himself to sit up completely another time. Such a great way to lose sleep. Breathing hard Loki leaned his forehead against his knees. He still felt like he hadn’t made sense out of the last couple of hours and soon even more overwhelming things were heading towards him.

He should get up, shower and probably catch two hours of sleep. Looking at the clock on the wall Loki winced. One hour. Tops. Where was the point in sleeping now? Slowly struggling up to his feet Loki got himself a glass water from the bar and downed it. When he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand Loki stopped mid-motion. Another memory from a few hours ago snuck up on him and now back in his rooms, alone with his own thoughts – Loki wasn’t sure what to think.

When the kiss had happened, Loki hadn’t been surprised. There had been a moment, impossible to deny. Loki had been part of it. He had to leave it to Balder, he knew how to choose a good moment. And how to kiss. No, Loki hadn’t been surprised, he would have had time to move away. Plenty actual. Nevertheless Loki hadn’t done that, because… Because why?

Balder was sweet and perfectly safe. Grounded even. Perhaps his mother was right and Loki needed that kind of stability to calm him down. Damn, he shouldn’t even be thinking so much about this. They both had agreed to take it easy and to find out what it would lead them. Well, it had led them to kisses and Balder’s very expensive leather couch. Balder’s hand on his cheek and his teeth on Loki’s lower lip. Perfectly careful. Not usually what Loki was into, but last night he had enjoyed just that. Also Balder’s adoring smile.

Pulling off his clothes Loki tried to force himself to stop thinking about Balder or how their relationship had changed. In two hours they would be back in the conference room, debating over Jotunheim’s future. Loki had to concentrate on that. The shower he took was short. All while searching for new clothes and getting dressed Loki tried to go over his arguments and ideas, but now his phone got in the way. Something always had to come up.

“Yes?” He sounded out of breath and annoyed, but he wasn’t going to hide that.

“I am sorry for the early disturbance, your highness, but your mother wants to see you.”

Loki opened his mouth to respond, then he had to think of Balder and last night and how pleased Frigga would be. He wasn’t able to explain it, but suddenly he was overcome with anger.

“Well, my mother knows where to find me.” Without saying anything else Loki hung up and continued to get dressed. He couldn’t find the energy for another discussion inside of him. Not when the most important meeting of his lifetime was only 100 minutes away. Had one of the others got
some sleep? Loki didn’t hope so. Otherwise he’d be the only tired person who had no idea what he was doing. It happened rarely, but today Loki thought that being a commoner would be so much easier and perhaps even so much for fulfilling. Or would there be any difference? Loki couldn’t do much in his position either.

Grabbing one of the discarded towels Loki continued to rub his hair dry. He didn’t feel like making a big effort today to make him look presentable. What was the point of it anyway when a ridiculous gorgeous person would be present anyway and make everybody else look like…

Loki wasn’t even going to finish this thought. A prince and counsellor of the crown and yet Loki was actually thinking about ridiculous things like someone being more attractive than him. Why couldn’t he control the direction in which his thoughts were going?

The knock on his door surprised him although he already knew who it was. “Come in.”

Frigga was already in full entire, looking well rested and she had a patient smile on her lips and it upset Loki. Which was way he turned away slightly. “Good morning, mother.”

“Good morning, Loki. My secretary said you were in a bad mood. This early?”

“Does that really surprise you?” Loki dropped the towel and walked back into the bathroom to get his hairbrush. When he came back Frigga had sat down on the couch, her legs crossed, her back perfectly straight. Even as a little boy Loki had already admired her natural elegance. Something he had always tried to mimic.

“I could not get a hold of you yesterday. I did not have the opportunity to ask you about the negotiations.”

“I am pretty sure you must have talked about it with father.” Loki knew that he was being unfair and his mother didn’t deserve his dismissive tone, but he couldn’t help himself.

Once again turning his back to her Loki looked at himself in the mirror next to the chimney and started brushing his hair.

“Of course I have talked to your father, but I want to hear your opinion. What do you think about it? Or which direction it might go. I want to hear what you are thinking, Loki.”

It was hard to hold on to his anger when he didn’t even know the reason. “I think that we are stuck in a dead-end and that today the crisis will only intensify.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s like you’ve always said – father can’t shake off the belief that giving in to the Ymirsons or the Jotuns in general is like admitting that our family stole their rights and property. Father believes that if he loosens the chains on the Jotuns they will feel empowered and confirmed in their belief that we have done them wrong 500 years ago. That only now we’re trying to make up for it. The consequence would be them demanding more and more and father is afraid that people might start asking why an Ymirson isn’t on the throne… We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” Loki tried to pull his hair back, but it was still too short to tie it together. Perhaps he should grow it out.

After putting the brush down Loki turned around to find his mother smiling gently at him. She looked content with him. “Did you just quote Thomas Jefferson?”

Loki shrugged. “A very smart and good man who couldn’t face a dark issue, because the right time
hadn’t come yet. Or at least he thought so… I think it’s a fitting comparison.”

“Slavery compared to the Jotun conflict? I doubt your father would appreciate that.”

“I wasn’t talking about slavery but a man who does not see himself or his people ready to overcome something that is much older than themselves and so perfectly normal although they themselves… despise it.” Sighing softly Loki stood up to get his waist coat, he had laid out his clothes the night before.

Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Frigga nodding softly, showing appreciation. At least she agreed with his choice of wardrobe.

“I am not exactly sure if your father despises the language act or the other forms of oppressions that Jotunheim has been put under.”

Loki shook his head and buttoned up the dark green waist coat. “Father is a good man and a good king. He does not want to treat people unfairly… it’s just… it has been ingrained in him that he can’t let loose on Jotunheim. Because if he does, the next time he turns around they will stab him in the back.”

“Do you believe that?”

“No, those are our people and they merely want to live their lives like everybody else. Unfortunately it’s not going to come to that.”

“Why not?”

His mother knew all about that, she was only trying to find out what Loki was thinking about all of this. “Father is stubborn and Laufey is… dedicated to his people and although he does a good job of leaving his personal feelings out of the conference room… he loathes us. He is not willing to compromise. He wants all or nothing. Unstoppable force meets immovable object.”

Hopeless, it was completely hopeless. Stuck between stubborn old men who refused to move.

Frigga nodded, as if he hadn’t expected anything else. “And the young one? Helblindi?”

She pronounced his name softly and with care, but it didn’t do anything to stop Loki’s chest from tightening. Although he hated himself for it Loki took a second before answering, long enough pretend his heart was still beating at the exact same speed it had two seconds before. “I can’t assess him. Not to flatter myself but that happens rarely. He’s playing his own game and I don’t know who are his pawns. Or if I have already become one…”

“I have met Laufey’s sons a couple of times over the last twenty years. They all have the same traits in common. Beauty, sharp wit, a bit of malice and a strong sense of justice. I am sure the young Lord is going to use every trick in his book, but he isn’t an unfair person. Like his father.” Frigga offered him a comforting smile and Loki nodded slowly. “I think he might be more open to compromise, but it’s not his decision and…” Loki remembered his words. Spoken with so much honesty and yet probably with dark intent. Poking at Loki’s desires. Trying to turn him against Thor. “…I don’t trust him. With Laufey I know that he means every word he says. Helblindi… he is a lawyer for Búri’s sake… the scum of the earth.”

Now his mother answered with a laugh and got up from the couch. “How many people would say the exact same thing about politicians? By the way Thomas Jefferson was a lawyer.”

Loki rolled his eyes and reached for his frock coat. “What I am trying to say… maybe there is a way
to find a solution with Helblindi, but father is not going to go for it. Helblindi doesn’t have a say in all of this and neither do I. It’s up to someone else…”

Slowly Loki slipped on the frock coat and Frigga adjusted the lapels. “You cannot underestimate the value and influence of good counsel. I am so proud of you.”

Again her eyes were sparkling and she looked beautiful. Loki felt that he was blushing when Frigga cupped his cheeks and pressed a gentle kiss on his forehead. Then she took the time to look at him. “You are beautiful, Loki.” Her fingers traced the seam of his frock coat. “Always green. One of these days I’d like to see you in another colour.”

Loki frowned but before he could ask a question Frigga continued with an almost too happy smile on her lips. “When I tried to talk to you last night your secretary told me that you had left the palace. Without your security detail.”

Instead of answering Loki merely looked at his mother, she would come to her own conclusions. She probably already had. “I hope Balder is doing fine.”

Surrendering himself to the fact that his mother knew everything about him Loki nodded. “Yes… he is doing fine. Great in fact…”

So little words and yet Frigga understood and she was so obviously, overwhelming pleased that Loki almost started smiling himself. “I know you don’t agree with everything that I want for you, but never doubt that I have only the very best for you in mind.”

“I know, mother…” Loki did know. At least what she thought was best for him.

Frigga stroked his cheek and Loki swore that he could indeed feel how content she was with him, how proud of him. “You are the son of king, Loki. An extraordinary prince.”

“I am not 10 years old anymore, mother and you’re not tugging me in.”

“But I am afraid you might forget. You will be doing wonderfully today.”

Once again Loki nodded and Frigga turned around to leave him alone when Loki’s phone on the couch table came alive. They both got a good look at Tony Stark’s name on the screen.

“You’re keeping close ties to America yourself, Loki?”

“A bit of an overstatement. He isn’t involved with his government, but nevertheless an influential person… and quite entertaining.” Loki wasn’t going to say more, it was none of her business and what would she care about a call from Tony Stark when Loki had just more or less admitted that things had changed between him and Balder.

Frigga didn’t look pleased, but it was fleeting. Not enough to ruin her immense happiness. “You should call him back after the meeting. Ignoring a call is very impolite.”

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It all came down to a very simple statement. Of course it was Helblindi who said it.

“My father, the Lord of Jotunheim, and I have come to an agreement that we firmly believe is in favour of every Jotun. If the king of Asgard agrees to abolish the Language Act in its entirety, then Lord of Jotunheim gives his word to put an end to separatist tendencies among the Jotun population. Jotunheim will reaffirm its unity with Asgard. Today that is all we ask for. A most gracious offer and
we hope the king will find the grace inside of him to agree.”

A most gracious offer. Definitely an understatement. It was a gift. Completely unexpected and Loki was left speechless. Finally a way out, to come to a compromise. Loki knew what he would do, but it still wasn’t his decision. His counsel wasn’t needed either.

Odin’s decision was clear and fast. Most of all firm. “No.”

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The Ymirsons left immediately and Loki couldn’t shake off the expression in Helblindi’s dark blue eyes. Despite the legends and the prerogative terms that had been invented for them – there was nothing cold about his eyes. Nothing that would ever make Loki think of the icy mountains of Jotunheim. No, Helblindi’s repugnance and hatred was burning hot like blazing fire.

Odin may be worried about Laufey’s intention and his belief that he was the one who should rightfully be sitting on the throne. Loki was more concerned with the son and his ambitions.

They were going to lose Jotunheim and that would be the best case scenario. That fucking son of a bitch… Now it made perfect sense why Helblindi and Laufey had made them this gift. Like this they could tell their people that they had offered the king a deal and he had refused. Even the last doubting Jotun would now happily turn his back on Asgard.

Still, it wasn’t Helblindi’s fault or manipulation. Odin had had the opportunity to stop the conflict from escalating and now it was too late.

Jotunheim was going to leave and there was no way Odin was going to let that happen. Yes, there were still ways, but most of them would rely on military presence or economic reprisal. Dizziness threatened to overcome Loki when he thought about the possible consequences. After 500 years? No Asgardian soldier should ever point his gun at another Asgardian, Jotun or not.

The second they had left the conference room Loki tried to talk to his father, but Odin refused again. So Loki grabbed his phone and instantly composed message that he sent to Laufey. A plea to not immediately jump to action, but to wait a couple of days, Loki was going to try to talk to his father. Such a feeble attempt, Loki didn’t know what to do.

Balder tried to call him a couple of times, only to be ignored by Loki. His secretary was told to tell Balder they would talk tonight. In the meantime Loki spent two hours on the phone with different associations and unions in Jotunheim, all of them were friendly or at least neutral towards the monarchy. It wasn’t very honourable but necessary. Loki pretty much begged them to use their influence on the Jotun population, to try to convince the general public that leaving the country was not the way to go.

The mayor of Útgarðar was anything but pleased to hear from Loki and he didn’t miss a beat to emphasize his complete loyalty to the Ymirson family. He was respectful enough to not call Laufey his king, but Loki could read between the lines.

500 years and they hadn’t forgotten.

Worn out and frustrated Loki returned to his rooms, eager for a glass of vodka or something stronger. A perfect opportunity to get drunk – wasn’t it? Loki was on his way there when Stark called him for the second time that day and the booze was probably the only reason why Loki picked up the phone. “What?”

“Wow, you sound pissed off and I haven’t even said anything yet. How did I do that?”
Loki snorted in response. “Not everything is about you.”

“Ah… your Jotun thing didn’t go as planned?”

Curse that guy for having a brain and for knowing how to use it. “I am sure you’ll read in the newspapers. Why are you calling?”

“I could sense that you missed me but were too embarrassed to call, so I’ve decided to help you out.”

Stark sounded cheerful and brash, a welcoming change and Loki was willing to admit that he enjoyed it. “Yes, my life as a prince is so terribly boring that all I can think about is man almost 20 years older than me and who will probably die soon of liver failure.”

“Great, I was hoping you would admit that. About the liver failure – don’t believe everything you read in the newspapers. How are you doing?”

Loki didn’t know if Stark was legitimately interested, but he responded honestly anyway. “It’s shaping up to be the worst day of my life. How about you?”

“Same. My assistant kicked me out of my own lab and forces me to take part in a conference in London.”

“Being in charge of a billion dollar company is such a chore, right?”


Loki’s hand was twitching slightly. Unfortunately it wasn’t enough to make him smirk. “Perfectly fine, but I have to disappoint you. The line about my knees is getting really old. Almost as old as you.”

Stark’s laugh was loud and full of heart. “Guess I deserved that. Listen, I checked the flight distance between Valhalla and London. Less than two hours. How about you jump into your private jet and join me in my hotel room next weekend? I am going to be terribly annoyed by the conference and you always are in a bad mood. I am perfectly sure we’re going to find a way to cheer each other up. I’m also not going to be as hard on your knees this time.”

The allusion and the memory caused Loki’s cheek to heat up, but he quickly shook his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Yeah, sorry, I swear that was the last time I’m using that cheap metaphor. How about we meet up and I screw your brains out?”

“As much as I appreciate the offer and I must admit that I definitely enjoyed last time… I must decline.”

“Oh, you’re breaking my heart. Why are you doing this to me?”

“I am sort of in a relationship now.”

Loki expected hesitation or at least a couple of seconds of silence. None of that.

“Sort of? How can you be sort of in a relationship?”

“It’s all very new.”

“Have you fucked him or her yet?”
“That’s none of your business, but no. We haven’t had sex yet.”

Stark snorted. “Then it’s not a relationship.”

“How would you know?”

“I am so much older than you and so much wiser.”

Loki laughed and it sounded alien to him. “A wise man knows when he is trying in vain.”

“Too bad… do you really want me to die off boredom in London?”

“It’s a beautiful city. You’ll find something else to do.”

“Yeah, but maybe I don’t want that.”
“Sir, good morning.” Coulson looked up from his files when he heard Barnes’ voice. He was wearing a smile on his lips like every day, but Coulson could immediately sense that something was still off. Like it had been the last couple of days. Little things, hardly noticeable, but Coulson had been working closely with him for the last year and despite his age, Coulson’s eyes were still working perfectly.

Whenever Barnes was talking and busy, everything seemed perfectly doing. Coulson had reason whatsoever to criticize his work. It was flawless. Yet during the little seconds in between, when Barnes was just standing there, Coulson could see the wheels turning in his head. His thoughts going out the window and flying far, far away. That had never happened before and if Coulson had to put his money on it, he would go for private problems. Maybe not even problems, just something on Barnes’ mind. As long as it didn’t affect his work, Coulson wouldn’t comment on it.

“Morning, Barnes. You have my reports?”

Demonstratively held up a couple of files in his hands and then put them down on Coulson’s desk.

“Naturally.”

“Thank you, Barnes. That would be all for now.”

Coulson was already diving back into the file in front of him when he noticed that Barnes wasn’t moving.

“Actually sir, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and talk to you.”

“Then go ahead, Barnes. You still have a day’s work ahead of you and I don’t want to be responsible if you lose time…”

Barnes shifted Coulson could see it without really looking at him. Normally Barnes knew better than to show his nervousness. Perhaps it was nonetheless time to have a little discussion with his right-hand man. In this line of work nothing could ever distract you from your duties. Death and lethal sickness were the only exceptions and except for his fidgeting, Barnes looked absolutely healthy. Perhaps in better shape than Coulson had ever been. Getting old was no fun at all.

“Barnes, my thoughts have time to wander, will you spit it out?”

“As you know my second tour is coming to an end in four months and I want to reapply. I just want to make sure that I have your support, sir.”

That was indeed enough to let the reports wait for a couple of minutes. It wasn’t a complete surprise,
definitely on the list of things that Coulson considered in the range of possibilities. Yet he was a little taken aback.

Right in front of him Barnes had stopped squirming. Now that he had said what he wanted to say he looked for more at ease and Coulson liked him a lot more this way. It also made conversation less awkward. “That would be your third term in Asgard.”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Rather unusual. You have spent enough time overseas to go back home for at least five years and yet you are here, standing in front me, telling me that you want to stay for another year? Now when the political climate is changing and the future is looking anything but pleasant.” This week was already shaping up to be a nightmare, in terms of work. Fury and the secretary of state were actually overjoyed that the king and the Lord of Jotunheim couldn’t get their shit together. It wasn’t like Coulson didn’t need a top-notch team and Barnes had proven times again and again that he was as loyal and reliable as they come. Nevertheless Coulson was sceptical. In their youth lots of agents enjoyed to do time overseas. Yes, they were obligated to anyway, but Coulson remembered himself and his eagerness. The lust for adventure and to represent his country. Like bringing light into dark and empty places. A foolish and admittedly stupid thought. None of that held an ounce of truth. Years go by, people become older, get married, have a family and they all want to stay at home them. Or work in DC. That had to be the big dream.

Barnes was single, he didn’t have a family, that was true. Still, after some time aboard, all agents want to go home even if only for a year. So what was going on here?

“Nothing’s better to make a name for yourself than working under difficult circumstances.” Barnes offered him a smile, but Coulson wasn’t buying it.

“That’s not what this is about. Your file is full of glowing recommendations. You’ve worked in Wakanda for god’s sake. After that you could have already go back and work at the White House or the Pentagon. Instead you wanted to go to Asgard. At the time very uninteresting. A language almost impossible to learn, almost no relations with the US whatsoever and a perfectly calm country. Makes me almost miss two years ago… I am not going to question your life choices, agent. Those are yours to make, but if you chose to go home after this turn, I am perfectly sure that a lot of doors will open for you. Doors in Washington DC.”

The promise of a bright future had an immediate impact, Coulson could see his a little light in his eyes. Which honestly could mean anything. “I am very proud to hear that, sir. But… I feel very good in my place right now and I think there are still things I can learn and do here. So I want to do another term. I was hoping for your recommendation.”

“That is all? No personal reasons? Have you become this attached to Asgard?” It didn’t quite fit into Coulson’s idea of Barnes, but sometimes a girl was indeed the explanation for everything.

“To be honest, I feel quite at home in Asgard and that’s why I want to stay another year. Perhaps I am going to stay even longer after that…”

Coulson raised an eyebrow. He could easily misinterpret that, but he definitely hadn’t expected Barnes to have these kinds of plans. Staying in Asgard? In a country that had worse immigrations laws than Australia. In a not very American friendly climate? How was Coulson to judge, but he wasn’t going to lose one of the best agents without a fight. “Are you planning on leaving the service?”

“No, I don’t. I just told you that I am very content where I am right now and I want to stay here. At
least for another year. You aren’t supporting my decision, sir?”

Sighing in defeat Coulson shook his head. He had more important things to take care of today than Barnes’ strange reasoning. No way in hell he was going to talk Barnes out of something that was going to end up being an advantage for Coulson. “One of my best agents wants to stay and make my life easier? Of course you have my support, Barnes. I merely want to be honest with you. You have to know about your opportunities.”

“I do, sir.”

“Anyway, you still have a couple of works before you have to make a decision. So long…”

Barnes nodded, thanked him and was about to turn around when Coulson stopped him.

“Since you are enjoying your work so much, I am going to give you some more. Ambassador Fury has an appointment with the crown at 11:00. You’ll be in charge.”

The instant frown on Barnes’ forehead was impossible to miss, but he remained quiet. Coulson hadn’t expected anything else. “Any questions?”

“No, sir. I am… merely a bit surprised that the crown agreed to an appointment today. After the failed Jotun negotiations yesterday I assumed they would be… handling other things than… American related issues.”

Coulson felt a smile pulling apart his lips. “Are you saying that we’re not important enough?”

“You know how I meant it.”

Sometimes Coulson was astonished by now familiar he had become with Barnes over the last two years, hardly anyone else in his service was talking to him like that. Hell, nobody else. “The appointment is related to the Jotun conflict, so the king was more than willing to find the time. That’s all, agent Barnes. Oh and take Rogers with you. Guy has spent the last week doing paper work, he needs to get out of here.”

Barnes nodded respectfully and then walked out. Coulson’s thoughts lingered with him for a couple of seconds longer. He couldn’t quite put his finger on what was wrong with Barnes or if he could even call it like that. For now it didn’t seem like anything worrisome. Despite Barnes was playing the thought of staying in Asgard. Having been here for over eight years Coulson could understand his passion for this country. It was beautiful and exotic, although every single Asgardian would roll his eyes at this expression. The people were friendly and polite, but the truth was, it could be ridiculously hard to make friends as an outsider. Their concept of religion and the language were huge barriers to overcome and the Asgardian people expected you to do that if you wanted to get along with them. Not to mention the big elephant in the room. Coulson couldn’t say that he had gotten that particular vibe from Barnes, but who knows? The man was surely aware of what he was getting into. Whenever the media was talking about Asgard, they were talking about it rarely, they presented it as this liberal paradise. It was anything but. After 30 years of service Coulson was confident to tell anyone who wanted to know that this was one of the most conservative countries he had ever worked in. The monarchy didn’t even really matter in that regard. Most of society’s views and traditions were dictated by the dominant religion. A religion that had also a very strong influence on the code of law. Coulson wasn’t going to argue that it was a very peaceful religion, but that didn’t change anything. Not everybody’s cup of tea, but Coulson had said it before – he wasn’t going to question Barnes’ life choices.

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“The Lord of Jotunheim wishes to demonstrate his high respect for you, your highness. He knows that you would have made different decisions if you had been in the right position. He hopes that in the future your voice will be heard louder and clearer. The Lord also approves of your continuous attempts to find a compromise, but you will have to accept that this ship has sailed. As soon as the Lord finds the time he will personally contact you. Unfortunately this is an incredibly important day and the Lord is lamenting the fact that he cannot tell you this personally.”

Yes, Loki was sure that Laufey was losing sleep over his emotional state. Not the secretary’s fault though. “I see… thank you.” Not a small part of him wanted to start protesting. Demanding that she would get him the Lord on the phone. Loki was the Duke of Glæsisvellir, second in line to the throne, he was Laufey’s sovereign. He could demand and order… and it would be in vain.

“May the spirits of your ancestors bless you, your highness.”

Loki stared at the phone in confusion, not knowing if he was dealing with an insult or not. She was Jotun, there was no way she would refer to Loki’s ancestors in a positive manner. Another thing that Loki had no time wondering about. Or maybe he could wonder about it all day long. It wasn’t like there was anything left that he could do.

“He wouldn’t even talk to you, right?” Thor’s voice sounded unusually small but not surprised in the least.

Shaking his head Loki continued pacing, his legs were refusing to sit down. “He is busy… which means him and Helblindi are setting their declaration of independence…”

Thor’s expression darkened even more, although Loki wouldn’t have thought that possible. “That guy is a disease.”

Finally something that made Loki stop in his tracks. “What?”

“Everything went down exactly the way he wanted it to.”

Was there anything that Loki hated more than being taken aback? It was being taken aback by Thor. His stomach clenched, but Loki had felt like throwing up the entire day, so he didn’t think too much of it. “You believe that he walked into the negotiations wanting them to fail?”

“I believe that Jotun situation has been dire before. Ten years ago things looked bad. With the protests… you remember when were both still kids? The actual riots. Those were bad times. The Jotun conflict is as old as Asgard… there have been better and worse times. We’re in a horrid situation now, but 20 years ago there was actual violence, people got hurt and nevertheless father and Laufey have been able to get to an agreement. They calmed things down. Look at us now. They are talking about leaving the country the second Helblindi is out of law school and more involved into governing. It was him on television who said that they weren’t going to put up with us any longer. Laufey brings him along to the negotiations, he’s being groomed to become the future Lord. It’s clearly not enough for him, he wants to be a king.”

Loki felt his mouth running a bit dry. He remembered Helblindi’s deep blue eyes when he had told him that he was curious to see what Loki had still in store for him and… other things. Helblindi had touched his bracelet with his forehead. Could he really be so brazen to ridicule an old, almost sacred sign of respect when he fostered the ambition of being king himself? This was absurd… Helblindi was a descendent of Lopthæna, of course he thought that he should be king.

Helblindi had said himself that he wouldn’t be king… of Asgard.
“I don’t know, Thor… I think he actually cares about his people.”

Thor’s answer was a shrug. “Quite possible that he does. He can care for his people and want to be king. One thing doesn’t exclude the other. I trust him as far as I can throw him.”

“I am not sure I agree with you… on most of it. I don’t trust him either. But it’s not just Helblindi… it’s the people and… and father. He should have given them the Language Act.”

“They wouldn’t have been satisfied with that.”

“Who the fuck cares!” Loki snapped, he couldn’t help it. “They have a right to their language and they a right to rename their streets if they feel offended by the actual names. They can have their own coins… who cares…”

“If we give them everything they want, you know what they will eventually ask for.”

Blood was pumping through his veins way too fast, rushing to his head, making him weary. Loki realised that he wanted to scream and yell. There was so much pent-up energy and frustration, begging to be released. Thor was here and he was talking bullshit. “No, actually I don’t know that! The Ymirsons want to be back in charge of Jotunheim, because we’re treating them like shit! If they didn’t feel oppressed, they wouldn’t be longing for another ruler.”

“Loki…”

“And father is so afraid of Laufey, it’s downright pathetic! He really must feel like he stole Laufey’s throne…”

“Loki!” Thor was up on his feet now and Loki knew he had gone too far. That wasn’t fair. None of it. They had all been born into it. Loki and Thor just like their father.

Or Helblindi…

“Our father has been king for over 40 years and he has been doing his best every single day. He has been through the Jotun conflict before. You haven’t. I haven’t. Don’t pretend you know better just because you would like to do something differently. None of us is content with this situation! Don’t you think that father would like to resolve this conflict once and for all? It’s not that easy. It’s not a one way street.”

Loki knew that he should tell Thor that he was right, but the anger was still too present. He couldn’t find it in him. Instead he was biting his lip. Thor recognized that it was useless to talk to him, so he affectionately patted Loki’s shoulder and then left him alone.

Not knowing what to do with himself Loki lay down on the couch, grabbing the remote control of his hi-fi system. Mozart wasn’t doing anything to calm him down, but he wouldn’t be able to stand the silence.

It should be the second time in a single week that Balder found him in the exact same position. “It’s starting to scare me how easily you get past the guards…”

“I’m not getting past anybody, I am family.” Balder’s smile looked a little out of place, but Loki knew that was only his miserable mood talking. They had chosen the worst time to start a relationship.

“I am sorry that the negotiations went up in flames…”
Sitting up Loki raised an eyebrow at Balder. “Why? Because it makes me feel bad or because it’s a fucking disaster for the entire country?”

Balder didn’t seem to be bothered by Loki’s harsh tone. “Both… but I’ll be honest, the disaster was very foreseeable. I am not surprised… Right now though, I am more worried about you. You may feel responsible for this, but you aren’t.”

“You are wrong. I don’t feel responsible for this. It’s the exact opposite. I can’t do anything. I am utterly useless…”

“That’s nonsense. You are so smart and your father and your brother listen to you. That doesn’t mean that they immediately take your advice, but don’t think that they don’t take the things you say into consideration. They would be stupid not to…”

The word stupid made Loki flinch. Sure, he hadn’t called the king stupid, yet it took some nerve to use that word in the same sentence as Odin. Studying Balder’s face Loki tried to find out if he meant it, then he remembered who he was talking to. Not one dishonest bone in Balder’s body. Loki couldn’t deny that it felt good to hear somebody say these things about him, although it came from a completely biased party. “Thank you… and I am sorry for not calling you back yesterday… It was… a terrible day and I fear today isn’t going to be much better.”

Sitting down next to him Balder shook his head. “It may be a terrible day for politics, but it doesn’t have to be for you. Not entirely. Will you let me take you out? Dinner then to the theatre?”

“I am sorry, but I really don’t want to leave today. That doesn’t mean… that doesn’t mean that I’m not glad you’re here. Last couple of days have been… you know.” Loki trailed off, Balder knew what he wanted to say anyway.

“Okay… you’ll tell me if you want me to leave, right?”

“I don’t… I really don’t.” Loki meant it and a little part of him was surprised by that. Balder was so willing, almost eager to put up with his bad mood and after his argument with Thor, it was so relieving to have somebody completely on his side.

“Good…” Smiling Balder reached out, brushing a strand of hair behind Loki’s ear. Such a simple gesture, but clearly affectionate.

Releasing a staggered breath Loki cocked his head. “Tell me what you did yesterday… something that has nothing to do with any of this madness going on here.”

“Honestly, I didn’t do much. I met up with the CEO of the company that I’m going to work for. That went down pretty well. I finished a book, watched some TV… I had lunch at an amazing Vietnamese place that I just discovered. All in all, a pretty normal day. Even when I tried to call you and developed a very close relationship to your secretary.”

“Leah is a treasure and I’ve already apologized for that… I’ve never had Vietnamese before. Maybe we could go there some time. When I feel like my presence can be inflicted on people again…”

Balder laughed and playfully tugged on the strand he was playing with. “I’d like that. Until then we can make a mess out of one of the kitchens.”

“I think the cleaning stuff is still mad with us…”

“I told you I am no good in a kitchen.” Balder shrugged and Loki smiled, because for once Balder wasn’t doing it. “I liked your mojitos.”
“Drinks don’t count.”

“You’re making this way too hard. I am trying to compliment you.” Loki sighed exaggeratedly and Balder moved in closer to him. “Compliment me on something else. Like my incredible discipline. I’ve wanted to kiss you since I walked through the door, but you looked like you seriously hurt me if I tried.”

Loki felt a chuckle rising in his throat. “That has less to do with discipline than with a healthy sense of self-preservation. I know I can… be miserable and snappy. That has nothing to do with you.”

“I know… You’re under a lot pressure, I’m not taking any of this personally. Not yet anyway.”

It took a second for Loki to make sense of what Balder was saying. The pieces fell into place when Balder brushed his lips over Loki’s. Careful and slow, almost as if it was the first time. Balder didn’t have it in him to be anything but sweet and right now that sweetness felt like a blanket wrapping itself around Loki. A sharp contrast to the harsh reality of this day. It didn’t last long though, Balder was pulling back, his smile as sweet as his kiss. Loki moved in again, trying to mimic what Balder had done. He felt a tingle of relief when it was as easy to fall into the kiss as two days ago. Balder opened his mouth and put a hand on Loki’s side. So here they were, Asgard and Vanaheim kissing on Loki’s couch. Not what Loki had expected and he tried not thinking about how somebody else had seen it coming. It wasn’t political after all. At least not for Loki.

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“Have you any idea what today was all about? Such a strange time for this meeting…” Steve was turning his glass on the table. Despite wanting to know the answer to his question, he was mostly trying to make conversation. James had been awfully quiet the entire day which seemed very unusual. Except that James had been doing this for over a week now. By now Steve knew James enough to know that this wasn’t normal and he couldn’t deny that he was a bit worried.

“Yeah, I have an idea, but I don’t really want to think about it…” Barnes mumbled, tapping his fingers again the table top. His eyes were looking at something or nothing at all, he definitely didn’t look at Steve. For a second Steve considered leaning to the side to get into his field of vision, but that would just be ridiculous.

“What do you mean?”

James pursed his lips, his fingers still taping to a strange and unsettling rhythm. “We’ve just made a huge weapons deal with Asgard and now that this nation heading towards a conflict that potentially could turn violent… the very same day the ambassador meets the king in private for over two hours. No, I don’t want to think about this…”

By the end of his phrase James downed his glass of scotch and sighed deeply. Steve swallowed softly, he was so obvious how distraught James was by all of this. “I am sure the ambassador has our best interests in mind.”

“Yeah, our best interests…” James repeated his words and then shook his head. “We should stop talking about this. Especially here. Somebody could overhear.”

“Right sorry…” Steve realised that had been a stupid thing to do in the first place, but now he was stuck again and didn’t know how to make James talk. As it turned out that wasn’t necessary. “Listen Steve, normally I like to go about these things in a different way, but I am actually kind of confused and I don’t know where I am at and I wanted to know if you…”
Steve raised an eyebrow while James trailed off, now definitely looking at something else. “You want to know…”

Shaking his head James pointed at something, so Steve turned around, noticing mid-motion that he entire bar had gone silent. The TV in the corner was on, somebody had turned up the volume. The Lord of Jotunheim was standing behind a lectern, speaking directly into the camera. There were subtitles in runes, so Steve assumed that he was talking in Jǫtnar. Once again Steve had no idea what was going on, but he could sense the atmosphere in the room changing. Soft murmurs, gaps and when the Lord had ended speaking and the TV news presenter was back on screen the entire bar was buzzing, filled with loud conversation. Turning back around Steve faced James who had curled his fingers tightly around his glass. “What did he say?”

“By the end of the week they are going to hold a mandatory plebiscite for the Jotun population. If they want to stay with Asgard or if they want to become their own, liberal nation. He promised to respect the result… and emphasised that it was his duty as Lord of Jotunheim to make sure that the will of his people would be put into action. No matter who might have objections…”
Hello everybody,

Thor and Loki have a talk about what it means to be royalty and Frigga and Odin discuss which one of their sons is king material...

Have fun ;)

Jane’s fingers were shaking. How many times could she go over her notes before the words lost all meaning and sounded the same? Not that she could find much meaning now. Old Norse still seemed like a gathering of letters in no particular order. Nonsensical. Not many words. Just “It’s an honour to meet you”, “It’s a pleasure”, “Good evening”, “Goodbye”. Shouldn’t be that much of a challenge. Except that Jane was almost about to fall over, she constantly felt her blood pumping through her head. Which couldn’t be healthy.

Sitting back down Jane put her notes away and rubbed the back of her hand over her eyes, only to curse herself one second later. She wasn’t used to wearing that much make-up. It looked very nice, lithe, soft colours. Classy and elegant. The dress she was wearing was so delicate and beautiful, Jane was kind of afraid to mess it up. Another thing she wasn’t used to.

Had she got used to the palace? Thor was a prince, but until now it might have been able to imagine him like the son of very rich parents. Extremely rich parents. Tonight that illusion was definitely going to be shattered. Jane had wished for something small. Like a tennis match or some other sport event. Just going there, sitting down, watching other people doing some physical exercise and then go back home. For Jane that would have been enough. Cameras would have caught glimpses of them and that would have been their first public appearance together. Without saying a word. That would have been wonderful.

Now things looked definitely different. A list of guests. A seating plan. A four course menu. Jane’s stomach turned and she took a long breath. There was no reason to lose her composure. Valkyrie and her had gone over the list of the most important guests, how to greet them and where to sit down. Jane was well prepared and two hours ago she had felt confident, she had even been looking forward to it. Now with only 45 minutes left, the idea of shaking an Asgardian general’s hand seemed a lot more intimidating.

Jane had raised an eyebrow and had thought about protesting when she had learned that the reception was an event to honour members of the military. Definitely not the first appearance with Thor that Jane had imagined. She wasn’t against the military, but it seemed nevertheless like a morbid theme. Judging by Valkyrie’s rigid posture she had probably sensed Jane’s doubts and therefore Jane had remained silent. Despite all their meetings Jane was unable to tell if Valkyrie disliked her or if she was maintaining a very professional distance. Nevertheless Jane wanted to avoid any form of conflict and she was grateful for not having said anything when Valkyrie started explaining how important and traditional that reception was. Less about the military than about the king’s guard. Honouring soldiers who have been in this service for 10 years or more.

About 40 invited guests, plus their significant others, staff, the royal family, Jane… over 100 people.
Would they all be looking at her? The new woman at the prince’s side. It was such an arrogant thought and Jane wanted to roll her eyes. The soldiers who were going to be decorated had definitely other things to think about than her. No, the evening wasn’t about her or Thor, they were going to be present. That’s it.

An honour, Jane would smile, she would be polite and make sure that she wasn’t going to embarrass herself or Thor. Loki and Frigga would be there, two people in Jane’s corner. There was nothing she had to do but shake a few hands and be nice. That wasn’t too bad. Something she was definitely able to do. She still had to go over her notes though, 30 million people were speaking Old Norse. Jane had a PhD, it couldn’t be that hard to get out a couple of words in the right way.

So Jane was back to pacing, going over her notes, her lips softly muttering the same phrases over and over again. Until she could hear a soft murmur. “You look lovely.”

Startled Jane stopped in her tracks and met Thor’s eyes. Now there was no denying that he wasn’t the son of wealthy parents but something more. The uniform looked good on him. Just like the multiple decorations on his chest. A sight to behold. Even in her beautiful dress Jane felt ridiculous and out of place standing next to him. Which made it even weirder that she was blushing and feeling fuzzy because Thor had called her lovely. “Yes?”

Smiling Thor stepped forward and very obviously looked her up and down. In a sweet way. “Marvellous. I like the way you wear your hair. Never seen it in a braid before.”

Absently Jane touched her hair, realising that her lips were forming a smile. “Thank you. At least I’m going to look good when I pass out…”

It was the wrong thing to say. Thor was going to worry about her, trying to calm her down, although he clearly had other things to think about. “Hey, I know this must seem… overwhelming, but it’s not that much of a big thing. My father is going to decorate some guards with a metal, people are going to have drinks and eventually there is going to be dinner. I’ll immediately introduce you to some friends, nice people that you can talk to when I’m… busy shaking hands. I’m sure you’d like to spend the evening in some other way, but…” He looked sheepish. Such a tall, somewhat bulky man, strong enough to easily pick her up in his arms. Nevertheless he suddenly looked shy, intimidated. “… these are some of the thing I have to do. It’s tradition and the guards have done outstanding work. They deserve an evening to celebrate their loyalty. I am also very proud that this is the first time I can present you as my girlfriend.”

Jane loved this about Thor. How easily he could talk about his feelings, although sometimes he sounded a bit clunky and heavy-handed. Nonetheless he wasn’t afraid to name the things that upset him and that him happy or nervous. So unlike most man she had ever met. Perhaps that was a European or an Asgardian thing. Maybe it was just Thor. Jane didn’t care, she appreciated it, made her feel safe and comfortable around him. “I’ll be fine. You don’t have to worry. I’ve never been to such an event. I guess it would be crazy if I wasn’t nervous… I’ve gone over the list of the important guests so many times that my head hurts. I just… don’t want to say something foolish or out of line…”

This time Thor didn’t try to say anything to calm her down. Her large hands gently cupped her cheeks and then Jane felt his soft, loving kiss. Out of a sudden the prospect of a night in the spotlight with eyes on her the entire time didn’t seem like such a big deal anymore. Afterwards there was still a coming home to this.

“The protocol isn’t very strict. Just be yourself, you are a lovely person. They’ll succumb to your charms, just like I did. Maybe not so bad. The only important thing is that you use the appropriate titles when talking about a member of my family. People get easily upset about that…”
Jane nodded, only to flinch when they got interrupted. “If you call me the Duke of Glæsisvellir a single time tonight – I am going to cause a scene. Most likely by throwing food against the wall.”

She wasn’t even going to ask how two princes in a row could enter a room without making a single sound. That Thor would look good in a uniform had been a no-brainer, Jane hadn’t had to see him to know that. Loki, on the other hand, was a surprise. The dark blue fabric went better with his black hair and pale skin. Of course their uniforms were tailor-made, they both fitted them perfectly.

“I liked to see that…” Jane laughed hoarsely while Thor sighed playfully.

Loki patted his brother on the back and then kissed Jane on the cheek. The second prince that looked her up and down that day. As to be expected Loki’s reaction was a bit different. An appreciating whistle and a smirk. “Nice dress… it flatters you.”

“Thanks. Wasn’t me though who picked it…”

“You think I chose my outfit? The whole military would go crazy if I decided to go there in a smoking. Apocalypse.” Loki made an exaggerated gesture and Thor gave him a little push. “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have to be here.”

“Right, because it’s ridiculous that we’re going to a party when we’re having a national crisis…”

Thor’s expression turned sour. “Can we please not have this talk tonight?”

“You started it and you can bet your ass that it’s going to be the only thing that I’m going to talk about tonight.”

Only brothers could talk like that although they were discussing serious political issues. Jane didn’t know if she should be worried or amused by their behaviour. Anyhow, she felt the desire to quickly change the subject. “No matter what you want to talk about, could you stay close to me tonight? I need someone I know in close proximity.”

“Sure, Thor is too polite anyway. He wouldn’t tell you who of the guests is a disgusting cringer and who has a gambling problem.” Loki winked at Jane and by now she was sure that she was going to get through this evening alright. It was easier to forget that maybe everybody else who was going to attend the reception was also nervous about being in the presence of the royal family.

The only people who were perfectly clam and rather annoyed were Thor and Loki. Loki by the event and Thor by Loki.

“I am talking about these kinds of things, because they are none of my business and I wouldn’t want other people saying similar things about me.”

“People wouldn’t talk about you anyway, because you are boring.” Loki made that sound like a fact and Jane had a hard time not smiling. “I was in a relationship with an artist who got famous for performance art that even Andy Warhol would have called pretentious and I had a one night stand with a billionaire, weapons manufacturer. I give people tons of things to take about.”

By now it was impossible to not chuckle and Jane shrugged when Thor shot her a glance that said “Really?”. Probably eager to change the topic Thor put his arm around Jane’s waist and cleared his throat. “So, where is Balder?”

Mentioning Loki’s boyfriend was enough to sober him up a little bit, which was a strange reaction in Jane’s mind. “He’s at home.”
Thor’s eyebrows went up. “Why? Is he coming later on?”

“No, I told him to stay at home. I didn’t want him to come.”

Jane could see how Thor was opening his mouth, the words already lying on the tip of his tongue, but he didn’t voice them. Instead he turned to Jane, pressing a quick kiss to her lips. “Uhm, can you give us a minute?”

Oh, another talk between brothers. Jane couldn’t pretend being upset, she would find it weird talking about Loki’s boyfriend who she hadn’t even met yet. “That’s fine. I need to go over my notes again anyway.”

Stealing another kiss from Thor Jane slid out of the room, still determined to be able to deliver a perfect greeting in Old Norse. Couldn’t be that difficult.

As soon as Jane closed the door behind her Thor was digging for more information. “Everything okay? He is on the guest list. Did you guys have a fight?”

Loki huffed and shook his head. “No, we didn’t fight. I didn’t put him on the guest list, mother did. I have no intention of going with him to the reception when we’ve only been dating for two days. Also, it would distract from you guys. I am not doing that.”

That made sense and it was definitely something that Loki would do. Thor was actually still taken aback that his little brother and Balder had ended up together. Balder wasn’t like the men Loki had shown interest in before. Which was technically a good thing. Thor didn’t like to judge and of course everybody had different tastes, but Loki had always been drawn to extravagant, arrogant guys that liked to cause trouble. Balder hadn’t been Loki’s idea and Thor still remembered how not very excited Loki had been about that development. Now they were a couple and Thor wasn’t going to hide his concern.

There were two possibilities. Either Loki had indeed changed his mind and had found some qualities in Balder that he hadn’t seen before. That could mean that he had matured. Or, and that possibility made Thor quite anxious, Loki had decided to get into this relationship against his better judgement. Despite having a little brother that had always surpassed him in his studies, making their teachers eyes grow wide, Thor was anything but stupid.

His mother wanted Loki and Balder together at the reception, because that would be the perfect relationship that the public expected. Very much unlike his relationship with Jane which was without a doubt problematic.

“Are you… How are things going with Balder anyway? Okay, it’s only been two, three days… but… To be honest I am really surprised that you started dating.” Thor knew he could have said that better, but he wasn’t as gifted with words as Loki. Loki was wearing a dark expression on his face. Probably didn’t mean much, he did that all the time during the last couple of weeks. “Honestly – not a lot is going on, because a lot of other things have been going on during those two, three days.”

“Come on, Loki. You know who I meant it.”

“No, I don’t.” Loki crossed his arms in front of his chest, some of his spite already dripping into his voice. “We’re here, holding a lovely dinner tonight, talking about dates when the country is more or less falling apart. Who the fuck cares if Balder and me have a lovely time or not?”

Always so stubborn, it was infuriating. “Believe it or not, I do care. It’s your life. You’re my brother, I am interested in what you are doing with it. The event today is taking place, because the people
involved deserve to be recognized for their deeds. We could call it off and then what? Send a delegation to Jotunheim and beg Laufey on our knees to call something off that he has no right to do anyway? There is nothing else on the agenda but Jotunheim. You are not the only one who is concerned, but life doesn’t stop. The life of the people around us doesn’t come to a halt and yours doesn’t either. So excuse me for wanting to talk about something else for a single moment. For caring. For acknowledging that there is something else in our lives.”

This was too much and Thor almost felt as if he had lost his temper, although he was talking in a perfectly fine volume. Sometimes it would be so easy to get furious. Everything was always so black and white to him, like he could only think in extremes. Despite being so much cleverer than everybody else.

He could see the frown on Loki’s forehead, like he hadn’t understood everything that Thor had been saying. Which was out of the question. Then the frown disappeared and Thor suddenly felt a stab in his chest. Caused by the bleak sadness in Loki’s eyes. His voice was dry, but perfectly firm and steady as he responded. “There is nothing else. At least there should not be anything else. There is the country and then there is nothing. We live to rule, guide and protect this country. We marry and have children to produce heirs who live to rule, guide and protect this country. That’s all there is, Thor.”

What was there that Thor could have said in return? He felt drained of all thoughts and ideas. Judging by Loki’s expression he didn’t care for an answer or a reaction. His eyes ghosted to the bracelet on his wrist and then he turned around on the spot. Leaving the room without giving Thor the opportunity to pick up the conversation again.

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By the time dinner was being served Odin was ready to thank his ancestors. It wasn’t food though that he was craving for, but a comfy chair. Only one hour into the reception Odin was feeling his age in his knees and back. Little sting of a needle and a heavy weight that was his own body.

When finally sliding into his chair Odin was careful to not sit down to fast or to show any sign of relief. In the back of his mind he knew that he couldn’t be fooling everyone, but he would be damned if he showed a single sign of discomfort. A king had to be fit and ready to serve. Being old was no excuse. His mind hadn’t been affected by the years, he could still take in everything that was going on in the ballroom and plan ahead. So many medals and Odin hadn’t needed the help of his secretary to remember the name of a single guard. Their faces and their posture. None of that was an obstacle.

Unfortunately time hasn’t been as kind to his body. The strain in his muscles couldn’t be denied and at this time of day, Odin found that the idea of going to be early sounded very pleasant. Still three courses to go through, then drinks.

Tomorrow he would wake up at 5 am, like every day. Jotunheim needed to be dealt with, Odin had an early appointment with the General State Prosecutor… and about 10 more attorneys that were experts on the constitution. It would be an awful morning, nothing to look forward to. Not that he was particularly enjoying the reception. Sleep was probably going to be the most beautiful thing during the next 20 hours.

At least the beef tartare was perfectly delicious.

Frigga placed a hand on his lower arm, sending him a small smile. His wife didn’t show any signs of weariness, she never did. “It’s been a long night. Most of it is already over.”
She always knew what was going on.

“The best part is still to come. Don’t you look forward to have drinks with every single nobleman in this hall, so nobody feels left?”

Her smile got a little brighter. “Somebody is already doing that.”

Of course. Also not a surprise. Odin’s eyes needed three seconds before the found his son. Sitting at a table he definitely shouldn’t be sitting at. One just couldn’t trust Loki to respect the seating plan. Even from the distance Odin could see that he had the same smile as his mother, easily charming everybody sitting at the table, although he was probably only feeling contempt for them. It wasn’t hard for Odin to understand. The reception was supposed to be for the guards, but there was also a big part of high nobility present every time. And they wanted to be fawned over.

Loki was raising his glass, saying something with that stunning smile on his lips. The people around him began laughing, then also raised their glasses and they were eating out of his hand. If Loki’s charms only worked on everyone…

“He is brilliant with people if he wants to.”

Frigga disagreed with him. “He is brilliant in everything he does.”

A mother talking, for sure, but Odin knew she wasn’t far from the truth. Except for his temper and that fierce will to make decisions for himself, even though he knew they were bad ones. Loki could hold on to a grudge forever, would let it eat him up from the inside while waiting for the right moment to release hell on whoever he thought deserved it. Unlike Thor, whose rage was burning hot but very fast.

Both traits were equally dangerous for a potential king.

Odin could almost smell the rage boiling beneath Loki’s skin. He would have to find the time to talk to him. Tomorrow, after the meetings perhaps. Hopefully.

His eyes continued to wander, Thor was easier to find. He was actually sitting where he was supposed to. Hand on the table, fingers entwined with the American girl. They looked sweet together. Happy. Talking to the other people at their table. The girl seemed to be at ease, clearly comfortable in Thor’s presence. Seeing them like this made it almost hard to believe that was going to seriously complicate Thor’s life and reign. Or would it be worse without her and Thor being unhappy.

By gently squeezing his arm Frigga caught his complete attention and Odin found out that her eyes were also focused on their first born. "I look at our son and I believe that Thor is going to be a good king. Then I see our youngest and I know that Loki would be brilliant.”

Odin couldn’t argue with her reasoning. “Believe me, nobody knows more about Loki’s abilities and shortcomings than I do. He may be brilliant, but that’s not the way destiny has chosen for him. Our ancestors sent him to us second. That’s the role he was born to play.”
Hello everybody,

Loki is annoyed because of the reception. First it gets better, then it gets so much worse ;)

Have fun ;)

The air was getting thick, Loki had been feeling the need to get out of the hall for several minutes now. He couldn’t though, not now. Thor was talking to some of the generals and Jane was alone at their table. Technically, not alone, but most definitely lost. In such a moment Loki found it impossible not to feel sorry for her. She was never going to fit in and it was even her fault. Nobody’s fault. Loki would be so lost himself if he kidnapped him and then dropped him off in the middle of the United States or even France. Asgardians were so proud of their profound differences from the rest of the world, but they couldn’t pretend these differences weren’t the source of more than one problem.

Hyenas were forming a circle around her. All female, old nobility, the kind of women who always insisted on being referred to by their whole title, but all they had ever done in their lives was getting married. The type of wife Thor was definitely not going to have. That upset them. Even worse, it scared them. Not that Jane was Midgardian, no let the common people worry about the only real issue.

Jane, a commoner herself, future king’s consort of Asgard. What an unsettling thought for them. Not a drop of noble blood. They made such a huge thing out of it, although they had no idea about their own family history and who actually made them important and great. Anyway, Loki should help her out and then he was going get out of here.

Putting on a smile Loki slid into the empty chair next to Jane. “I hope the ladies don’t mind company.”

Every single head instantly went down and all five of them muttered something like “Of course not” or “It’s an honour, your highness”. Not that Loki was interested in their reactions, but Jane smiled gratefully at him, so Loki squeezed her wrist. The questions continued nonetheless. How was Asgard different from the United States? What was an astrophysicist actually doing? How had she met Thor? It must all be so exciting and hard to get used to.

How many times could Loki roll his eyes before they got stuck? Jane was doing fine, he had to admit. Always polite, smiling, not giving away too much detail. Flowery phrases all over the place, but not much information. Valkyrie had briefed her just fine and with Loki at the table, the others couldn’t slip into Old Norse without him knowing what they were talking about. Loki gave them about 10 minutes, then spoke up, his smile dazzling. “Would the ladies please excuse us for a moment, but I have to introduce Jane to several of the generals.”

The table instantly erupted into soft protests and demands that he would promise to instantly come back again. Loki laughed, telling them that nothing could keep him away and gently put his hand on
Jane’s back. When they were a couple of steps away from the table she dared to let out a shaky breath. “Thank you, I definitely needed a break from them.”

“You did fine, no reason to worry. Even if… they don’t matter. They are the equivalent to trophy wives. You hit a bad table. Look to your right. See that woman in the black dress and the gloves? That one is important.”

Jane’s eyes darted around. “What’s the difference? Between her and the others?”

“That’s Idun Ivaldison. She is the head of her house. Still a very rare thing in Asgard, but perfectly acceptable. She has two younger brothers, but she was the only one of age when their father died, so she took over and has been in charge since. It’s one of the most influential houses. People like her are the ones you have to pay attention to… and they aren’t going to ask ridiculous questions or gnaw your ear of. She gets easily offended though when you mention that she has worn that dress before. It was meant as a compliment, that she always looked lovely in it. She was angry at me for over half a year.”

Loki appreciated it that Jane was listening carefully and she proved it by asking a follow-up question. One that made achingly clear that she was Midgardian. “What makes her house so influential when the king makes all major decisions? I don’t think I quite understand the structure of things…”

“Asgard is not an absolute monarchy. Why do Midgardian also assume that when they hear the word ‘monarchy’ that the king as all the power. He doesn’t. Yes, he has a lot of power and the last word on important issues that concern every Asgardian. Most noble families are responsible for the lands that have always been in their administration. Idun for example is the Lady of a big part of Vanaheim. Call it a district if you want. She has legislative power in her district. Sure, she is bound to Asgardian law which is made by the king, but there is some leeway. The Lords are immensely influential in their lands and it has happened before the people side with their Lord if he disagrees with the king.”

Jane nodded slowly and of course she brought up the one thing that Loki had been thinking about anyway. “So that’s why the Jotun situation is so difficult?”

“It’s part of it. No other Lord or Lady is responsible for a territory as big as Jotunheim. There are 5 million Jotuns, it’s a sixth of the population. Big parts of the Jotun territory actually legally belong to the Ymirson family. Anyway, to cut a long story short – there is a lot of nobility all over Asgard, but most of the time it’s just a title. The Lords and Ladies… completely different thing. No reason to worry though, hardly any of the Lords are here. Come on, let’s get a drink.”

Loki gently steered her past several tables and gave one of the waiters a little sign. One drink, then he would hand Jane over to Thor and hopefully get out of here. Loki felt like taking a long bath and writing several letters to Laufey.

“Your highness. How hard it has become to get a grasp on you nowadays.”

Loki didn’t recognize the voice immediately, but when he turned around he was greeted by a familiar face and caring, gentle smile. “Heil og sæl, doctor.” Loki whispered as he reached out and took the old man’s hands in his own. After carefully kissing both palms Loki remained in his pose with his head bowed until Dr. Jørgensen’s voice reached his ears. Tenderly. The only tone he was capable of using. “The clouds dissolve to reveal a marvellous sky every time to see you. Unfortunately it has become such a rare occasion.”

Lifting his head Loki smiled, letting go of the doctor’s hands. “I fear I am indeed a busy person. It’s a shame…”
The last time he had seen Dr. Jørgensen he hadn’t looked that old. At least to Loki. Now he was indeed a small, almost frail man with a white shock of hair and the soft, always appreciating smile of a grandfather. This was how Loki imagined the look on his grandfather’s face, he had never met him, so he couldn’t know. His manners were catching up to him, Loki gestured at Jane next to him.

“Doctor Jørgensen, this is Jane Foster. My brother’s partner.”

It was clear that Jane was a little bit confused, but she nevertheless smiled at the doctor, bowing her head. Not the appropriate reaction, but she had seen Loki do it, so why wouldn’t she do the same thing? “An honour to meet you.”

“The honour is all mine, Miss Foster. You look radiant. One glance at you assures me that the spirits sent you to us. A gift of light in darkness.”

The blush on Jane’s face was cute and it actually made Loki laugh. “Doctor Jørgensen likes to quote the trúa. It may sound odd to Midgardian ears.”

“Are you well, Loki? Always so pale. It’s been so long since you attended your last check-up. You are not looking out for yourself.”

“You sound like my mother…” Loki chuckled and the doctor nodded softly. His eyes were shining brightly. The only young part about him. “I know. Your mother is a wonderful, most impressive woman. You know what she said when I put you into her arms after you were born?”

Loki felt the warm tingle inside of his chest, making him feel comfortable and appreciated. It remembered him of being a child. “You’ve told me the story every single time I went to see you as a kid and my mother said the exact same thing… every time she put me to bed.”

The doctor beamed with satisfaction and it was Jane who spoke up next. “What did she say? Am I allowed to know?”

Now Loki thought that he might blush, because it seemed to so private and a little silly. Doctor Jørgensen didn’t share that opinion. When he told Jane, he did it with pride and admiration. “She said that he was the son of a king, an extraordinary prince.”

Not knowing what to say Loki just smiled at Jane, a bit tempted to shrug, but he didn’t.

“Do not miss your next check-up, your highness. It’s scheduled next week. You owe it to the Asgardian people to stay healthy and fit. Will you do me that favour?”

Loki instantly nodded and he couldn’t help for feeling a bit guilty for deliberately missing his check-ups. There was always something to do. Something coming up. Like the biggest national crisis of the century. “I will do my best.”

“Which is so much more than I can expect.” The doctor took one of Loki’s hands, gave it a soft squeeze and Loki could feel all of his appreciation, his love. When the old man walked away with slow and tried steps, Jane leaned in to whisper into Loki’s ear. “Are all Asgardian doctors like that?”

“No, that’s just him…”

“He’s been treating you since you’ve been a child?”

Loki nodded, remembering how Frigga would hold his hand, leading him into a room where Doctor Jørgensen had been waiting, his hair still brown. Not white yet. Although growing up as a prince Loki hadn’t been pampered, but every single person in his entourage had always been nice and obliging. Nobody had ever been as sweet to him as Doctor Jørgensen. He had been Loki’s favourite
and vice-versa. Something about the way he kissed Loki’s forehead or how he would look at Loki like he was the most precious person in the world. Back then Loki of course hadn’t been able to name that sentiment, but looking back it became quite clear. “He is the doctor who delivered me. To me he was always an old man, but now… strange enough he is about the same age as father.”

“Has that something to do with… you kissing his hands?”

Again, Loki nodded. “Yes… it’s in the trúa. One must honour the hands that brought you into this world. He is a lovely man… I guess I can’t find a way to ditch my next check-up… Let’s find Thor, huh? How rude to leave a woman all alone and in such bad company.”

Laughing lightly Jane linked their arms and for a moment Loki thought that maybe the night wasn’t so bad. He still felt a strong need for air though.

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Loki’s driver nodded when he was told to return to the palace and Loki himself entered the building. The concierge blinked when he saw him, still not used to having real royalty walking past him. Normally Loki would have given him a smile, but he felt tired. The reception had sucked all fake compliments and effort out of him.

After entering the elevator Loki typed in the code and leaned against the wall, waiting until he had reached the top floor. Balder was waiting for him when the doors slid open, he looked like he was ready to go to bed. Long-sleeved grey shirt and sweatpants. Was it weird that Loki had seen him in an expensive suit so many times and only now, when he was wearing his sleeping clothes, Loki noticed his slim waist and the nicely shaped shoulders?

“That’s a surprise…” Balder smiled. Not like most of the nobles. Real, actually glad to see him. It reminded Loki of Doctor Jørgensen.

“I needed to get out of there… left a bit early. Events like that make me want to start smoking, so I can get out and a few times during the evening…”

“Somebody is in a good mood…” Clearly amused Balder took a step forward and grabbed Loki’s hand, pulling him out of the elevator. “It’s nice to see you though…”

His mouth brushed over Loki’s, just the ghost of a kiss and for a fleeting second Loki wanted to pull him in, bite his lips and thrust his tongue into Balder’s mouth to taste him. But Balder’s lips were already gone. “I’ll get you something to drink. Stronger than the wine they serve at the reception.”

“That’s a really good idea…”

Loki made himself comfortable on Balder’s couch, even closing his eyes for a second, but by then Balder was already back with a glass of green liquid in his hand.

“Absinth?”

“Absinth and passion fruit. You are going to love it. Just don’t drink it in one gulp, it’s very strong.”

Perfect. Loki started with a little sip and not downing that drink was going to be a challenge. “It’s delicious.”

“No matter what party I attended… I was always the bartender.” Balder winked at him and Loki found the strength to give him a little smile. “I am sure that you did an excellent job.”
“So how bad was the reception?” Balder’s hand was on Loki’s knee, his thumb drawing little circles.

Running one hand over his eyes Loki sighed, feeling suddenly ridiculous. Like he was overreacting.
“Not bad… It’s a good thing, a nice occasion. Honouring the guards and the military. I just… It should have been postponed. Father shouldn’t have been there, but in Jotunheim. Talking to Laufey… instead we held a dinner party.”

“Your father has never been to Jotunheim…”

“I know. Hard to believe that the Jotuns don’t feel equal when their sovereign won’t even set a foot in their home.” Loki snorted and tried not to think of a pair of blue eyes. Helblindi definitely wasn’t having a dinner party tonight. Maybe he was drinking too. No Absinth and passion fruit but champagne. Which wasn’t fair.

“Can I ask you an honest question?”

“Sure… anytime.”

“Is there a single moment… when you are not thinking about politics?” The smile on Balder’s face was just the tiniest bit teasing. Not enough to make Loki feel guilty. “No.”

“Thought so.” Still amused and nonetheless Loki felt like he was doing something wrong. “Okay, I’ll stop whining, I promise.”

“You weren’t whining, but I wouldn’t mind stop talking about… things that put you in a bad mood.”

“I fear there will be nothing left to talk about…”

Balder laughed, shaking his head. “I might think of a change of topic.”

“I am all ears…”

Fingers were moving from his knee to his thigh. Still perfectly safe. As if Balder might ever do something without asking for permission first. “I didn’t expect that I would like the sight of you in a uniform that much.”

Loki took a second to decide if he wanted to make it easy on Balder or not. A strange thought to cross his mind, Loki had never made it easy for anyone. “You are Asgardian. I am a very public figure who is sometimes required to wear a uniform. You must have seen me wearing one before.”

“Not up close. I like it…” The hand came to rest on Loki’s thigh and maybe he knew exactly why Loki had shown up. Things shouldn’t go down like this. Not when Balder was supposed to be his boyfriend. There was no way Loki was going to say it out loud, but his conversation with Thor had rubbed him the wrong way. There was still a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I mean it… I’m thinking about politics all the time. That’s not going to change.”

Somewhat surprised Balder raised his eyebrows. “I know. That’s okay. That’s you… Do you think I can’t deal with that?”

“No… I’m just wondering if it’s fair.”

“It has nothing to do with fair or unfair. That’s you… and I like that about you. Believe it or not.”

Loki did believe him. It had something strangely comforting to be with somebody who wasn’t able to lie. Putting his glass on the couch table Loki met Balder’s eyes. “Do you mind me staying here
tonight?"

“Mind? No, I was hoping you’d come here with the intention of staying…”

It was about time to show some initiative, normally Loki wasn’t timid or particularly patient in this kind of situations. Leaning forward Loki put his hand on Balder’s cheek and kissed him. Perfectly soft lips and Balder opened up immediately, responding to the kiss. Different now. Balder’s hands moved to his waist, playing with one of the buttons of Loki’s jacket. Playing. Not in a hurry.

Loki shouldn’t get frustrated so easily, but the entire evening had been on someone else’s terms. Enough of that. Pulling back Loki hastily unbuttoned his own jacket and carelessly threw it away. Somewhere his tailor and some general were both suffering a heart attack. Fuck them. With the jacket on the floor and forgotten Loki climbed into Balder’s lap, kissing him intensely. This was important. If this man should ever become his husband, like everybody clearly wanted them to, there should be passion. They should work together like this.

Fingers were sliding into his hair, Balder was gently forcing him to pull back and Loki was about to complain, but a warm mouth against his neck was a good counter argument. So instead of complaining Loki tilted his head to give Balder better access. It felt good, great even.

The rest of the evening took a very pleasurable turn in comparison to what Loki had been going through until then. He also learned a thing or two. Like Balder’s sheets were perfectly white. He wasn’t much of an explorer. Balder would put his lips up against Loki’s ear and ask him what he liked. So Loki told him or would simply guide Balder’s hands there where he wanted them. Once or twice he asked Loki ‘if it was okay like that’ and the second time Loki could merely gasp and nod.

Loki expected Balder to hold him close afterwards, but he got surprised when Balder lay next to him, only his hand was resting on Loki’s stomach. It was easy and nice to fall asleep like this.

Waking up was the very same. Somebody was touching his cheek and there was a delicious smell entering his nostrils. “You know… just because I am a prince, you don’t have to serve me coffee in bed…”

“You didn’t look like you were going to wake up anytime soon… I didn’t think it was possible to sleep without moving a muscle. You stayed in the exact same place the entire night.”

Opening his eyes Loki tried to decide if Balder had already washed his face or combed his hair or if he really looked that good first thing in the morning. “I am a sound sleeper.”

While handing him the cup of coffee Balder kissed him chastely on the lips. Loki tasted his coffee and it was too sweet like everything else, but good nonetheless.

“Thank you…” Stretching lightly Loki tried to sit up a bit straighter, but Balder pushed him back down. “So…. Where do you need to be today and when do you have to be there?”

Loki had to admit that it felt nice to sink back into the sheets and into the cushions. It caused him to sigh. “I asked a high member of the Court of Audit for an appointment. He is Jotun nobility. Maybe I can convince him to get Laufey to talk to me. That’s about all for today.”

“That appointment is when?” Balder’s fingers were playing with his hair and Loki smiled. “Two in the afternoon.”

“Good. You want to stay for breakfast?”

“I don’t know. You’ve told me several times that you can’t cook. Does that imply scrambled eggs?”
“I’ve also told that I am great at ordering things…” Balder offered him one of those rare smirks and then leaned down to kiss him. Sighing softly Loki kissed him back and snaked his arm around Balder’s waist, pulling him in. Balder was easy to touch and his weight felt good on top of Loki.

“I know I said I liked you in the uniform… you wearing nothing at all… I might like that even more…”

“Of course you do… I look great naked…”

Balder laughed against his lips before kissing him again. It’s been a terribly long time since he had started a day with sex. A shame. Even worse though, it wasn’t going to happen today either. Balder’s hand had just slipped underneath the blanket when the annoying sound of Loki’s phone interrupted them. “I guess a prince has to answer his phone, right?”

Sighing softly Loki pushed Balder off him and climbed out of bed to get his phone. Still in his pants which were lying on the floor. At least Balder got a nice sight of Loki bending over to get it. Loki wondered if that would give him any ideas.

“Yes?”

“Your highness, please forgive me the early disturbance, but his grace, your father demands your presence. Immediately.”

“Thank you, Leah.”

Well, so much about breakfast. Turning around Loki faced Balder who had already understood what was going on. “Should I borrow you some clothes? I guess you shouldn’t be seen wearing the uniform from last night.”

“Yes, that’d be nice. Thank you. I have to take a shower.”

Half an hour later Loki was freshly showered and back at the palace, but he changed clothes before joining his father anyway. It could only be about Jotunheim which didn’t give Loki a lot of hope. A conversation over breakfast. What a nice alternative to sex.

The table was nicely set, still full of food, so Odin and Thor couldn’t have been here very long with him.

Thor greeted him with a joyed smile which made Loki believe that Jane had told him that he had taken care of her yesterday. Their father didn’t look as happy. “Loki, how nice of you to join us. Are you aware that the security protocol doesn’t make exceptions for you?”

Sitting down next to Thor Loki reached for a croissant before casually shaking his head. “No, it doesn’t.”

“Excellent. Then I would prefer it if you told Heimdall where you are going when you’re leaving the palace. Or that you are leaving.”

“The driver knew where I was and I don’t need a security detail when I’m visiting Balder.” Loki responded drily, hoping there wouldn’t be obvious reactions to him spending the night at Balder’s place.

That wish was granted. “It does not matter where you go. You are a prince, in line for the throne and we shouldn’t even have this conversation. You know the rules.”
Loki swallowed a sigh, it was no fun to argue when he knew that his father was right. “We’re not here to discuss my reckless behaviour, aren’t we?”

Odin’s eyes lingered on him and Loki had to think of Doctor Jørgensen. How old that man had seemed to him yesterday. As if a little breeze might be able to break him in half. Odin’s presence was quite different, still imposing and strong. Nevertheless Loki couldn’t ignore that his father was also an old man. Especially with Loki and Thor in the same room. Odin had already been over 40 years old when him and Frigga had finally had their firstborn. The long awaited prince.

Now the firstborn was 31 years old. Loki 28 and their father was an old man.

“No. You are right, that’s not the reason. I need to discuss several things with you about a visit from the American ambassador.”

That couldn’t be good. Nothing good ever came from that man.

“What did he want? All the treaties have been signed.” Thor pointed out and Odin shook his head. “He didn’t want to talk about the American policy but about Jotunheim.”

That wasn’t good. “Those are inner-Asgardian affairs. None of that is their concern.” Loki tried not to instantly snap, but just the thought about the Americans getting involved in this made his stomach turn. As if they hadn’t already lost too much control of situation.

“Ambassador Fury is aware of that, Loki. He wanted to assure me of the friendship between our two countries in this difficult time. He also offered his country’s support.”

Dangerous territory. Loki’s hand was itching and Thor sent him a worried glance. “Support? How so?”

Odin sounded very matter-of-fact and Loki found it hard to guess what his father was thinking. “If the plebiscite goes through and if Jotunheim should decide on its independence, the United States are not going to acknowledge it.”

“As if the Jotuns are going to care…” Loki snorted and Odin shot him a dark look while Thor cleared his throat. “What else? There is more to it.”

“Indeed. Ambassador Fury let me know that the president is considering imposing an embargo Jotunheim if it should declare its independence.”

It took one second for the words to sink in and two seconds for Loki to lose his mind. That insolence and weakness made him want to scream. The belief that you could just step on somebody, because you were able to do it. What other reason was necessary?

Thor had to see it on Loki’s face, how he was falling apart, maybe that was why he spoke up first. “That sounds like a very extreme measure to show us their support…”

“It’s not extreme, it’s immoral. What? Are we going to turn Jotunheim into another Cuba, because they don’t bend to our will? Tell the Americans to get their hands of our people…” Loki pressed the words through gritted teeth and his father sighed. Like he had done when Loki had still been a child. “Why is it so hard for you to listen to the entire story before lashing out?”

“With all due respect, father, I already do know for the entire story. It’s the same story. They wanted the trade agreement and the arms deal, the improvement of our relationship, because their relationship to Russia is hardly better now than during the Cold War. We are the gateway to Russia, they need their influence here. Jotunheim and Russia share a border. Of course they don’t want us to lose
Jotunheim… It’s mostly mountains and snow… and oil wells. They depend on imported food. So if you don’t tell the American ambassador to get his sleazy hands off Jotunheim, I will gladly do it personally.”

“Loki…” Thor shook his head, telling him with his eyes to calm down. “This is strategy… you understand that, right? The threat of an embargo might be enough to scare them out of the idea of independency…”

“This is madness. Where does Jotunheim get most of his food supply from at the moment? From the rest of Asgard. So the embargo would only be a threat if Asgard went along with it. What would that make us? Oh, you want to leave us, so we’re going to try and let you starve? The rest of the world is going to love that. Jotunheim is rich enough to make a deal with Russia and if not… do you really want Jotunheim to become America’s cue ball? No, we are not going to do that.”

Odin sighed again and inwardly Loki panic. His mind racing too fast for him to keep up with it. What if Helblindi knew about his? What if there was some leak? If this got public and the Ymirsons were the ones to say it out loud… there might be more at stake than Jotunheim’s independence.

“At the moment it’s just an offer on the table. That doesn’t mean I am going to take it. Nonetheless it needs to be discussed. We are running out of options.”

“There is one big option.”

“That would be?”

“Talk to Laufey.”

“We tried that.”

“No, not really. They don’t want the independence. The Ymirsons don’t. The Jotuns… maybe a part of them, but most of them don’t. It’s an Asgardian issue. We have to find a solution without a third party involved. Until Sunday…”
Hello everybody,

No Loki in this chapter, sorry. Instead we're checking out what Steve and Bucky are doing... and we're going to Jotunheim :)

Have fun :D

“I like it. The lack of furniture is a question of taste, but overall, not bad.” Bucky couldn’t let it go, smiling before taking another bite of his slice of pizza. The taste didn’t remind him of home in the slightest bit. Something had Bucky had gotten used to a couple of years ago. Pizza all over the world didn’t taste like how they made it in Brooklyn. Not a bad thing though. Just different.

“I got it. You don’t have to beat it home that much… I need to get furniture shopping, I am aware of that. I just get overwhelmed by all the… variety. I always leave without picking anything.” Steve shrugged, the slightest bit annoyed by now which told Bucky to tune it down.

“You know I am being serious though. Sure, you still need some furniture, but you already have plants and pictures on the walls. That’s what makes a place feel like somebody is actually living in it. When I was living in Wakanda… I visited a friend’s place and it felt so weird and… yeah, kind of unpleasant.”

Seemingly Steve had forgiven him his teasing and showed interest in the little anecdote. “Why’s that?”

“First of all… there was no wooden floor, just tiles in every single room. Which is totally weird. The walls were white, if there pictures on them, they were completely bland… It didn’t feel lived in. You know? Despite the fancy, probably expensive furniture everything felt cold. Your apartment doesn’t feel cold. You know what I mean? I don’t feel like I’m making a lot of sense “ Bucky eventually shrugged mostly to himself and turned his attention back to his pizza. To his surprise he could see Steve nodding softly. “No, I guess I see what you mean. I was actually kind of worried that you would kind the place might feel… what was the word? Cold.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s your place. It can’t be cold.” It was another one of those times when Bucky had probably gone too far, but to his relief Steve smiled shyly. Cute as always. And endless frustrating. Another thing that Bucky appreciate about Asgardians. They were so straightforward. No mixed signals. Probably just a positive stereotype, but Bucky couldn’t help himself.

Okay, Steve was smiling and Bucky had somehow created an easy mood. Why not continue from there? Most of all he should stop thinking, he was so bad at that. At least in these kinds of situations. Bucky always trusted his gut, that was what he was doing. “I like it that you can’t decide on which furniture to buy, but you have no problem buying art.” Grinning lightly Bucky nodded his head towards one of the framed pictures on the wall.

Steve’s cheeks were suddenly coloured by a lithe shade of pink. Bucky had to stop using the word ‘pretty’ in his mind. Or thinking altogether. Why was that so hard?
“I didn’t buy it. It’s one of my drawings.” Steve pointed out softly and Bucky’s eyebrows went up. “You’re kidding?”

“No, I made it. I like to draw. Most of it doesn’t turn out so well, but when I’m content with something, I like to put it up the wall.”

Bucky was already up on his feet, walking over to check out the drawing. To be honest, he didn’t have a single clue what made a painting or a drawing art. To him most of that stuff was just overpriced scribbling that any child could do. Steve’s drawing looked good. A dragon. Sitting on a huge rock, his wings spread wide. As a motive it worked great and even Bucky could make out all the little details that Steve had included. Like the dragon’s stomach being covered in spikes. Every single scale had been drawn with care, it looked amazing. Also kind of Asgardian. They liked their dragon motives. Perhaps Asgard had indeed already rubbed off on Steve.

“It’s beautiful. I had no idea that you’re the creative type…”

Still on the couch Steve laughed, sounding a bit embarrassed. “Thanks… creative… I don’t know… I hardly come up with things, I draw what I see.”

“It’s cool. Where did you run into a dragon?”

“The fountain in the park…”

Bucky nodded in understanding and came back to the couch. His pizza was getting cold. Sitting back down next to Steve Bucky complimented him again and Steve told him to cut it out. He was smiling though and Bucky thought that it might be a good time to bring up his little idea. The last time he had tried something familiar, a TV had interrupted him. Which was so incredibly stupid… and Bucky definitely had to stop thinking. “I have two days off and I was thinking about going to Útgarðar. I’ve never been there. You want to come with me?”

Steve’s hand with the piece of pizza in it stopped mid-motion. “What? Really?”

“Sure. Útgarðar is supposed to be an amazingly beautiful city. Lots of timber framing. Influences of the Viking Period, lots of Late Gothic buildings… Don’t worry, I looked it up, I don’t just know these things. I’ve heard it’s a very green city… I want to check it out. It’s a six hour train ride. You want to come along?” Bucky shouldn’t build up Útgarðar that much. Either Steve wanted to or not. Which city they were going to didn’t matter ultimately.

“Is that a good idea? With the protest… doesn’t seem like the safest place at the moment…”

Or it did matter. “Yeah, the protest calmed down and none of it has been violent. I want to go there before the plebiscite… things could indeed get rough after that… it’s a great time to bring up his little idea. The last time I had tried something familiar, a TV had interrupted him. Which was so incredibly stupid… I’d like to leave tomorrow. I know you have a couple of days off. Come on, it’s going to be fun… I’d really like to check it out with you.” Bucky made sure that he wasn’t going to stop smiling, he hoped that it didn’t look as forced as it felt. He could go a step further if he needed to.

For a short moment he was concerned, because there was still a frown on Steve’s face, when he should be head over heels to go on a short trip with Bucky. “Sure, yeah. That’s going to be great.”

The second Steve agreed Bucky went to a strange sensation. A state of disbelief and he couldn’t understand why. He had already planned the trip to Útgarðar, written a list of sights they could check out, he had googled restaurants. Bucky had done all that with the conviction that they were going to be two people and now he was a little overwhelmed. Which was utterly ridiculous. Bucky had sworn himself that nothing would ever again be able to throw him for loop. Not after making out with
“Cool! Believe me, it’s going to amazing. I hear Jotun food is the strangest thing, but once you get used to it, it’s delicious.”

“Yeah, I bet a lot of raw fish and other disgusting stuff.” Steve laughed, then shrugged and sighed. “Too bad that Sam is on duty tomorrow, all three of us could have gone together.”

Bucky wanted to raise his hand and gave Steve a smack around the head. This couldn’t be true. Several people had told him before that he wasn’t a subtle person. Either all of them had been lying or Steve really didn’t get it.

Or he just didn’t want to get it. That was a possibility too, as unpleasant as it was. It was a reason to get upset nonetheless, but Bucky wasn’t going to do that. They were still going to Jotunheim together and it would be amazing. Bucky would try again and then he would make sure that misunderstandings weren’t possible.

Well, it was somehow kind of cute that Steve didn’t get it. Obliviousness could be charming. At least for a while. Not to mention the blonde hair and the bright eyes.

“Yeah, I doubt he would have come along…” That was something probably better left unsaid, but Bucky felt like he should point a few things out. Steve was so sweet, he might actually propose to Sam that he joined them a day later.

“Why that?” Steve seemed honestly confused, half-way done with his piece of pizza.

“Oh come on, you must have noticed.” A bit of overstatement, Steve hadn’t noticed a lot of things, like Bucky constantly trying to spend time with him. Yes, except for the last two weeks, but he had needed those to do some soul searching.

“What?”

“Sam doesn’t like me very much.” Bucky shrugged, because honestly he didn’t care. Agents came and went. Bucky had been there before him and hopefully he would still be here when Sam was long gone.

To his surprise Steve was now making a face as if he was feeling a bit embarrassed for somebody else. “I’m sure you just had a rough start…”

“No, he just doesn’t like me. Which is perfectly okay. I am sure he can think of a more pleasant vacation than a trip to Jotunheim with a guy he doesn’t like.”

“I don’t get why he doesn’t like you.” Steve blurted out, a bit too fast, then he smiled awkwardly and Bucky decided that yes, he was oblivious. Which was way better than the other option. Jotunheim was going to be beautiful.

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“Óreiðum augum. Lítið okkr þinig. Ok gefið sitjöndum sigr.” The familiar echo carried the words through the shrine. His words seemed to be bouncing of the plaques. After finishing the greeting Helblindi lit one of the torches before sitting down on the cold floor. He hadn’t written a letter. There was nothing new to say, no new sins had been committed and Helblindi was still yearning for the same things.

His agenda was bursting and Helblindi wanted to start his day by getting the blessing of his
ancestors. Somebody had already been here before him. Byleistr or his father. Definitely his father.

Closing his eyes Helblindi breathed in the cool, sacred air and let it clear his mind. Unfortunately it didn’t work as well as it should. These days his heart just wouldn’t beat at a normal rate. He had trouble falling asleep at night. Sometimes his body seemed to belong to another person. It felt foreign and not under his control. Almost as if electricity was constantly running through it.

Perhaps Helblindi should be glad. It kept him awake, focused, concentrated. Yet an hour of peace of mind was the one thing he found himself longing for the most. Without his thoughts permanently drifting back to the same direction. Helblindi grimaced, it was a selfish desire, despicable even. His thoughts should only be occupied with the future and well-being of his people. Wanting a distraction from that was not much different than treason.

His complaints about being restless were minor. Nothing compared to what other people had been going through. Helblindi’s home hadn’t been shameless robbed. Never had a crown been ripped from his head when it was his rightfully his. Only his. He had not been helplessly forced to watch invaders divide his homeland among them. Helblindi had never had to pick up his arms. Never fight for his birth right and the honour of his people. Helblindi hadn’t seen half his family vanish because of the plague, neither had he seen his people being slaughtered on the battlefield. Dying for him because they believed in him. Nor did he have to live in constant fear for his child, the heir to throne, to be murdered by the same men who had stolen his throne.

Lopthæna had gone through all of his. In comparison Helblindi’s life had been nothing but pleasant. What bad thing had ever happened to him? The death of his mother. A little sting in his chest to remind him that the pain would never completely go away.

That was all. No right to complain, not even to think about how hard this was on him.

How pathetic that he couldn’t take a bit of discomfort. Especially when it hadn’t even started yet. None of it. Also it wasn’t about him.

“To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul, my mother Fárbauti, gone before her time… I will always remember that none of this is about me.”

Slowly standing up Helblindi walked over to the plaque which he had sat down in front of. Unlike the others there was still space left. For new names. His father’s. Helblindi’s. Byleistr’s. And their children’s.

Slowly Helblindi let his fingers over the runes that formed the last name in the column. His mother’s.

Back in the castle Helblindi found his security detail already waiting for him. “My Lord. Are you ready to leave?”

Helblindi nodded and then he was on his way. During the entire drive Helblindi was looking out the window without actually seeing something. Hundreds of little flags on the facades. Like any other day. After 20 minutes they arrived at the school. The mayor, the principal and several other people were already waiting in the frontline. Several kids. Not many of them, Helblindi would be meeting most of them inside during the reception.

When his security detail opened the door and Helblindi got out, the kids started applauding. Like kids would. Too loud and too frantic. Overexcited. It took Helblindi aback, which was a hard thing to do. One of the teachers, looking slightly embarrassed, tried to shush them, then smiled defeated. The principal stepped forward and Helblindi could almost his nervousness on him, but his smile was
also filled with real joy.

“My Lord, I am Asger Møller, the principal of this school. Thank you so much for honouring our school with your presence.”

Shaking his head Helblindi smiled back at him. “The honour is mine. You are going to show me how beautiful the school has turned out?”

Of course he would. First Helblindi had to greet the mayor though, so many hands to shake. Inside the school everything had to strictly follow the protocol. They showed Helblindi around, the new rooms and the better equipment. Money indeed well spent. The kids definitely deserved the best they could get. After the tour was the official reception, lots of speeches, acknowledgments. Helblindi was the last one to step up to the speaker’s desk. Before every speech Helblindi liked to take a moment, to build up the tension and to analyse his audience. Lots of kids, teachers, parents. So different and yet every single one of them had the same expression on their face.

A smile.

In the first row Helblindi could even make out sparkling eyes. They weren’t so excited about their new school and its inauguration. None of the other speakers had evoked that kind of reaction. They were smiling at him.

Finally Helblindi could feel his heart slowing down. The entire room was vibrating, engulfing him in adoration and trust. Holding his head up Helblindi began talking, that’s what he knew doing best.

About how schools were the place where young minds were being formed and brought to greatness.

About how children deserved only the best and that he hoped that they liked the new design.

About how the money had been invested in the right place and how he saw great potential here.

They applauded. Several times.

When Helblindi promised them that soon there would be Jótnar lesson held in these new rooms, people got up from their chairs. Helblindi was drowned in applause and cheers. There was so much excitement. Faces torn apart by it and they deserved it. They deserved to no longer be put down by an old man who had no idea how wonderful they were.

With the speeches and the more official part was done Helblindi got to talk to a couple of the kids. He couldn’t help but wonder what their parents or their teachers had told him, since all of them were beaming at him. Mothers and fathers were shaking his hand, bowing their heads. Telling him how grateful they were for everything he was doing for them.

Helblindi was starting to feel tired when a cute little girl was standing in front of him. She asked him if he had also hated mathematics during his time at school. Laughing softly Helblindi shook his head, telling her that he had loved all of his courses, but sadly he had not visited a private, nor a public school. He had been tutored at the castle, several teachers just for him. No other students who would let him copy their homework. That concept seemed to be completely alien to her.

“Your daughter is lovely, you must be very proud.” Helblindi turned to her mother and his smile faded away. He couldn’t tell why. Something about her. She bowed her head. “Thank you, my Lord. She was looking forward to see you all month. Like me.”

“You are too kind.”
“Not nearly enough, my Lord.” There was no smile on her face, but Helblindi was captured by her eyes. Shining brightly. “I needed to come here today to thank you. For reminding us.”

“I’m sorry?”

She was talking slowly, but there was emphasis on every word. She was just as real as the rest of them. “We didn’t forget, but I think we got used to it. Used to being a stepping stone. Second class citizens. Everyday life. Then you opened your mouth and started talking to us. Reminding us that this isn’t who we are and that nobody is going to continue treating us like that. You give us hope.”

It was raw and exactly what Helblindi had hoped to inspire and yet he couldn’t respond. Not here, in this environment. So Helblindi nodded softly. “I thank you for your kind words.”

“It is all of us who has to thank you.” She reached for his hand and Helblindi thought she was going to say goodbye, but instead she leaned down and kissed the back of his hands and eventually touched it with her forehead. “My prince.”

For the rest of the day Helblindi felt as if somebody had built up an invisible wall around him. People were moving their lips, but he could not really hear what they were saying. He smiled though, was polite and tried to be as attentive as possible. They deserved that. Anyway, Helblindi couldn’t deny an immense relief when he was on his way back home. It seemed still too soon to be drinking whiskey, but he felt a strong desire for it.

Outside of the car people on the street were recognizing the insignia and they were waving, shouting, smiles everywhere.

Helblindi needed to remember that none of this was about him.

Back at home Laufey came to see him, to ask how his appointment at the school had gone down. Helblindi spent about 10 minutes telling him about the kids, how the new building was beautiful and that the reception had been warm and almost touching.

“There was… a woman. With an adorable little girl. She thanked me for giving them hope.”

Laufey nodded, but unlike the people he didn’t smile. His father rarely did and Helblindi didn’t mind, he had other ways to show happiness and appreciation. “You are giving them hope. You are young, fierce, so smart and compassionate. People can see that you care for their issues. That their issues are yours too.”

“Of course they are… I am Jotun just like them.”

His father nodded again and Helblindi knew that he was proud of him.

“She called me her prince…”

Laufey arched an eyebrow, not saying anything what caused Helblindi to feel like he had to add something, to explain. Why? Helblindi was a prince. “She called me her prince and touched my hand with her forehead.”

“Most Jotuns see you as their prince.”

“But nobody has ever shown me a gesture that is reserved for royalty…”

“Do you think that you are royalty?”
Helblindi knew that he was being tested, his father sounded curious enough, nonetheless cold. As if they were talking about their stolen birth right.

Raising his chin a little Helblindi replied in the same tone. “I am royalty. So is Byleistr. So are you. Sons and descendants of kings and a robbed queen. The man on the throne is the son of thieves and murderers. You are the king. I am your son. Your firstborn. That makes me a prince. Was my answer to your satisfaction?”

“No, it wasn’t. You’re raising my concerns.”

Helblindi snapped. Way too quickly and without proper reason. A whole life of being told that it had been their blood that had built up this nation. “Why? What did I do to raise your concerns?”

“I am worried that you might get blinded and lose focus.”

“Father, you know me better than that. I will never put myself before our people.”

“Then tell me why, at this point, when we’re only days away from changing the foundation of Jotunheim, you are suddenly contemplating the thought of being royalty?”

Something was wrong. Helblindi had done something to upset him, he recognized that gaze. Yet it was impossible to tell what had set Laufey off. A conversation that they’ve had so many times before. Sighing softly Helblindi gave up. “Father, I am not fond of playing this game. Why don’t you just tell me what’s on your mind?”

“No father has ever been prouder of his sons than I am. I see the love the people feel for you and you deserve it. You deserve every praise you’re receiving, perhaps even more. That woman sees you as her prince, because she knows that you care about her, her family, her city. For them you are a prince, their future king. They wish for you to be that. When I am gone, you will be the Lord of Jotunheim and I know it will be cared for. I also know that you are not going to be a king. No matter how much they adore you. It also doesn’t matter if you begin to picture yourself in that role and find out that you like that image… It is not going to happen. For neither of us and that doesn’t matter as long as Jotunheim is being taken care of. Do you understand?”

Reluctantly Helblindi nodded. He understood and he knew. He had said so himself. Too much time had passed. Not for Jotunheim but for the rest of Asgard. They didn’t see that old man for what he was. A thief. No, for them he was their king and they hailed his foolish soon as the future of the nation. While he was going to whore it out to the rest of the world. Walking over Jotunheim, pretending that they were some sort of colony. Like they didn’t matter.

“I understand perfectly, father. I always do.”

Laufey still didn’t smile, but he stood up and ran his hand over Helblindi’s black hair. He pressed a soft kiss on Helblindi’s forehead.

Closing his eyes Helblindi let himself enjoy his father’s display of affection, but his thoughts once again drifted off to Lopthæna. The betrayal had started exactly like that. Someone saying that she couldn’t be queen. She had fought for her right and lost. Countless of sons followed, the first ones still willing to chase after what was rightfully theirs. The later ones still refused to bow their heads to the new king, but they slowly resigned. Every single one of them had been told that they weren’t going to be king. None of them had become king. They had resigned themselves to the belief that it was too late. Even his father.

Helblindi wasn’t quite there yet.
Balder would give it another 10 minutes, then Loki would have definitely walked holes into the floor. Even the air around him was radiating with tension. At some point Loki would have to stop. Either he was going to give into exhaustion or the soon-to-be hole in the floor was going to swallow him. None of these two options sounded very appealing to Balder. He knew better then to interrupt Loki when he was talking himself into a frenzy. So fast by the way that Balder had trouble making out what he was saying.

“… means to an end. They are going to do everything to make us depend on them… getting involved in our internal affairs…”

At this point Balder had to do something, Loki was fuelling his own anger by now. An endless spiral, it wasn’t going to get better.

“The Americans or the Jotuns?”

Loki was startled, seemingly shocked that somebody else but him was in the room. “The Americans of course. Aren’t you listening to me?”

“Honestly? No, I stopped a while ago when you stopped talking in coherent sentences. It’s actually quite hard to tell what you are talking about.”

The truth seemed to offend Loki and he huffed dismissively. “Story of my life. Nobody is listening to me…”

“That’s not true, I would love to listen to you. If it wasn’t 11:30 and if you weren’t talking to yourself for over an hour now…” Balder offered him a smile, to show Loki that he didn’t really mind, but somebody had to point it out to him.

“That can’t be true… That wasn’t an… Shit, I’ve been going on for an hour. Why didn’t you stop me?”

“You believe that I can make you stop?” Balder chuckled before standing up and approaching Loki. “Well, you could at least try…”

Putting his hands on Loki’s shoulders Balder kissed him softly. It was no surprise that Loki had his troubles getting into it. His mind was on the political issues, like always. Which was a good thing and a huge part of Loki’s character. Nevertheless it was the middle of the night and everybody had to take a break sometimes. Especially Loki when he liked to get worked out about things that he couldn’t change. Right now Balder wasn’t going to point that out, because Loki would probably freak out. So much passion had to be admired.

“How about that?” Balder smiled at Loki who shrugged indifferently. “I still want to run up to the
American embassy and set it on fire…”

“Now that’s going to set back diplomatic relationships…”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point.” Loki grumbled and sat down on the edge of the bed. Well, that was process at least. Balder should probably face the truth, there was no way of just taking Loki’s mind of the Jotun crisis. It wasn’t like Balder wasn’t concerned himself, but everybody would ultimately have to deal with the fallout. Every single person in Asgard, Loki shouldn’t take it so personally. There was only so much worrying a person could do, before the anxiety left a permanent impression on them. Kneeling down in front of Loki Balder put his hands on his knees. “Nothing is ever that black or white, Loki. The Americans aren’t going to summon doom…”

“I am not against diplomatic or trade relations with the US. It could be beneficial for everybody, but since father showed them that they can do anything they want… they will do everything they want. We can’t just… It’s despicable to even make that suggestion. Teaming up with a foreign nation against our own people…”

“It’s a scare tactic… they hope that if Jotunheim has to face the possibility of an embargo, they’ll back off and don’t go through with the plebiscite…”

In response Loki snorted and Balder could see sparks dancing in his eyes. “Scare tactic… only a person who works all day in a secluded office could think of something like that. They don’t get what the people think. We would lose the support of the rest of Asgard if they knew that something like that was even being discussed. They would lose total trust in us. And Helblindi…” Loki trailed off, slightly shaking his head. “I don’t want to even think about what he might end up doing…”

“Laufey is the Lord of Jotunheim, not his son.”

“I am not worried about the father, but about the son.” Loki’s reply was dry, but the slight tension in his voice couldn’t be overheard. Another thing to worry about.

Smiling softly Balder squeezed Loki’s knees. “You know what he is doing now? The young Lord of Jotunheim? And every other Asgardian?”

Loki huffed, since he obviously knew where this was going. “Sleeping?”

“Exactly. Get into bed, will you? I promise that all your worries are still going to be there tomorrow…” Balder winked at him and then got back up to his feet. No, Loki didn’t look content with that, but he didn’t put up a fight. A small victory, but Balder felt definitely proud. A little bit. In the meantime Loki was already taking off his socks, this pants and t-shirt quickly joining them on the floor.

It was hard to tell but Balder might like him the most when Loki was at his most casual. There was always grace in his movements, in his entire nature. Balder enjoyed watching him. His white skin and the sharp contrast of his dark hair. Sometimes he wondered if there was even a single birthmark on his body, Balder hadn’t found one yet. To him it almost a shame that one day the wedding markings would create lines on his perfect skin.

“You are gawking…”

Feeling caught Balder smiled and shrugged. “Can’t help it. You look lovely.”

“Well, I gotta agree with that…” Loki smirked at him and finally looked completely like himself. Lovely.
Also sitting down on the couch Balder pressed his lips against Loki’s shoulder. “I really like the way you look… that you are so lean…” To emphasize his point Balder let his hand run down Loki’s side, feeling the fine muscles beneath his fingers.

“Yeah? I didn’t. Not until I was 17 and I realised that a lot of people actually liked it…”

That seemed odd to Balder. Physically Loki was close to perfect, how could he not have realised that at a very young age?

“I have trouble believing that… I’ve known you for all your life. You’ve always been very vain…” Loki’s skin was warm and soft beneath his lips.

“That’s not what I meant. I was just wondering, constantly, why Thor looked so different than me. I am all lean and he is all muscles. When you are 17 years old you prefer pretty much everything to your own looks.”

“I prefer your looks… by several miles.” Leaning forward Balder captured Loki’s lips in a soft kiss.

His boyfriend responded eagerly and Balder felt a hand pressing against his chest, pushing him down on the mattress. So much about going to sleep. No, he definitely didn’t mind. Loki nipped at his jaw, then trailed feathery kisses along his throat. More than glad Balder closed his eyes and let Loki do what he wanted. As it seemed Loki wanted to nuzzle his neck while sliding his hand beneath Balder’s shirt. The touch was light but definitely not hesitant. Just as Loki’s fingers moved higher they got interrupted by Loki’s phone. A call in the middle of the night, at the worst possible time.

It was a futile hope, Balder already knew that it wasn’t going to work out, but he nonetheless tried to pull Loki into a kiss as a distraction.

“Wait a second…” Loki mumbled against his lips and Balder knew that all was lost. Dropping his head onto a pillow Balder sighed. “Go ahead…”

Who was he saying that to? Loki was already out of bed, walking over to the commode where his phone was lying. “Leah, it’s past… what?”

There was something in Loki’s voice. A hint of something worse than worry. Dread. Enough to make Balder raise his head and follow Loki closely with his eyes. The phone was pressed to his ear, his lips slightly parted and his eyes got wider by the second. Now dread wasn’t only audible in his voice, but also visible on his beautiful face. “Loki?”

“How? How the fuck do they know that?! That’s confidential information! How can…” Loki stopped mid-sentence, ending the call and then tossed his phone onto the bed, almost hitting Balder. “Hey!”

Again, Loki wasn’t listening, Balder only got to see him walk out of the bedroom door. With a man in Loki’s position, there were a thousand things that could have happened to cause him to storm out, unfortunately. Balder felt his throat tightening with worry. All the delicious tension from a moment ago had vanished. After getting up from the bed Balder followed Loki into the salon. The picture that welcomed it was strange enough. Loki was standing in front of the TV, staring at it with fierce eye. The question of what was wrong was answered by the news channel.

... the United States and the Asgardian government might impose radical economic sanctions on Jotunheim if the plebiscite should take place. Sources at the royal court talk about an embargo…

“They know! How can they know? Somebody went to the press…” Loki kept talking, a string of
curse words flowing from his lips while his shoulders were clearly shaking with anger. Balder liked to flatter himself by thinking that he always kept his calm, that he knew what things to say to make people feel better about themselves. The current situation didn’t give him much to work with.

A political nightmare and Loki was going to take it personally, like he always did. Slowly walking up to Loki Balder put a hand on his shoulder. “They’re not saying it’s a fact. Right now it’s still a rumor. You might be able to…”

“To what? To sweep it under the rug? It’s out there! It’s too late to do anything. It doesn’t matter if it is the truth, which it is, or not. Now it’s out and people are going to draw their own conclusions. Not just the Jotuns are going to feel betrayed, but every single Asgardian. There is no way of controlling that now. How do the news know about this?”

The tension started in Loki’s shoulders, Balder could see his arms shaking lightly. He was going to be restless until this is issue was going to be resolved and Balder was realistic enough to know that something this big couldn’t be resolved.

“Somebody must have leaked it… at the court or at the American embassy.” Balder was well aware that he was stating the obvious, but he felt like there was nothing else that he could do right now. Not when Loki’s thoughts were already going in circles, trying to get a step ahead of something that had already spiralled out of control.

“I have to talk to my father, to Thor. This is…” Loki trailed off, eventually shook his head and left the room again. When he came back, he was fully dressed, talking into his phone. Three seconds later Loki was gone and Balder sat down sighing on the couch. Bad news all over the place.

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The lack of dignity was deeply upsetting. Over the course of his reign Odin had been woken up in the middle of the night more than once. When he tried to remember how many times exactly, a thick fog draped itself over Odin’s memory. Four times? Five times? The flooding in Helheim, of course. Almost 15 years ago. There had been worries, bad weather reports, but the sheer amount of rain that had crashed down on their soil hadn’t been expected by anybody. So they had woken Odin from his sleep, he had immediately travelled to Helheim, with a big part of the army to help the civilians that had had to flee from their houses.

A dreadful thing to wake up to. Odin almost wished that the fog would settle on that memory. There had been utter reasons, not only better, but delightful. Benedictory. 28 years ago Heimdall had walked into Odin’s bedroom, had woken him up and had told him that he had another son. Not that Frigga had gone into labour, but that he had another son.

Even in with birth Loki had had to defy expectations. Frigga had called her doctor, because she hadn’t been feeling to well. Her second child and she had been sure that it was too soon. Four weeks too soon actually. It had taken her by surprise when the doctor wouldn’t let her go, the baby had already been on its way. Their second son’s birth had taken less than three hours. Frigga hadn’t sent somebody to alert him, thinking that he wouldn’t make it in time anyway. It was one of the very few things that Odin resented her doing.

When Odin had finally arrived at the hospital Frigga had been already holding their new-born son in her arms. A beautiful, healthy child with his mother’s green eyes. Frigga had already chosen his name and Odin had thought that it fitted quite well. He still did.

Loki’s birth had been the most wonderful thing to be the reason why Odin had been woken up in the middle of the night. Probably the only good reason.
Tonight everything was very different. Odin had struggled out of bed, his legs still hurting from the
effort. It was nothing new that his body was acting up. What did it matter as long as his mind wasn’t
acting up? As long as the fog was only clouding distant memories.

Odin was wearing his dressing gown, sitting on the sofa with a cup of tea in his hand when Heimdall
announced that Valkyrie had arrived. Although they had called her only 20 minutes ago, here she
was, looking almost as professional and beautiful as any other day, any other time. He gave her one
hour to find out who had published the story first and to get that person here. There was a leak in his
close circle and Odin wasn’t going to rest until he found out who it was. Only a handful of people
had even known about the American offer. It should have stayed that way.

As a baby Loki might have defied his expectations, he didn’t do that today. He was the first to storm
into Odin’s study, dressed in a pair of jeans and a black shirt. Rather unusual for him. His fierce
anger and his temper were perfectly in character. “You have to deny it! Tell them that it was made up
by the Americans. Or that the American approached you with it and you sent them away.”

“I see you are awake, Loki. Sit down. Drink your tea. No good decisions are made in a haste.” Odin
gestured at the chair opposite of him. Of course Loki wouldn’t sit down. While his legs were hurting
Odin’s eyes had lost nothing of their sharpness, he could see how fast his son was breathing. His
heart was probably racing.

“It’s still in the middle of the night. Most Asgardians are still asleep which means we can still have a
hand in how they are exposed to this information. When they open their newspapers or turn on their
TV or read online, they can read our version. We need to get our version out now.” Loki was
sizzling, just the slightest bit and Odin thought of Frigga, how much she praised Loki’s brilliance.
Any mother would. She wasn’t wrong, but just maybe she refused to see this side of Loki. Wearing
one’s heart on their sleeve. Such a nice way of saying that someone’s mouth got the better of them.
Loki didn’t matter what people thought about him or his words, he was driven by recklessness,
impatience and good intentions all at once. A most strange combination.

At some point Loki would have to learn to hide his feelings, to play a role. No, that was wrong. Odin
knew that Loki was perfectly capable of doing that, he just didn’t want to.

“Sit down. Your brother will be here any second. We will talk about what to do.”

“It’s shockingly obvious what we should do…”

“Sit down. I am not going to ask one more time.”

Loki stopped pacing and met his father’s eyes. It was a shame that he looked always so angry. His
son had a beautiful face. Frigga was right, he was in danger of burning up. Unfortunately Odin
doubted that a lover, a husband or a wife could change that. Especially when Loki refused to see the
important thing. At the moment Loki tried to stare him down. It almost made Odin smile. 25 years
ago he had explained to this boy that there was no monster hiding under his bed. How could he ever
stare him down like this?

Finally Loki admitted that his attempt had failed and he sank down on his chair. The door opened
and Odin saw his eldest son walking in. Thor didn’t seem less angry than Loki, but slightly more
composed. He was also in jeans and a t-shirt. “Do we know who it was? They need to be fired and
put on trial.”

“I agree that we have to find out, but right now we have to react! The clock is ticking, we have to get
our version out before the people go to work…” The urgency in Loki’s words was clear, just like his
priorities. Odin wasn’t of the same opinion. “Sit down, Thor. This is not the first time confidential
information gets to the press. It has happened before. Although never something of such importance at such a bad time. I have to find out where the leak is located and fix it. Or it will happen again, maybe even worse.”

Loki groaned while Thor nodded.

“Hardly anyone knew about the American offer. The ambassador told me in private. I let the minister of the interior and the minister of finance know. And the both of you. Now I have to know who the both of you told it to.”

“What? The press didn’t learn from us!” Thor exclaimed, offended too easily.

“I asked you a simple question, Thor, answer it.”

Thor didn’t, but Loki carelessly shrugged. “I told Balder.”

Slowly Odin nodded. A bit of a surprise, but understandable. They were in a relationship, Loki had to be to trust Balder with anything.

“And I mentioned it in my prayers. Are our ancestors also under suspicion?”

Thor’s head snapped around and he stared reproachfully at Loki for saying something so inappropriate. Loki answered with another shrug. “What? If we are going to waste time, I’m going to waste time.”

“Thor? I am still waiting.”

“I didn’t tell anyone. What about the Americans? The ambassador told you, but definitely more people knew about the embargo. The leak could have been on their side…”

Loki looked incredibly satisfied with Thor’s suggestion and Odin decided to play along. It was important that they learned to listen. Both of them. “Why would they do that?”

“I’m not saying that they did it on purpose. If more people know about something, then there is a bigger chance that it gets out.”

Ignoring Thor Loki gave his own explanation. “To force our hand. They made an offer, you didn’t give them an answer. Now that it’s out, we have to react. Either accept it or reject it. Which brings me back to the main point. We have to react before more people learn about it! Laufey and Helblindi are only waiting for this kind of present. What are they doing right now? They’re preparing their own statements, we have to be faster than them.”

Odin felt the familiar heat in his guts. He wouldn’t lose his calm over this. “I can see very well how you think about all of this, Loki. I will hear you out. What do you think I should do?”

Loki didn’t have to think, the words were easily flowing from his mouth. “The embargo is a terrible idea. It’s disgraceful and the people are not going to forgive us for it. All they’ll see is us completely turning against Jotunheim. Most of the rest of the country has remained silent until now, but it’s not going to stay that way if they hear about the embargo. They are already upset about the American policy. It will look like the court is conspiring with the Americans against the people… We need to release a statement that we’re not even thinking about taking them up on their offer. That way we might be able to do some damage control.”

“So you are concerned about the people’s opinion.”
“Of course.”

“And do you also know what the people think about Jotun plebiscite? Vanaheim, Helheim, Svartálfar… What do they think about that? About Laufey deliberately breaking the law. The constitution. The majority of Asgardians is not in favor of that.”

“You cannot be really thinking about that. The relationship between Jotunheim and Valhalla would be permanently destroyed.”

“Am I supposed to let Laufey ignore the constitution and betray his sovereign?”

“No, of course not.”

“What is the right way to deal with the plebiscite? To stop it from happening?”

“Take their deal. We let go of the language act and perhaps they’ll change their mind.”

“Thor, what do you think?”

“That’s highly unlikely. Laufey already announced the plebiscite, he will not back out. The Language Act was just one point on a long list. They are not going to be content and if we give in there are going to be more and more demands. We know that.”

Odin knew that Loki could hide his frustration well, so why was he refusing to do it. “How do we know that? We don’t know anything. Laufey cares about Jotunheim, he wants what is best for his people.”

There was a twitch, so Odin quickly put his hand in his lap. They shouldn’t see it. “You are a good judge of character, but I fear you don’t understand the mind-set of the Ymirsons.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “And you do, father?”

“Yes, because I have known Laufey Ymirson for over 50 years now and I also knew his father. I know what he thinks because I heard him say it. It’s not all about Jotunheim. It’s about him and his sons. Their entire family and what they think is their right.”

“Why are you so afraid of Laufey? Why do you think that he will use everything to stab you in the back? Even if it hurts his own people?”

Loki didn’t understand and the words he used were clear reproaches. Which was wrong. In each and every way. “I know because he told me so. Before the two of you were born, even before the birth of his own sons, Laufey told me that the right to the throne was in his bloodline and that his blood was going to rule over Asgard. I heard him say it, so excuse me if I don’t believe Laufey’s promises. No, the plebiscite is not going to happen. I am not going to send police or military forces into Jotunheim. What is going on now has been one single Jotun’s decision and this morning I will publicly address him this morning and demand that he will call off the plebiscite since it’s against the constitution and he didn’t have the right to set it up to begin with.”

Thor responded while Loki’s jaw was tensed, his eyes still burning. “He is not going to do it.”

“Then the threat of a potential embargo might be enough to reconsider if he is really doing this for his people.”

Finally Loki’s voice had gone down to a normal volume, which didn’t mean it had lost any of its bite. “Father, you cannot do that. They are our people. You can’t team up with the Americans
against them. The Jotuns are not going to forgive that… neither will the rest of Asgard.”

“I hope that we will not have to go that far, but independence is not an option.” Or anything else that Laufey might suggest. Everything that man brought to the table was a disguised attack on Odin’s legacy. It wasn’t going to be destroyed. It belonged to Thor and Loki and Odin was going to preserve it for them. Although they might have trouble seeing it just now.

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The security detail had stormed into the room after hearing glass shatter and loud yelling. There was no intruder though. A glass had been smashed against the wall, the shards were scattered across the floor. The young Lord was standing next to his bed, breathing hard.

“These scumbags! Liars and thieves! All of them! They’re not going to get away with that…”

***

Loki slammed the door shut and very distantly he realised that Balder had been sleeping on the couch. Not anymore, he was startled awake by the loud, uneven sound. “Loki?”

His father couldn’t betray his own people like that. They would lose the support of the other regions, not just Jotunheim. The protests could spread and most importantly they were inviting their Americans into their inner affairs.

No, Loki wasn’t going to let that happen.

“Loki, are you alright?”

He knew just who to turn to.

***

“No, I am not here!”

Groaning in annoyance Tony rolled his shoulders and then set back to work. Miracles of technology didn’t build itself and it was hard to work one’s genius when the phone was constantly ringing.

Yeah, it was his private cell, whatever. Pepper or Rhodey would show up if it was really important. He had spent the entire last day talking to the kid. It was unlikely Peter would call again. Unlikely, but not impossible.

There, it stopped ringing. Finally some silence. Too silent. Perhaps Tony should put on some music. He was in the mood for some Jazz or…

The ringing started again and Tony was about to lose it. Persistent little fuckers. That was enough. Somebody clearly had to be desperate beyond belief to let his phone ring for over half an hour.

Grabbing the device Tony glanced at the display and his anger was replaced by bewilderment. An unknown number. Huh…

This was his private phone. Nobody had that number. Not even business associates, just a handful of people that Tony had given it to. This was probably a sign that Tony should immediately through that fucking thing away and get a new one. Well, Tony had never been one to go down the logical road. Or the one that was good for him.

Answering his phone Tony cleared his throat. “Baldrige Vacuum & Carpet Cleaning. How can I
An unknown male voice answered on the other end of the line. “Good evening, Mr. Stark. I am sorry for the disturbance.”

“We are a 24/7 business, our customers are never a disturbance.”

“Mr. Stark, this is going to be a rather serious conversation, so I would appreciate it if you were a bit more serious.”

“Aha, doesn’t sound very appealing. How did you get this number?”

“My employer, a very important and very busy man, wishes to do business with you. It’s a rather delicate matter that cannot be discussed on the phone. He wants a personal meeting.”

“Aha, somebody cares about what I want?”

“Actually, no, Mr. Stark. I can only emphasise the urgency of my call. My employer expects you tomorrow morning in Hamburg, Germany. A plane is waiting for you at Newark Airport.”

“You expect me to fly from New Jersey? Seriously?” Tony was still making jokes, but his mind was racing. This was his private number, so unless Peter had lost his mind and pinned it to the black board at his school, this was a real call.

Hamburg? Tony had the best contacts to the German private sector and to the German government. Unlikely. A meeting on neutral ground?

“You will be compensated immensely for your time and your effort.”

“Oh, really? Maybe you’ll interest me eventually.”

“Mr. Stark, you are my employer’s first choice, but there are other possibilities. I cannot give you any details on the phone and you will not be able to talk about this meeting to anyone. This is serious. My employer wants me to tell you that if you feel confident enough to do business with somebody without making a comment about their scraped knees, you better get on the stupid plane, because he isn’t a spoiled billionaire. He doesn’t have any time to lose.”

Tony almost dropped his phone.
Hello everybody,

So Tony and Loki are back in one room... What's going to happen?

Give me another couple of hours and you'll get the responses to your reviews, I didn't forget ;)

Have fun

It had been a long time since Tony had felt the little tingles and he had been painfully aware of how much he had been missing them. Men of his age and status constantly found themselves in a ridiculous situation. Having all the money in the world could be a real bitch. No, Tony wasn’t of those guys who would pretend that being wealthy, being part of the one percent was a chore and such a heavy burden carry. Being a billionaire was the best thing in the world. It made his life incredibly comfortable and the only things Tony had to worry about where problems that he created himself. Mostly because of boredom.

The only nasty part was that after so time it was so incredibly hard to find excitement. Lack of opportunities or possibilities was something that Tony didn’t know. Something he had never experienced. The opposite was the case. Tony had done everything. At some point nothing could shock him anymore. Not that Tony wanted to be shocked, but he liked challenges and excitement. A bit of craziness.

Like eating sushi of a ridiculously gorgeous girl in Japan. Those Japanese business men really knew how to create some distraction. Thinking back that had been one of the tamest things he had ever done.

Yes, Tony had missed the tingles and now he was definitely excited about whatever was awaiting him here.

The whole arrangement smelled like trouble.

Point number 1 – the prince hadn’t called him personally but through some guy working for him. Not saying a name or giving away any details. That meant the whole thing was indeed about something business related.

Point number 2 – the prince wasn’t in a position to do business with Tony. The ink on all the contracts had already dried. If somebody wanted to do something about that it had to be the king and the American government had to also get involved.

Point number 3 and that one was really exciting – everything about this was definitely against the rules.

Tony was excited. Pepper threw a fit when he called off a board meeting to jet to Germany and he would have to send her a fruit basket or something like that. He would be back soon enough, given that everything in Asgard was going to shit the prince wouldn’t have too much time on his hands. A
pity, Tony loved to get under his skin.

Anyway, the flight to Hamburg was pleasant, they served him champagne and Tony played way too much Angry Birds on his phone. After a short nap he went through his latest blueprints and then the plane was already landing.

As soon as he stepped outside Tony was approached by a rather short, somewhat Asian looking man. Huh. Weren’t Asgardians all ridiculously Caucasian? Maybe he felt a bit like an outsider and that was why he was looking so grim.

“Mr. Stark. My name is Hogun I will escort you to the hotel.”

“Hi, nice to meet you. Better not the Grand Élysee, the last time I was there the colour of the sheets didn’t match the curtains.”

Hogun only slightly arched an eyebrow, but instead of giving Tony a well-deserved response he gestured towards a black BMW that was already waiting for them. Well, too bad.

The drive only lasted for approximately 20 minutes, long enough to get Tony worked up and even more excited. Oh, he was going to be such a pain. Just to see those lovely green eyes flashing with anger. That wasn’t too much to ask.

Eventually the car pulled up in front of the Atlantic Hotel, Tony had never been there, but one glance was enough that the prince definitely didn’t downgrade him. Presidential suite. Check. Not for Tony though.

Hogun, who obviously had already used all the words at his disposal for today, led him to one of the top floors and even opened the door for him. At least he was perfectly courteous even without saying a thing. As casually as he possibly could Tony strolled inside and did a look around. Proper five star suite, everything that he was already used to.

What he could get used to was that perfect specimen looking like one million bucks sitting on the couch and already looking pissed. Damn, Tony must have been such a good boy to deserve that.

Another quick check. The prince definitely looked different than the last time he had seen him. He was wearing normal clothes for once. No stupid frock coat, that was new. Bright blue trousers, a grey jacket and a white shirt underneath. His hair looked somewhat slicked back, Tony wondered if he used barrettes to fix the black strands behind his ears. Whatever, Tony was very pleased with what he saw. There were a couple of things that even his enormous wealth couldn’t buy.

Charisma.

Luckily Tony didn’t need it, every room was bursting with it as soon as he walked in, but he also liked his company to capture his attention with their aura. Loki had it, no doubt about that. It seemed even more intense when he was in a bad mood.

Tony loved everything about his little trip to Germany.

“Mr. Stark, I appreciate that you accepted my invitation.”

Sure he did, but he didn’t bother to get up from the couch. God, Tony might eat him up alive.

“Thanks for picking me up at the airport. Next time please send someone less chatty. Your good friend here chewed my air off.”
Loki didn’t move a muscle. “Thank you, Hogun. I will take it from here.”

“Your highness.” Hogun bowed his head and then left the room, closing the door shut behind him. Great, the game was on. Tony walked over to the bar that he had spotted the second he had entered the room. Thank god for the Germans, they knew that it was important to get their alcoholics buzzed.

“Darling, I knew that you wouldn’t be able to stay away from me, but there was no need to fly me around half the world. We could have met somewhere half way… like Capo Verde.” Tony smirked while grabbing a bottle of scotch.

Loki still didn’t move, the corners of his mouth twitched the slightest bit. Perfectly at ease with the situation Tony poured himself a glass and waited. Not for long.

“May I remind you that the nature of your meeting is purely professional? I would prefer it if you stayed sober.”

“Oh believe me, you wouldn’t. Anyway, you letting somebody else call me instead of talking to me personally. That really broke my heart.”

“Will you sit down now so that I can make my proposition? This is important and I don’t have that much time on my hands. Unlike you obviously.”

Cheap shot, Tony couldn’t care less. He would have loved to annoy him a bit more, to rub him all the wrong ways to see him lose his composure. Right now that didn’t seem like the best idea, Loki already looked upset enough. If Tony was going to push this too hard, the prince would probably walk out of him. For once Tony was quite willing to play by someone else’s rules.

Sitting down Tony mirrored Loki’s position, crossing his legs and then made a casual gesture. “Feel free to start right away. I am perfectly willing and able to listen. Not going to do it sober though.”

“So that’s as good as it gets?”

“Exactly. Cheers.” Tony took a sip and was happy to find out that it was good stuff.

Whatever Loki wanted to talk about it was important enough to swallow down his incredible annoyance. “I don’t know how familiar you are with the current Asgardian political affairs.”

“You mean the fact that in three days part of your country is going to tell your family to go fuck yourself and that you didn’t help the situation by partnering up with our president to let them bleed out? Classy move by the way.”

Oh, that had been the exact wrong button to push. Or the right one. Loki’s eyes flashed and damn, did it feel good to see some actual passion. Tony’s life seemed so awfully deprived of that. It almost reminded him of the kid. Only without the innocence of a teenager who may think that he knew everything about the world, but who in reality had no clue. Loki knew what was going on and it made him furious. An anger that almost couldn’t be put in words. So how did Tony fit in all of this?

“I was in no way involved in the embargo.”

“Yeah, that much was obvious. Still a fucked-up idea.” Tony kept drinking and Loki kept talking. “My father was raised in the firm belief that the Ymirsons are not trustworthy and that offering them any form of kindness would be a sign of weakness. Why are you raising your hand?”

“Because I have a question?”
“Just ask your question and stop being obnoxious.”

Lovely. “I have a terrible memory when it comes down to names. I am better with faces. Pretty faces. Ymirsons?”


Oh right, Tony remembered now. “Talking about pretty faces that are easy to remember… doesn’t he have a son who should be on the cover of ‘Hottest person alive’?”

Instantly Loki’s face darkened a bit more. “Helblindi, yes. He is also a charmer… Anyway, my father was raised with the strict belief that if Jotunheim should ever get too powerful as a region… that it would threaten our family. He is so focused on the Ymirsons that he forgets about the rest of Jotunheim. 5 million people… Those people would suffer under the embargo. Not the Ymirsons. The people would hate my family… rightly so.”

“From what I read in the newspapers, they already hate you.”

“The Jotuns are smart and good people. They hate the fact that their language doesn’t have the same status as Old Norse. That their streets are named after kings that chased away their national hero. That no Jotun has ever been part of the government. And so on. They hated these facts. Things that can be altered, corrected and I believe in their ability and willingness to forgive. They are Asgardians. We share a religion, a culture, a history. We are brothers and sisters and I am not going to let Jotunheim walk away from us. I am not going to let them be harmed. Not by family or your government.”

The whiskey suddenly tasted a lot more serious and Tony really should keep his tongue tied up. Sure, this wasn’t his business and what did it matter to him anyway what happened at the other end of the world? Well, a question of human decency perhaps.

“You’re father was raised that way, but you weren’t raised like that?”

“I guess in some things I am more like my mother. Anyway, if the plebiscite should happen and if it’s not going to be in our favour, which it won’t, then my father is willing to put the embargo into action. By then the cracks will be too deep to ever repair them…..”

“So you won’t let things even go as far. Got it. You want me to help you. How am I supposed to do that and way more important – why should I help you?” Good, Tony’s business voice was as cold as ever.

Loki seemed in favour of that. “You have strong ties to the American military, right?”

Danger. Code red. Time to end this conversation and to leave. A sane person would have done that. “Strong? Those guys love me. I created half the stuff they use and a lot more stuff that nobody not working for the military is allowed to know about. Why are you asking?”

“I need somebody to bring an idea to the table. The promise of an American intervention in Jotunheim to support their great ally, the Asgardian king.”

Nope, Tony’s voice wasn’t cold. Loki was pure ice. At least the way he talked. His eyes were still burning.

“Okay, sweetheart, this is not funny. What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about a forcing a situation on my father that would force him to side with Jotunheim.
For once.” Loki stated that drily and Tony needed to down his whiskey. “Fine, I’ll bite. How is that supposed to work?”

Loki’s face remained completely motionless. “The embargo has already caused a lot of distress among the non-Jotun population. They realise it’s a foreign nation teaming up with their ruler against a big part of the people. It’s not enough though to force my father’s hand. Probably because a lot of people still hope that Jotunheim is going to back out. Just the thought of American military on Asgardian soil will have every single person riled up in front of the palace. Especially after the trade agreement. My father would be forced to distance himself from this policy and the embargo would be off the table. I cannot think of another way that might make my father correct his course.”

“Wow, that’s the most reckless and dangerous plan I’ve ever heard. Not quite sure yet if it’s also stupid. What makes you sure that your father wouldn’t immediately go for American military help?”

“Because he is stubborn when it comes down to the Ymirsons, but not when all of his people unite for a cause.”

“They weren’t too pleased about the trade agreements either.”

“Not quite the same dimension as having American military at your doors. It won’t go as far. All I need is an offer. I’ll make sure that information becomes public knowledge before anything can happen. The outrage will be immediate. It will force my father to publicly distance himself from this idea, refuse and deny it. He will have to distance himself so strongly that the embargo will be impossible to impose.”

Now, Tony liked to live dangerously, but those were some serious risks. Risks that could ruin an entire country. How much he hated to be the responsible one. “Nice idea. Got to admit that. Not going to fuck with you any time. You are really willing to go the extra mile. Just one tiny little issue I have with this plan. If your people are not as forgiving as you may believe… your father would be done for as king. You’re planning on ruining the monarchy?”

The strangest thing happened. Loki smiled. “Oh, Midgardians… it’s almost adorable that you believe every mistake a king makes is going to end the monarchy. Would be one bad president for you enough to abolish your democracy? The monarchy is not in danger. My father has been playing the thought of abdicating. He is 75 years old, he has been a good king for over 40 years. My brother is old enough to follow my father on the throne. It’s the natural course of things.”

Huh. Was Tony supposed to buy that? Sure, the prince sounded sincere enough, but that didn’t mean much. There were so many good liars in the world. “Your brother, sure. And you wouldn’t be a good candidate to take over as king after your dad failed so terribly?”

“My father did not fail. Asgard is a prosperous and rich nation. Our education and health systems are among the best in the world. The standard of living is higher than yours. My father ensured that. But he is… he can’t see the Jotun crisis any other way and that’s bad for the entire country.”

“Okay, okay. But what about you?”

“Nothing about me. Thor was born first. He is the successor to the throne. It’s his birth right.”

Yeah, that totally didn’t sound like a rehearsed phrase.

“I’ve never understood the concept of primogeniture. It sounds perfectly unfair. Your brother is a tool.”

“You will not dare to speak this way about Thor in my presence!”
Wrong thing to say. Again.

“Calm down, will you?”

At least he was now getting up on his feet, stalking over to the bar. “Midgardians… have you never bothered to read up on some history? Not Asgardian history, any history? Primogenitures ensure the survival of the monarchy. Things are clear, legal. If there is no clear line of succession there is big risk for feuds… fights… brothers, uncles, sons and fathers killing each other for a better shot at the throne. I am not here to discuss the keystones of the monarchy with you. I just need an answer. Will talk to the ambassador?”

Tony snorted. “That sounds awfully lot like treason…”

“Oh come on, what do you care, Merchant of death? Just make a proposition. You will figure out a way how to make money of that. I don’t need a concrete plan. I just need a note, a phone call, and a conversation. Something to leak. The more abstract and theoretical this stays the better. I don’t actually want soldiers anywhere near Jotunheim. I just need somebody to bring that idea to the table.”

It was totally doable. Tony could bring this up in every conversation. Fury thought that he was a crazy bastard anyway. But what was in there for Tony? “Aha and when this whole thing goes down I will be one looking bad, because it was my idea.”

“I believe in your ability to cover your ass. I don’t have a lot of time. I need an answer.”

That was right, the prince needed him or he would have to come up with another plan. Tony comfortably leaned back. “Oh, I am sure I can bring something like that up in a conversation… I might even be able to bring it up in a way that will make sure that nobody is going to go for you. All you need are the words ‘American invasion of Jotunheim’ on an agenda, right?”

“Exactly…” Loki looked at him like he didn’t believe what was going on. Smart boy.

“Now let’s talk about what I get out of this…”

“The good feeling of helping someone out and preventing a country from falling apart.”

“Yeah, nice try. Be a little bit more creative.”

Annoyed Loki waved him off. “I am extremely wealthy. Name a number, it will be fine.”

“Darling, please… if I own any more money it will look ridiculous.”

The prince let out a deep sigh and yes, Tony was going to love this. “Are you expecting me to prostitute myself for this?”

“No, I wasn’t going to suggest that, but now that you’ve already done it…”

The sigh turned into a dry laugh. “Charming, but I must decline. My boyfriend wouldn’t appreciate.”

A pity. “Okay, so tell me about him.”

“Why?”

“Because you are asking a favour of me and since you are not going to pay me in kind, I want you to sit down and talk to me. Answer a few questions…”
The response was a frown, but nevertheless Loki came back to the couch and slowly sat down. “I am listening…”

“Oh, I have a lot of questions. You better start answering them… and fix me another drink. Will you?” Tony held out his glass and it was a pleasure to see how Loki pursed his lips in disgust. Nonetheless he grabbed the glass and got back up. Perfect… “Get on with it.”

“Nope, you didn’t answer my question.”

“Are you that insecure that you need me to praise your sexual abilities?”

“No, I am just reminding you what you’re missing out on, so you’ll forget about that little boyfriend of yours and we’ll seal this deal the fun way.”

Tony’s eyes were on Loki’s back when the other man suddenly froze. Like completely. As if Tony had hit him.

“Now listen to me very carefully. If you imply one more time that I might be unfaithful… I will walk out this door and this conversation has never happened.”

Cold, once again.

Tony didn’t want to admit it, but he suddenly felt a little uneasy and shifted on the couch. “Jesus, why are you so sensitive about that? It’s not like I suggest you kill somebody…”

Loki put down the glass and grabbed the bottle of whiskey Tony had already drunk from. “It’s not that different.”

“Oh, come on…”

“You are disrespecting me. In a way that you cannot even comprehend. You’re suggesting that my word doesn’t mean anything. That I cannot be trusted. That I am not a good person. That I don’t care about my soul decaying…”

Well somebody was being dramatic. “What has that to do with anything?”

“That’s what cheating does. That’s what it means. How would you come to know? Your culture does all but glorifying it. It’s presented in movies and novels like a normal thing. Like something that just happens. That you can’t help yourself sometimes. That’s not how it works for me. You are insulting me. Stop it.” Loki was back pushing the glass into Tony’s hand and he stared him down.

There were the tingles again. Good and bad ones at the same time. “Okay… I’ll shut up. I get it.”

Shaking his head Loki sat down. “No, you don’t get it, but it will suffice if you stop talking about it.”

Another time Tony really would have to read up on Asgardian culture and history. This was making his head spin. “So you think your brother is soon going to be king?”

“I do, yes.”

“And the American girlfriend? Fiancé? That’s not going to cause trouble?”
“Nothing that cannot be overcome.”

“And you? You’re getting cosy with your boyfriend? Get a couple of kids? Live the happy, calm life of the second born?” Yeah, Tony didn’t believe it for a second.

“I am doing the dirty work. For as long as I have to.”
Hello everybody,

Here we go. Steve and Bucky check out Jotunheim. What can go wrong?

Have fun :D

“Please, my feet hurt.”

“Are you for real? I thought you were a highly trained agent. Fit. Now your feet hurt from three hours of sightseeing?” James was laughing, heartily which was such a nice sound. Nonetheless he felt the need to defend himself. “Agent training doesn’t compare to three hours of sightseeing with you. We’ve been to ten different places in those three hours! You are horrible!”

“Hey, we just have about 30 hours. I want to see as much as possible, but okay, I’m hungry too. Let’s get some foot.”

Steve let out a happy sigh. “Thank god, but we’re not going to walk around for another hour to find a restaurant. There is one right over here.”

The place looked nice enough but not fancy. Perfect. Except that they only had one menu outside and it was all in runes. “Care to help me out here?”

James stepped forward, taking a look at the glass casket that contained the menu. “No chance, that’s not Old Norse, but Jǫtnar. I can’t read any of that. It’s weird… From what I’ve heard every somewhat public establishment has to present every piece of information in bilingual form…” James’ eyes darted around and then he uttered a soft huff as he pointed at the other part of the casket which was empty. “Looks like they removed the menu in Old Norse… just great.”

So much about not getting caught up in the Jotun conflict. Not that Steve cared very much right now, he was mostly hungry. “Well, they’re still going to serve tourists, right? Come on, I’m going to pass out if I don’t get something to eat very soon.”

“Can’t risk that.” James smiled and gestured towards the door. Before Steve entered the restaurant though he was held back. “Uhm, how good is your Canadian accent?”

“Huh?”

“I think it wouldn’t be a bad idea if we were Canadians. At least for the next two hours… The restaurant clearly has issues with the government, that means they probably aren’t too fond of the American policy either. I don’t want anybody to spit onto my food, so I’m from Toronto now.”

“Really? Don’t you think that’s a little extreme? Okay, the situation with the king is tense, but two Americans tourists should still be able to get some food in Jotunheim. You think they’d throw us out.”

James determinently shook his head. “No, but I think the service might be better and friendlier if we
were Canadian. Come on, trust me, I’ve been in this country for a while longer than you. Just in case.”

To be honest, Steve didn’t care that much anyway, so he shrugged and they entered the restaurant which turned out to be more of a tavern. Dark wood, sturdy tables and an easy, relaxed atmosphere. Steve liked it. The waitress was at their table instantly, her smile was friendly and natural. Also she was a very pretty. The long black hair and the blue eyes. Something that was so easy to find in this city, but she was lovely nonetheless. Except for her words which could mean anything and Steve wouldn’t know. It sounded like nothing he had ever heard in Asgard. Somewhat easier on the ears than Old Norse, but that could also only be his imagination.

Since they were both completely lost James offered his sweetest smile and responded in Old Norse. Although Steve had definitely become better, this was still too fast for him to understand. Why not leave the talking completely to James? He was better with people anyway and he wanted to put on their Canadian scheme. Which still seemed exaggerated.

Attentively Steve watched the waitress’ face and for a second he thought that he might side with James after all. Shortly she frowned, narrowed her eyes just the tiniest bit. Almost as if she instantly became suspicious of them, because James hadn’t answered in Old Norse. Or she just didn’t like them. A waitress pulling a face could have a million reasons. Nothing to worry about since James said a few other words and suddenly she was all smiles again.

“Just give me second.”

The moment she walked back to the bar Steve leaned over to James and whispered “What did you just say to her?”

“That I work in Valhalla and you came here to visit me. You know, from Canada…”

“Seriously? You’ve said myself that I can’t hide my Brooklyn accent.”

“An American can tell that. Way harder for Europeans. Don’t worry, she’s not going to analyse our speech patterns, but you are so obviously not Jotun and we don’t speak the language…” James shrugged and the waitress was already coming back, two menus tugged underneath her arm. “Here, these two are in English. I had to look for them in the back, but here they are.”

Steve couldn’t help but being taken aback but how great her English sounded. Actually kind of British.

“Oh thank you, that’s really great. This is our first time in Jotunheim. Can you recommend us anything?”

“This is Jotunheim, we love our fish. Our specialty is komperdøse. You should definitely try it, you can only get it in Jotunheim.”

Steve and James shared a look. “Uhm, what is a komperdøse?”

“Oh, sorry. I should explain, shouldn’t I? It’s uhm… dumplings filled with pork and beef. The dough is made from potatoes. It’s spicy, but delicious. You want to try them?” She seemed excited about it and Steve didn’t want to be the guy who went for the stuff he knew. Also one couldn’t go wrong with dumplings. “I’ll give them a try.”

That decision earned him a smile and James went for some fish dish on the menu. Beaming the waitress sundered off again and Steve couldn’t imagine that it made any difference that James was pretending that they were Canadian.
“So what are we doing afterwards? I want a clear plan, since I can’t let you lead. You clearly feel obligated to run from one monument to the next.”

“The second we’ll be one, you’ll be grateful. At least like this you get to see things.” James smirked and there was just the slightest mischievous glint in his eyes. Not really dangerous. More like a child who decided that he wouldn’t go directly home after school, but was going to hide between the mall to read some magazines he was clearly too young for. It was kind of cute.

“Oh, I want to see things, but I want to stay long enough in one place to actually look at something. Give me the trip advisor, I am going to make a plan.”

“Are you always such an annoyingly organised person during holidays?”

“No, but I figured I’d have to be with you around.”

Rolling his eyes James handed him the city plan and Steve immediately tried to find a place worth visiting close to the restaurant. He didn’t get far, because James had to interrupt him instantly. “No matter what you come up with – I need to check out the fortress. No discussion about that.”

“As if I was going to say no to that… It’s on the cover of the freaking trip advisor. Of course we’re going there. It’s on the other end of the city though, so we have to check a few other things out first.” With a pencil Steve marked a couple of places that they might be interested in. Not that they had to actually check out a lot of monuments, the city itself was fairly enough to get lost in. Just standing the streets and looking at the houses could fill half a day. Everything was indeed so very different of Valhalla. Steve wasn’t a craftsman, but he liked to flatter himself with believing that he had a good eye for art. In his mind there was no doubt about this, this type of architecture was art and Steve found it incredibly easy to look at. So much that he bemoaned the fact that it was so teeth shattering cold outside. Steve would have liked to eat on the terrace with this panorama all around him.

Truth to be told Steve hadn’t come here with lots of expectations. A weekend trip with James was going to be fun and if James wanted to check out Jotunheim – why not? Now Steve had to admit that it was indeed a lovely place with a somewhat rough charm. There were no small things in Útgarðar. Everything seemed to be big and rustic, yet it was easy to tell that a lot of craftsmanship had gone into every building. Nothing looked out of place or from the wrong time period.

Right, but it was nonetheless too cold to just stroll around the city. The first snowflakes were falling down and to be honest, it was kind of the perfect setting.

“Should we check out a museum before the fortress? It’s freezing outside, so maybe it wouldn’t hurt to spend some time inside.”

James shrugged, but didn’t seem off put by the idea. “Sure, you’re into paintings and stuff. Let’s check it out.”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to. Don’t feel obligated because of me.”

“Steve, it’s fine. Okay, I admit that I’m not really into the whole art thing, but I like looking at a beautiful painting once in a while. You know as long as it’s still a painting and you can make out what it’s supposed to be. I am going to spend two hours staring at a sheet of paper that someone sprinkled some red paint on.”

Trying hard not laugh Steve nodded. “Alright, no Jackson Pollock for you.”

“Something is wrong with society if you can instantly name an artist who produces such shit…” The annoyance was absolutely adorable, causing Steve to laugh.
“No fan of modern arts. I got it. No modern arts museum. Noted.”

They spent several more minutes over the tourist guide before they figured out which museum to visit before heading to the fortress. By the time they had come to a decision the stunning waitress was back with their food, which didn’t look like much, but tasted delicious.

“How are the dumplings?”

“Good.” Steve could hear the surprise in his own voice and James chuckled. A hearty sound. Steve liked it a lot. Sure, James was always smiling. That was one of the reasons Steve enjoyed spending time with him, but today… today James seemed even more at ease than usual. “My palate sucks, I have no idea what is in there, but it’s really good. Spicy… onions. That’s all I can tell.”

“The fish is great also…”

They kept eating until Bucky brought their agenda for today back up. “I had this idea… since your feet are already hurting I think we’ll be completely beat after checking out the gallery and the fortress. We could head back to the hotel get some rest and tonight we get something to eat in the old town. Afterwards we could go for a walk… I’ve read that the old town is gorgeous…”

“Sure, that sounds nice.”

James answered with another smile and Steve was silently content that they were here together.

Half an hour later, after paid for their meal, they left the tavern and found themselves on the cold street. The first snowflakes were indeed falling and Steve almost doubled over with laughter when he saw that James was trying to catch them with his tongue. “How old are you? 10?”

“Come on. When do I get the opportunity to have a little fun? At work it’s always – stand with your back straight, don’t smile and for fuck’s sake don’t piss off a member of the royal family. And don’t forget to salute. God bless America…” James rolled his eyes and Steve would have lied if he had said that he didn’t think it was a bit weird. Their line of work was important and granted, strict. Not the kind of job you did to have fun, but it had to be done and you wanted to be sure it was done correctly. Steve thought it was a noble thing to work for his country. This was the first time that the thought crossed Steve’s mind that James wasn’t thinking the same.

Obviously that wasn’t fair. It had been nothing but a quick remark and Steve didn’t want to be the guy who thought that their position was so sacred that nobody was allowed to make a joke about it. Even the guys who were working beside him.

“So that’s what you enjoy doing off-duty? Eating snowflakes?” That had to be the most ridiculous thing that Steve had ever said and James answered with a smile and a shrug. “Why not get excited about the little things? Come on, let’s get going. The gallery is that way.”

After taking a couple of steps Steve considered suggested that they should take public transport, but then he saw James tilting up his face towards the snow. Why not walk? His feet had had some rest, he could walk a little bit.

Steve didn’t only like to look at the houses and the streets but also at the people. Which meant he was watching a lot of heavy coats, scarfs and bonnets. Underneath all that layers of garment were slim people with pale skin. Naturally he couldn’t see a lot of hair, but until now everything he had seen had been black hair. James was right, Steve was kind of standing out.

They walked past a crossroad when James suddenly stopped and Steve was startled. “What’s wrong?”
“Nothing. Just… what are they doing?”

James gestured towards the building to their right. Two young men, also wrapped up in warm winter clothes had propped up two ladders against the beautiful façade. They definitely didn’t look like they were doing some repair work. No, they were attaching a big piece of white cloth to the wall. “It looks like they’re covering the… street number?” Steve raised an eyebrow, because he wasn’t so sure himself, but the expression on James’ face told him that he must have said something unsettling.

One second later he realised that they were indeed covering up the street name and the number of the house. Something was written on the cloth in big, bold, black letters.

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A couple of other people stopped next to them to watch the men’s work and within seconds a young woman was shouting encouragements. At least that’s what Steve thought it was. She didn’t sound upset and there was a smile on her lips. Someone else started to applaud and James grabbed Steve’s arm with a soft sigh. “Let’s get going.”

“Are they covering the old name because it’s in Old Norse?”

“I don’t know. Could be. I guess it’s a street named after a Búrison king and they covered it because… Well, if the plebiscite goes through they are going to rename all the streets anyway. At least the streets named after a Búrison king… which are most of them.”

Steve nodded, trying not to think about what they had just seen. Sure, it didn’t look like too much of a big deal. Hanging up a sheet. Small thing. But people usually started with small things before plucking up the damage to do something big. And bad. These really wasn’t the kind of stuff he wanted or should think about. Just a few minutes ago he had contemplated how easy everything when he was hanging out with James. Now he remembered that there was a rebellion going on. No screaming people in the streets or fires burning. Just a lot a flags. Hundreds of them. Framing windows.

Great, now Steve’s mind was gone so far that it was hard to get back from it. “What do you think is going to happen on Saturday? How is this plebiscite going to turn out?”

Suddenly so serious. The man who had been trying to catch snowflakes with his tongue just a moment ago. “I don’t know. From what I’ve read and from what the Ymirsons have said on television… not a lot of people actually want a Jotun state. They don’t feel that different from other Asgardians. It’s about the language and equal opportunities… I am really not an expert. What I know for sure is that they love the Ymirsons. The Lord has made clear that he thinks they should go this way. They trust him and he is their sovereign, so they will go that way. It’s rather a question of – Will the king let that plebiscite happen? It’s against the constitution. He has every right to send in the military or the police to stop this from happening. That would be… I have no idea how the Ymirsons would react. The Jotun forces are absolutely loyal to them… No I don’t really want to think about that possibility…”

“Yes, I am sorry I brought this up…”

“Don’t be. It’s for a reason that we’re here before Sunday.”

The whole conversation was an incredible downer and to be honest they didn’t really come back from it. No in the art gallery and definitely not in the fortress which again reminded Steve of thick walls that were meant to keep somebody out in case of war. They followed the plan though, back to the hotel and relaxed for about two hours. Then James knocked at his door and they went out to have
some dinner. Steve didn’t have to have Jotun cuisine everyday, but the food was again delicious. Afterwards they strolled through the streets of the old town and the word to describe the atmosphere was lovely. It wasn’t a weekend, so there weren’t a lot of people on the streets, which was great. Like this they could check out the pictorial alleys in the soft golden light of the street lamps.

To his shame Steve only realised how ridiculously romantic this city was by night when a couple walked towards them. Not really, they were passing them by on the street. Steve tried not to stare, really. Again, two young men, one had his arm wrapped around the other’s shoulders and they were whispering, laughing. Granted they looked kind of cute. One of them winked at Steve and it for some reason Steve was sure that he thought him and James were also a couple, having a romantic walk. The mere idea caused Steve to blush deeply.

“Something’s wrong?”

Wonderful, now James had noticed.

“Nothing. I was just wondering… this is really nice place.”

James looked at him, smiling softly and Steve was freaking out. No other way to describe this. For now reason. He couldn’t tell why, but Steve was panicking. James was going to say something and Steve couldn’t have it. For no reason. “You know… I think I am finally getting better at Old Norse.”

“Yeah, how so? You’ve found yourself a teacher?”

“Kind of yeah. I met a woman in a bar… that sounds weird since she is the bartender. She helped to figure a few things about this place… Well, after a while she insisted that I would order my drinks in Old Norse and keeps correcting my pronunciation… which is a complete mess.” Steve laughed and James hummed in response. “Yeah, having a native help you out is always the best way… You wanna head back to the hotel?”

Steve stopped dead in his tracks, quite surprised by this suggestion. “Already? It’s just…”

“Yes, but it’s getting cold and I’m tired. I guess you were right, we were checking out too many places too fast.” James shrugged and Steve missed his careless and joyful mood. Catching snowflakes? No, James just turned around and Steve followed him. A bit distraught by the sudden end of their evening.

That night Steve had trouble falling asleep and when somebody woke him up by knocking at his door Steve felt like hadn’t closed an eye the entire night. Yawning softly Steve stalked to the door and opened it.

“Hey, get your stuff. We have to leave.” James was already in his jacket, his bag slung around his shoulders and Steve instantly felt fully awake. “What’s wrong?”

“Evidently our government was nice enough to secretly assure the Asgardian king that they would impose an embargo on Jotunheim if they should declare their independence. Similar to Cuba. Well, that secret promise was leaked to the press during the night and the Jotuns are pissed. I just watched the news, people have been gathering in the streets. They forcefully entered some government agency building and set some flags on fire. Hopefully the situation will calm down when the Lord makes a public declaration, but things could also escalate and I don’t want to be here when that happens. Get dressed, we need to get to the railway station.”

It was too much to process in a couple of seconds, but it was James who was saying it and Steve could hear his real concern. 15 minutes later they had checked out and Steve definitely didn’t
imagine the hostile look the receptionist bestowed on them. Their ride to the railway station was quick and completely calm. The streets weren’t burning, but Steve nevertheless felt relieved when they were sitting in their train. There James and him watched the news on their phones.

No, the streets weren’t burning. But the building the fierce mob had broken into.

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“Are you really sure you don’t want to be king? You’re working on pushing your dead out. Do the same with your brother and tada! King Loki the First. Would you be the first? Have there been Lokis before who have been king? It would a cool king name…”

Loki should have gagged him. Why was he still thinking about something Stark had said? That unpleasant man who had no idea what was going on in Asgard and who also definitely didn’t care.

Loki did care. It was the thing he cared most about in the entire world. So why was he still pondering words that had got under his skin when Jotunheim was setting buildings on fire? One building. Singular. Nonetheless it was worse than anything Loki had expected. The mere information about the embargo had made things turn violent. Which meant that Loki should immediately cancel his own plan. What was an embargo compared to the threat of a military intervention? Yes, Loki wanted public outrage, but not violence. He would have to call Stark…

Or was this one of the risks that somebody had to take? What would happen if Loki wasn’t going to do anything? Jotunheim was now in a definite state of rebellion and his father had to act if Laufey wasn’t going to send people into prison.

Loki doubted that he would…

Everything was happening to fast. The entire situation had already changed when Loki had got off his plane from Germany. Stark had been a pain but compliant and since his father hadn’t listened to Loki, the Jotuns had learned about the embargo through the press and they had jumped into action. Things were falling apart.

There was no other way, Loki had to talk with his father. Do something…

Back at the palace Loki didn’t stand a chance. Heimdall was already waiting for him and informed him that his mother was waiting for him. Also, his father wasn’t available for him right now. Protesting wasn’t going to help. It was so easy to make Loki feel like a little boy again, being escorted to his mother’s rooms.

“Mother, what is this about? I cannot…”

“Where have you been, Loki?” Frigga was sitting at her desks, writing a letter and Loki felt like he was being slapped in the face. The air around him seemed cold. He never felt cold around his mother.

“I’d rather not say.”

“You flew to Germany. To meet whom?” Only now she looked at him. It was so strange to have her not smiling at him. Well, of course she knew. Easy to figure out where he had been. It was now that he had decided what to do about his plan. If he wanted to go through with it, Loki couldn’t tell his mother that he had met Tony Stark. Too obvious. American. Military. Weapons. Jotunheim.

No matter how much Frigga loved him, she would have to tell Odin and then… technically Loki was
setting up treason.

Houses were already burning. How could he go through with this? People would get hurt. There was also Helblindi with his hatred against their family. What would he do? It was too risky. Loki had to call it off. He had to call Stark and tell him…

“I met Tony Stark.”

Frigga’s hand froze and her eyes bore into Loki’s. Was that disappointment? Loki couldn’t tell. He had never seen it on her face. “Why would have a clandestine meeting with that man, Loki?”

“I think it’s rather obvious, mother.” Loki replied coldly. “If father is not willing to listen, I will find someone else.”

“An American? A business without a spine who built his fortune on the misery and death of others? A man who didn’t show interest in a major business deal but the body of a beautiful young prince? Is that the support you are looking for?”

Yes, disappointment and it made Loki furious. “Just what am I supposed to do? Father doesn’t listen to me, Thor doesn’t share my opinion and I don’t have any more options left. I have to talk to the Americans…”

“No you don’t.” As she stood up and walked towards him Loki could see his mother again. The softness in her eyes and the slightest of smiles on her lips. “There is somebody else and they will listen. They are able to help and if you are willing to talk, they’ll be willing to.”

“What’s the point?” Loki sounded so weak, tired and he hated himself for it. “Father has already tried. The divide between us got only bigger.”

Frigga reached for his hand and gave it a soft squeeze. “I am not talking about your father. I am talking about you. He is caught up in an idea that he is unable to shake off. Your father doesn’t know it, but he needs your help.”

Releasing a shaky breath Loki thought of deep blue eyes and the words spoken in the garden. Not so different from Stark’s. “I may not share all of father’s opinions, but I don’t trust them either. Not the father and especially not the son.”

Frigga continued to smile at him. “And they don’t trust you either. Perhaps it’s time to change that.”
Hello everybody,

I like this chapter. A lot. We need to get the plot going, right? ;)

Have fun :D

“How hard is it to pick up the phone?” Gritting his teeth Loki hung up and nervously tapped his fingers against his knee. At the moment he didn’t feel real worry yet. There was a very good chance that Stark was ignoring him on purpose. Letting him wait to make himself interesting. As long as Loki got a hold of him before Stark got into action. It was hard enough that Loki had to admit that his plan had failed before even being put into action. At the moment it would only make things worse. Loki couldn’t risk an escalation, not when the population was already taking matters into their own hands.

And that fucking American wasn’t answering his phone.

A soft hand came to cover Loki’s, stopping him from tapping his fingers and lacing them together. Balder soothingly rubbed his thumb over the back of Loki’s hand. “With your entire household calling, it’s only a question of time to get a hold of him.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. He’s enjoying pissing me off. Which is making me furious.” Loki muttered under his breath. There were other things to worry about and of course Stark had made it all so much more difficult. Two weeks ago that man hadn’t been able to stop calling Loki. Now he was playing dead and Loki knew that Stark wasn’t actually busy. He could be, running that company, but no, not the case. Just trying to rub Loki the wrong way and it was working perfectly. His own fault though. Loki had been desperate enough to go with tremendously important information to a reckless egoist. Who else to turn to when Stark was the only one who could offer what he needed?

Now Loki didn’t need that support anymore. It would actually break his neck and even worse, it could get people killed.

“Calm down. Where is the point in getting angry when you already know that somebody is trying to annoy you?” Balder tried to be his voice of reason and Loki knew he was right, but that didn’t change anything. “Yes, but just because I know what he is doing doesn’t mean that it isn’t working.”

Why was he still thinking about Stark? They were approaching the real problem fast as Loki looked out of the window and saw the other cars passing by.

“Is it because of your history?”

Balder’s question had Loki turning his head. Grey eyes were looking at him with curiosity, but not more than usual. “History? There is no history. He is an attractive man who made an offer that I accepted. Nothing more to it. He was a constant pain to begin with. More entitled than me probably and he loves to rub it people’s faces and now it’s my turn.”

Loki shrugged. “I like my privileges.”

“Sure, but you don’t think that they mean that you are a better than other people.”

“Well, we already know that I don’t go shopping myself. You were shocked that I haven’t set food in a supermarket for years. Isn’t that a form of entitlement?” Loki smiled, mostly to himself and Balder uttered a soft laugh. “If that’s all, I am sure people can live with it.”

“Guess they will have to. Damn, I’ll try again.” Without much hope Loki used his free hand to call Stark for the tenth or so time. Balder was also silently waiting for him to hang up again, but that annoying American threw them for a loop.

“Look who’s calling. Who has been calling all noon. I knew you would come around. So many missed opportunities yesterday. I wanted to let you hang in there a bit longer, but since you have been calling with such persistence…”

“Would you please stop listening to the sound of your own voice for a second?” Loki finally managed to get a word in. “I need you to call it off. Forget what I asked of you yesterday. It’s off the table.”

“Huh.” Stark sounded mildly surprised, but not like he cared. “You’re not cheating on me with some other contact, aren’t you?”

Loki was really tempted to hang up, he had no interest whatsoever to have a conversation with Stark, but it was important that he got it. No scheme about a fake military invention. “No, it’s off the table. I changed my mind.”

“Yeah, nice try. You have to give me a little more, sweetheart. All that fuss and now you’re backing out? How about you give the poor, old, confused man an explanation?”

There was a headache building. Right behind Loki’s eyes. “Listen… It’s fairly simple. The situation changed and my plan isn’t going to work anymore. Thank you for being willing to help me, but it’s not necessary anymore.”

Loki felt a nervous tingle when there was no response. Stark was anything but silent. That man didn’t know how to shut up.

“Stark?”

“You don’t happen to have a gun to your head right now?”

Blinking in confusion Loki thought he hadn’t heard right. “What?”

“You were pretty much planning to remove the king. Did your secret service catch up with you?”

Loki couldn’t tell if Stark was serious or not. Also these things shouldn’t be said on the phone. Too late for that now. “Don’t be ridiculous. Things have changed.”

“Aha.” Stark paused again. “Are you alright?”

Taken aback Loki didn’t quite know what to say. No sarcasm, no flirty tone. Nothing at all. Stark sounded serious and for the first time Loki didn’t know how to take that. Balder was raising an eyebrow at him, probably concerned by the expression on Loki’s face.
“Yes. It’s all good.”

“Okay, then start spelling things out for me. You had me flying around half the world. I got off a plane just two hours ago and I’m still jetlagged. Now you’re telling me it’s all a fucking joke? I don’t care about a lot of stuff, but you were dead serious and throwing around words like ‘future of your country’. Start explaining, now.”

Stark sounded pissed off and that was rubbing Loki the wrong way. “You just said that you didn’t care. Things changed. That’s it.”

“Yeah, fuck that. You were pulling me into this and now you’re pushing me out. Normally I would say that you’re just fucking with me, but I know that you care about your country. So it’s either the gun to your head or you start spilling things out.”

There was no reason why Loki couldn’t just hang up. The most important things had been said. Still Loki felt like he owed Stark somewhat of an explanation. “People reacted even harsher to the embargo as I expected. There was an incident. A fire, a few people hurt. What I had in mind is not going to help, it’s going to further escalate things. I’ll have to take another route. That’s all. It’s enough anyway. Was that enough spelling out for you?”

“I guess it will do. Does that other route imply you becoming king? Because when you’ve stabilized your precious, gay nation I would love to do business with you.”

Closing his eyes Loki groaned. “For a second I thought you’d get it…”

“Oh, I think I get it more than you. Sure, being the puppet master is fun for some time, but everyone with eyes can see that you don’t just want to be pulling strings. Sucks to be the second in line, doesn’t it?”

“You know what? Fuck you.”

Stark laughed softly and Loki’s hand was itching. “Take care, your highness. Talk to you soon.”

Just like that Stark hung up and Loki huffed in annoyance. Well, at least the cooperation was off the table.

“What happened?” Balder’s thumb was still drawing little patterns on Loki’s hand. “He enjoyed pissing me off and succeeded in making me furious. At least the old plan is off the table. He couldn’t resist being a jerk… Now that’s done with, it’s going to get worse now.”

“He agreed to meet, so that’s a good start. Still, the whole arrangement is a bit strange. Not that I mind coming along, I like accompanying you. The next time though I’d like it to be a real trip.” Balder’s smile was comforting, although a bit out of place. Loki’s mind had been busy with Stark, now he was only thinking about the upcoming meeting. Not quite fair. “Thank you for coming along. I know this isn’t… You have better things to do than being my cover.”

Balder shook his head. “No, I don’t. I get to spend time with you and I’ll use today to remind you that you owe me a real trip out of Valhalla.” Lifting Loki’s hand Balder pressed a kiss to his knuckles.

The gesture was so sweet and Loki felt his heart skip a beat. “Thank you. There will be a trip, I promise. As soon as this whole Jotun mess calms down.”

“Great. A good way to tell me that we’re never going to do that since Jotunheim has been a mess for over 500 years.” Balder chuckled and Loki opened his mouth to protest, but Balder just pecked him
on the lips instead. “I’m joking. It’s going to be fine. You’ll talk him down. You are great at this.”

Loki would have laughed to be as confident as Balder, but he had serious doubts, considering their latest encounters. “We’ll see… I hope so.”

The driver began to slow down and by looking out the window Loki could tell that they had arrived at the palais. As the door was being opened and Loki moved to get out he noticed that Balder wouldn’t let go of his hand. He didn’t mind.

They were greeted by the staff and Loki was grateful that they cut the speeches short. Yes, it was an honour, but they would only be here for a couple of hours anyway.

“What are you going to do while I check out the lion’s dungeon?”

One of these rare smirks appeared on Balder’s face. “If you are going to choose a spar for your secret meeting, someone has to take advantage of it. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess someone should enjoy his time here.”

After Loki gave his security detail a little sign and the man stepped closer. “We’ll see each other in… I don’t know. Try to have some fun for me.”

Balder squeezed his hand before letting go and Loki along with his security detail followed the staff member that was supposed to bring him to a room upstairs, used for small events and reunions. Normally Loki would have admired the artwork on the walls, but he was highly distracted. “He isn’t even here yet?”

“No, your highness.”

“Most wonderful.” Loki made a dismissive gesture and he was left alone in the room. Sitting down on a chair Loki crossed his arms and legs. First Stark to annoy him and now the Jotun was trying to put him in his place by making him wait. Not a very creative strategy, easy to look through and yet it was still effective. Loki didn’t like to call what he was going through nervousness. Nevertheless his heart was beating a little too fast. There was a good chance that this was going to go horribly wrong. Or they could figure this out, find a solution.

The minutes were passing agonizingly slowly and Loki was ready to throw something against the wall. Naturally only now the door flung open and there he was. Helblindi was strolling into the room with unmatched confidence. It was a mere second, within its short time Loki hated him. The familiar arrogance and the blue eyes. The ability to voice words that cut deeper than daggers.

“You are late.”

“You are desperate.”

Yes, Loki hated him.

Casually Helblindi closed the door behind him and walked a couple of steps into the room before stopping abruptly. Ice blue orbs were taking him in and there was something new. Okay, not quite new. That disdain had been there before, but not directed at Loki. “Are you going to sit there and let the commoner stand, my liege?”

They were off to a great start. Choosing the easiest route Loki stood up. “I am not here to fight. Things are getting out of control and I want to find a way to stop it. I cannot do it alone.”
“As I’ve said – you are desperate.”

“It’s a desperate situation. People got hurt.”

Helblindi shrugged and a strand of pitch black hair fell into his forehead. It was upsetting how beautiful that man was. Loki wondered how often Helblindi had already used that to his advantage. As a distraction or to make people believe that he didn’t have a brilliant mind. None of that was going to happen now.

“One person got hurt. A few scratches. Worse things could happen when an angry crowd storms into a building.”

“You are not concerned that things have already turned violent? That a building was set on fire and that the people working inside of it had to run for their lives?” Loki was taken aback. Until now Helblindi had shown great concern for the people’s safety and at least he had pretended to want to stop things from escalating. Why that sudden indifference?

Helblindi’s laugh was bitter and cold. “Am I not concerned? Are you serious? Am I not concerned? What did you think was supposed to happen? When the leader of this country, who has treated all Jotuns like dirt, teams up with the Americans against a huge part of his own population? Do you really think that the people are going to react calmly to that?”

Loki wanted to close his eyes and take a breath. The embargo was going to tear Asgard apart, he knew it. Perhaps a couple of days ago Helblindi would have been willing to help him out, to make a deal. Now the earth was burned and Loki had nothing to offer. “Just because I understand what happened… doesn’t mean… Look, I want to find a way out of this. A peaceful co-existence. All of us are Asgard.”

“Some of us are not treated like Asgardians!” Loki made half a step back, shocked by Helblindi’s sounded outburst. “Some of us are spit on every day! When they have to apply for a drivers licence, social security or get a vaccination! Because they cannot even talk to the public servant in their own mother tongue! When they move into a new home they find out that their street is named after a king that had their ancestors lined up and slaughtered for supporting their real king, a Jotun! When they’re doing excellent work in the civil service and still hit the glass ceiling, because they can never get into a superior position, since they are Jotun! When the usurper on the throne claims to care for them while forming an alliance with a foreign nation against us! Do not even pretend that it’s different or I will lose the last bit of respect that I have left for you…”

He was snarling, a gorgeous face distorted by anger and passion. Loki knew that it wasn’t just him. Helblindi was high nobility, a prince in the eyes of a lot of people. Most of the problems he had just named didn’t concern him, he would never have to deal with them personally. Nevertheless he cared. Deeply and it made him dangerous.

Loki would have to manipulate him, to at least get him to listen. Given their earlier conversations Loki knew that Helblindi believed that Loki cared too. He would have to build on that. Gain his trust, so they could work together.

“You will never hear me deny that the Jotuns have suffered great wrong doings…”

The grimace softened a bit, but Loki wasn’t fooled. Helblindi’s huff made clear how he felt. “The truth coming out of the mouth of a Búrison… what a memorable moment.”

“If you don’t believe that I want to find a solution, then why have you come here?” Loki had to show him that there was a reason for this and that he wasn’t going to bow his head in front of
Helblindi’s anger.

“Oh, solution is such a wide word. I am sure you’re trying to find one, but I don’t know who it will benefit.”

“Enough of this crap. Only a week ago you said that you knew that I cared and you wanted to work together. Why do you act now like I am trying to screw you over?”

“Because I didn’t believe that the rotten man you call father would go as far as threatening to destroy our existence by teaming up with the Americans.”

“I’ve publicly stated that I loathe the American policy!” Loki exclaimed and Helblindi couldn’t look like he cared less. The disdain suddenly so obvious. “Yes, but who are you? The son of liars, thieves and murderers. Your father would rather destroy Jotunheim than loosen his chain on it. Your brother is already in bed with an American and is the son of his father. Why should you out of all of them turn out differently?”

Loki gritted his teeth and wanted to tell him to shut up. Sure, his father had made many mistakes and his way of handling the Jotun crisis was wrong, but he was a good man. Helblindi was insulting his family. “My brother’s relationship has nothing to do with his political opinions. He wants a peaceful and satisfying solution for everyone, just like we do.”

Helblindi’s eyes got wide and even bluer. “Oh, I am sure. I am sure he has tremendous respect for all of my kind.”

It was getting hard not to yell at him, although Loki sympathised with him. Helblindi wasn’t wrong and he had been disillusioned a long time ago. Loki couldn’t let the urge to defend Thor get the better of him. They had to be reasonable, cold even. “Thor still has to learn, but he is completely aware of his duties… and he wishes to be a good future king to the entire nation?”

Snorting Helblindi shot him a degrading glance. “Then why isn’t your brother here with you? Trying to find a solution? No, it’s only you. The second born. Useless. The back-up plan if your big brother should ever fall off his horse and hit his head.”

Loki was already almost in Helblindi’s face when the pieces fell into place. A hoarse laugh escaped his lips and Helblindi raised an eyebrow. A part of Loki felt embarrassed for realising only now that he was being played. Like a fiddle. If he had come here to manipulate Helblindi, it should be clear that the Jotun was trying to do the same. “Congratulations… you almost got me. Do you want to see how far you have to push me before I storm out and admit that I don’t give a damn about Jotunheim?”

The fast change of expression on Helblindi’s face was astounding. From furious and disgusted to completely neutral. “Are you going to do that, your highness?”

Slowly Loki shook his head. “No. You were right – I care. You were also right when you said that our fathers are caught up in a mind-set that they can’t escape from. You’ve wanted to work together, you were also right about that. We should. Not quite in the way you suggested though.”

He felt like a double agent. A bit like a traitor. Ridiculous since what he had planned to do with Stark had been the definition of treason. But this was an Ymirson and Loki didn’t trust him.

A smile made its way on Helblindi’s face. It was full of mischief and malice. Also gorgeous. “So let’s talk.”

Better getting straight to the point. “Is there any way to call off the plebiscite?”
“After the embargo?” Helblindi shook his head. “Perhaps if you could abolish the Language Act today. I don’t see any other way.”

“It’s against the constitution. My father has the right to send troops to stop it from happening.”

“Do you think that he will?”

“I doubt that he wants to risk civil war, but I wouldn’t have thought that he might go for the embargo… If the plebiscite goes through… there is hardly anything left we can do. Then there would have to be weapons from stopping Asgard from falling apart. I think that there is a good chance that my father will let the plebiscite happen, but… I fear that if the outcome is against Asgard…”

“Which it will be.”

“… then he might send the army. Your father?”

Helblindi laughed and now it sounded sad. “Wouldn’t hesitate to answer with violence. Listen, just to make one thing clear. I don’t want the Jotun nation, but I prefer it to how things are now. If you have nothing to offer, I stand by the plebiscite.”

“I know… but I fear I will need time. Can you give me that?”

Blue eyes full of distrust. Of course, he was smart after all. “What for?”

Could Loki really go that far? It was shameful and treacherous, but also reasonable. That didn’t mean that it didn’t hurt Loki. “I cannot change my father’s mind. I have tried. I can change Thor’s mind though.”

Tilting his head Helblindi nodded. “Go on.”

“My father is a proud man. He is hiding it well, but he is tired and ready to give the crown to Thor. I believe he only hasn’t done it yet, because he doesn’t approve of Thor’s relationship.”

“A miracle, I agree with your father.”

“Anyway…” Loki ignored the snarky comment. “With Thor as king… I can guarantee you the Language Act. Perhaps even the new names for the streets. Within the first year.”

“I would be impressed if the plebiscite wasn’t in two days.”

“Like I said, I need time.”

Helblindi sighed in frustration and it sounded somewhat familiar. Loki could feel a soft flutter in his chest that he instantly ignored. “I could maybe give you a week, but how on earth should I possibly reschedule the plebiscite until your father decides to finally fuck off? I don’t just have to deal with my father, but the people.”

“The people adore you.”

“Yes, because they know I am on their side. They won’t feel like I am on their side when I am suddenly against the plebiscite.”

“I am sure you’re smart enough to find a way to pull it off.” Loki offered him a grin and he expected Helblindi to roll his eyes or to snap at him. Instead he laughed, there was a gleam in his eyes that clearly said that he was fond of challenges. “Oh, how easy to say that. There has to be a damn good
reason to postpone the plebiscite without the people going crazy… and there is also my father. So we
can’t even pretend that there are new talks between us and the crown. Unless…”

“Heblindi didn’t continue, his eyes were fixed on Loki and it felt like they were looking right through
him. As if the Jotun could tell what he was thinking, feeling, fearing. “What?”

“I need to be sure, I need your word. I need you to swear on your ancestors, despite how much I hate
them.” Heblindi stepped closer, staring at him with an intensity that made Loki want to look away,
to end this conversation. He didn’t though. “Can you, Loki Búrison, son of Odin, guarantee me that
if Thor sits on the throne of Asgard, that the Language Act will fall? Can you?”

Loki didn’t dare to breathe and he could feel the blood pulsing in his ears. A wave of nausea
threatened to come over him. Again, it felt like treason, but with Heblindi it was different. Odin was
lost in his personal fight against the Ymirsons, afraid for his legacy. Heblindi only cared about his
people.

Pushing all of the doubts and insecurity away Loki raised his chin before nodding softly. “Yes, I can.
I will make that happen if you give me enough time.”

“And what about your father? What if decides to stay king until he dies?”

“He won’t. He is tried, my mother wishes for him to retire. If the Jotun crisis should calm down, he
will be willing to step down and I will give Thor the right ideas.” Loki stated these words firmly and
Heblindi frowned softly.

They stared at each other, trying to find a lie on the other’s face or another sign that would give them
a reason to stab each other in the back. Loki could hear his own heart beating.

“Swear it to me.”

Loki took his time. Carefully pronouncing every word in a way that would make Heblindi believe
him. He had to believe him, Loki was bound by his oath. “I, Loki Búrison, second son of Odin and
Frigga, brother of Thor, swear by those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my
soul that when my brother takes the throne I will give you the Language Act.”

The gleaming in Heblindi’s eyes got brighter, hard to look away. “Thank you… your highness. I
will make you time.”

“How?”

“I will talk to my father. Let him know that we are one generation away from getting our language
back. My people want co-existence more than their own nation. So if we tell them that we’re back at
the negotiation table, they will accept that. We will contact the crown, make a peace offering and
you’ll do your part. Did we come to an agreement?”

“You’re going to tell your father? I don’t know if…”

“It’s the only way I can give you time.”

“I don’t know if your father is as willing to cooperate as you are.”

“You are not the only one who can be persuasive.” Heblindi smiled and held out his hand. “So? We
have an agreement?”
Loki let him wait. To let him know that he could always turn around and leave. That he was the one making Helblindi a big gift. Eventually he nodded and shook Helblindi’s hand. This time there was no staring but a dark smile on Helblindi’s face. “I still don’t trust you.”

“That makes two of us.”

Letting out a soft laugh Helblindi let go of his hand. “I should get back to Jotunheim. I have a lot to of work to do.”

“Again, that makes two of us.”

Helblindi bowed his head and was already at the door when he stopped again. Looking over his shoulder. “You know… we could save ourselves a lot of work if we just put you on the throne.”

“Just don’t.” Loki glared at him and Helblindi smiled before slipping out of the door.

A few seconds Loki forced himself to keep standing straight, just in case. Helblindi might come back in. After counting to five Loki sank back down on his chair, releasing a long and shaky breath. The tension was slowly leaving his body and he felt completely drained. After making a deal with the devil. Strangely enough the devil seemed to be the only person on his side. Closing his eyes Loki tried calm himself down enough to feel ready to leave this room. There was knock on the door and Loki instantly sat up straight.

“Your highness, everything alright?”

His security detail. Loki’s heart was racing. “I am fine. Just a second.”

The second turned into a minute, then Loki got up to his feet and left, texting Balder that they needed to get back to Valhalla. Loki was going to wait in the car for him.

Those 15 minutes lasted incredibly long and Loki had way too much time to think. When Balder sat down next to him Loki noticed how good he smelled. Like lemons. “How was your massage?”

“Forget about the massage. How did it go?” Balder was asking with obvious and eager impatience.

Yes, how did it go? “Good… I think so. It’s hard to tell with him, but we made a deal.”

“That’s good. I’m glad. Back home now?”

Loki nodded. There were so many things he had to do, but actually nothing that he could do today. It was Helblindi’s turn first. “Or we… go somewhere else? You choose.”

“Okay.” Surprised, but definitely pleased. “I’d like that. You don’t enter supermarkets. What about a jazz club?”

“Sounds good. I’ve never been, you’ll have to show me.”

“Gladly.”

Closing his eyes Loki leaned his head against Balder’s shoulder. “Wake me up when we’re there.

“Sure thing…” Balder laced their fingers together again and Loki wished his heartbeat would finally slow down.

Chapter End Notes
Really guys? Nobody is going to comment on what I just did there? How can I always end up being too subtle when I feel like it's already so damned obvious :D
Hello everybody,

Here we go, Loki’s personal life is catching up to the political crisis... will the poor guy ever catch a break?

Have fun :)

The heat came in constant waves, running through Loki’s body. By this time he should be completely lost in the sensations that were spreading across his entire skin. Outside and inside. Falling into it and letting them swallow his mind and everything that had ever saddened or excited him.

Loki tried and he wanted to. It was all there, the tingles, the heat and the shivers. All he needed was to let go and Loki was trying. The problem was that in these kinds of situations you shouldn’t be trying. It should happen on its own or it wasn’t going to happen.

Another well-placed thrust that made Loki gasp and he fisted his fingers into the mattress. It felt good, wonderful almost, so why couldn’t he just let go? The next thrust seemed to go even deeper, took his breath away and Loki pressed his face against the cushion. Too intense and yet he couldn’t fall into it.

A warm mouth was pressed against his shoulder blade and Loki bit his lip. “You okay…?” Balder’s voice sounded husky and far away, so easy to mistake. Loki squeezed his eyes shut to the images out and answered equally out of breath. “Yeah… keep going…”

Another kiss on his shoulder and the thrusts continued, slow but strong. Loki’s body welcomed every one of them, they felt good, made him pant and his body sing in pleasure. It was getting harder and harder to stand, because something was missing. Or it was too much. Loki couldn’t tell. He could feel Balder moving on top of him, their skin sliding together. It could be anybody really.

“Argh…” Loki turned his head to catch some definitely needed air when the angle changed suddenly and a hand grabbed his hip. It felt so good and Loki couldn’t, not like this. “Stop…”

All movement came to a halt instantly. “Loki?”

Reaching behind him Loki pushed against Balder’s arm. “I want to…”

There was some shifting and when he withdrew Loki rolled onto his back before sitting up. Balder was looking at him with widened, anxious eyes. “Are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

Quickly Loki shook his head, because Balder shouldn’t even think that for a second. “No, I just… can we…” Loki thought about stopping altogether, but that wouldn’t be fair and he didn’t want to stop. Maybe he could bring Balder off with his mouth and… No, again, that wasn’t what he wanted. If he only could let go.

“Like this…” Loki lay back down, this time on his back, gently pulling Balder on top of him.
Brushing his lips over Balder’s Loki pulled up his legs and encouragingly pushed up his hips. Sensing the hesitation Loki kept kissing him until Balder was kissing him back and Loki slid his hands down his back. When Balder entered him again Loki sucked in a breath and Balder kissed his cheek. “Okay?”

“Yes… just keep looking at me.”

Balder did look at him, he wouldn’t stop and it was better this way. Loki held on to him and enjoyed the new waves of pleasure, the gentle touches, the whispers. “You’re beautiful…”

Smiling faintly Loki kissed him again and he still couldn’t quite let go. None of it was Balder’s fault, he almost seemed perfect. Loki would have to tell him, because he doubted that Balder knew. Until then he looked into Balder’s grey eyes and kissed him. When it was over Loki enjoyed the short moment of silence, the pleasure of his sore body. They couldn’t stay silent though.

“Everything alright?” Balder’s fingers were running through his hair, his body partly covering Loki’s. “Did I do something that you didn’t want?”

Loki should be ashamed of himself.

“No. Definitely not. I liked all of it…” For reassurance Loki nipped at Balder’s lower lip. “It’s just… it’s been a bad day. One that I can’t shake off that easily…”

Balder offered him a faint smile and kissed Loki gently. “Try to get some sleep, hmm?”

“Yeah…”

It didn’t surprise Loki that it took Balder about 20 minutes to fall asleep while he was lying awake and staring at the ceiling. Slowly Loki slid out of the bed and grabbed his underwear from the floor. After putting them on Loki got one of his dressing gowns from the wardrobe and then left for his living room. Sitting down on the couch Loki got his phone and pressed the number 1. He had to wait about half a minute before his call was answered with a yawn. “Really? It’s almost midnight.”

“Yes, I am sorry. Can we talk… I kinda of want to…”

“Really?”

Loki sighed and nodded. “I’ve… there is something I’d like to talk about.”

“Give me five minutes.”

“Thanks.” Hanging up Loki put on his slippers and left his rooms. They’ve always met halfway in the blue salon. As kids they had enjoyed the huge couch with hundreds of cushions for pillow fights. Then as teenagers they suddenly found out that the blue salon had a bar. Loki still enjoyed that as adult. In the blue salon Loki immediately fixed himself a scotch. He was taking a first sip when Thor slipped inside the room.

“Wow, so it’s that kind of a conversation…”

Loki laughed drily and held up his glass. “You want one?”

“Do I need one?”

“Could be.”

“One finger.”
So Loki prepared Thor a glass and they sat down on the couch. “Cheers…”

They drank in silence for a couple of moments until Thor grew tired of merely looking at Loki. “What’s wrong?”

Loki wanted to talk about it, that was the reason why they were here. Unfortunately he found it increasingly hard to do so. How did you talk about a problem that you couldn’t even name? Or that you were afraid to name? “I don’t know… Have you ever… been completely sure that something is the right thing to do and when you do it… you start freaking out and think maybe it’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever done?”

“Constantly… Why? What did you do?”

“Nothing. I am confused. I don’t like being confused. I’m not used to it…”

“Loki, why don’t you just spit it out?”

There was too much to say. Things that Loki couldn’t dare to voice. Like he had made a deal with a man that he didn’t trust and who still seemed to be the only one who completely shared his opinions. How Loki thought that their father should abdicate, because he was not fit to handle the current political situation. There was one thing Loki could talk about though. “I’ve had sex with Balder…”

“Yeah, obviously…”

“Huh?”


Screwing his face Loki shook his head. “Don’t ever say that in front of people. They might get the wrong impression…”

“Or they might just think that I don’t always bother to knock.” Thor smirked before turning completely serious one second later. “Something wrong about that? Was it bad?”

At least one question that Loki could answer without thinking twice about it. “No, definitely not. He knows what he’s doing, but… I had trouble getting into it.”

Thor nodded and took a sip from his drink. “That happens from time to time. Especially when you’re constantly thinking about other stuff. Like the Jotuns. Which I know you’re thinking about. Or is it something else?”

No, it was exactly that, but Thor couldn’t understand just how right he was and Loki wasn’t going to point it out. “No, it’s just… that never happened before. Not really.”

“Seriously? You always get so invested in every political issue. When the tax law was changed you didn’t eat for a week. You’re trying to tell me that’s the first time that you had to think about it so much that you couldn’t get into it?”

“Is that so surprising?”

“Honestly yes. When you get passionate about something, it gets all you’re thinking about. Some people use sex as a distraction from that…”

“Believe it or not, I do that too…” Loki instantly wanted to bite his lip. “No, that sounded wrong. Today was… Listen, this is not about the Jotun issue…”
“Okay, then what is it about? It’s clearly bothering you, so spit it out.”

Loki wanted to, really, but it was so hard for him to figure out. Thor would try to understand though, he knew that and Thor’s been through more relationship drama than Loki. For Loki there had never been relationship drama. Maybe that was the problem. “Today was… really nice. He was supportive, charming, sweet. There are no words to describe how sweet he is. We were at a jazz club. I’ve never been, but… I liked it. I liked being there with him and when we came back… I am not sure who initiated it, but I wanted it and it was good, but I just couldn’t… get into it like I wanted to. Shit, everything about him is sweet. Even when he’s fucking you…”

“By our ancestors, you are such an idiot!”

Taken aback Loki stared at Thor how emphasised his point by rolling his eyes at him. “What?”

“You have shitty taste in men!” Thor blurted out and Loki’s mouth dropped open. Sure, they were family, everybody, including Frigga had complained about his dates before, but not with this intensity. “Excuse me?”

Snorting Thor waved him off with his hand. “It’s true and you know that. You’re always going for assholes who keep rubbing you the wrong way… That’s exciting for a limited amount of time and then you get actually frustrated with them, because they keep giving you shit. Now you have a suddenly a nice guy at your side and you have no idea how to deal with that.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not. Seriously, name me one guy you dated who you didn’t constantly fight with.” Thor shot him a challenging look and Loki was ready to give him name after name when he realised that he couldn’t. For a second he thought of Svadilfari, but no, that would just be ridiculous. Looking back it was a miracle that they hadn’t killed each other. “Okay… yeah, I might have a type.”

“Your type sucks. Believe it or not, Balder not constantly giving you shit is a good thing. Actually quite the normal thing.” Thor winked at him and this time Loki wanted to roll his eyes. “You’re acting as if I was dating psychopaths.”

“I didn’t say that, but you enjoy making things unnecessary difficult. Maybe you now just don’t know what to do when things aren’t complicated.”

Loki hated to admit it, but that actually did make some sense. “I guess… it really is different. Everything about it. Mother adores him…”

Thor answered with a smile. “Yeah, she does. More than us even. I can’t remember the last time she invited me to have tea in her garden.”

In the back of his mind Loki could hear some bitterness, but he got too distracted by the main message. “When did they have tea?”

“Yesterday. I got a glimpse of him slipping into the gardens. Rather by accident.”

“Huh… strange.”

“Why? You know that she likes him.”

“Sure, but… he didn’t tell me and I don’t know how I feel about them being so close. Especially since she pretty much pushed me into his arms.”
“There you go again. Making things difficult when there is no need to. Your mother and your boyfriend get along. How horrible.” Thor gave him another smile and Loki began to feel indeed ridiculous. Maybe he was indeed making half of this stuff up in his head. Completely possible. Was he freaking out? After downing the rest of his scotch Loki contemplated the glass in his hand. “She wants me to marry him…”

“Well, she wants you to like him. Sure.” Thor tried to calm him down a bit, but it didn’t do much to help Loki. “But mother only wants you to be happy. She would never pressure you into something.”

“I know but… sometimes I get the feeling that he isn’t just a guy that she would appreciate as a son in law, but… like it’s really important that I am with him. I can’t quite put it into words.” Loki sighed and his throat felt so terribly dry, longing for another drink.

Thor frowned and Loki could feel that the conversation had taken a turn. Down a very dark road. “You don’t seriously feel like you’re being forced? Because if you do, I will…”

“No.” Quickly shaking his head Loki negated that. “I know nobody is going to force me, but I feel a little bit pressured. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, it does. That would also explain why you’re feeling weirded out. You need to talk about it.”

“I’ve already talked to mother.”

“No, not mother. Balder. You need to talk to him about it. Obviously. Ever thought about that he might also be freaked out about the expectations?”

Honestly – no. Again, it was due to Balder being so sweet. The constant smiles, compliments, touches and kisses. Balder wasn’t able to fake anything, Loki knew that. This was actual fondness. Balder was smitten with him. Completely. Which didn’t mean that he would be fond of the idea of marrying next month. “As much as it hurts me to say this… you are right. That’s going to be a pleasant conversation. ‘Hey, I really like you, but the fact that my mother is sooner or later going to organize our wedding scares the shit out of me.’”

Chuckling softly Thor gave him the thumbs-up. “Sounds good to me. You know what? If he drops to his knees and proposes to you, you just tell me that you can’t even get engaged before me. How about that?”

“Great. That will buy me probably 6 months. Why aren’t you engaged yet?”

“After all this stuff she has gone through for me, Jane deserves a fantastic, extraordinary proposal. I still need to figure out the details… I’m really bad at romance.” Thor comforted himself with a sip from his scotch and Loki felt a little chuckle passing his lips. “You need some help?”

“No, you are even worse at that than I am.”

Loki couldn’t respond anything to that, because Thor was definitely right and all he did was smile. Yes, that had helped.

They kept sitting there for another moment until Thor didn’t even bother to suppress a yawn. “Is there something else you’d like to talk about? If not… I’m kind of falling asleep here.”

Shaking his head Loki continued to smile. “No, it’s fine. Go back to bed. Sorry for waking you up in the first place.”

“Don’t apologize. It’ll be fine. Next time you just talk to him directly and let me sleep. How does that
sound?"

"Reasonable. No way I’ll do it."

Rolling his eyes Thor got up and patted Loki on the shoulder before leaving the room. Alone now Loki rubbed his eyes, now he suddenly started to feel tired. Which didn’t mean that he would be able to find sleep. Thor had given him good advice, that was true, but Loki had only told him parts of what was bothering him. Closing his eyes Loki sucked in a deep breath. Tomorrow there would still be enough time to worry about it.

After putting down the empty glass Loki got up and also left the salon. Back in his rooms Loki stared at the bedroom door, but sleep suddenly seemed so far away again. How could a single person act so stupid?

Just as Loki made a step forward his phone started to buzz. Still lying neglected on the couch table. Another day Loki would maybe have been able to ignore it, but it could be the reason for all of his troubles. Picking up the phone Loki stared at the screen and let out a string of curses. Oh, he was going to rip him apart.

“It’s in the middle of the night! And don’t even tell me you aren’t aware of the time difference!”

“Good evening to you too. How are you doing? Missed me?”

“No, Stark. It’s not a good evening. I am not doing fine and I didn’t miss you. Is that enough information to satisfy you?”

On the other end of the line Stark laughed heartily. “No, absolutely not. You see, I am a very curious person. Tell me how you did it.”

How was Loki supposed to stay angry when he had no idea what Stark was talking about? “How I did what?”

“Oh, don’t be cute. You flew me around the world to work out a deal, 12 hours later you called it off and another 12 hours later – tada. Completely new political situation. I’m seldom impressed. Also I am a little bit pissed off, because I really wanted you to owe me something. I was constantly thinking about ways how you could repay me… so how did you do it?”

Loki suddenly was hit by the strong feeling that Helblindi definitely knew what he was doing and that he was doing it very fast. How could Stark know about this even before Loki? That was impossible…

“Stark, I will ask you again. One single time. What are you talking about?”

“Despite being an American I do love the BBC. So much more trustworthy than CNN… also they didn’t bring the story when I threw up all over Miss Argentina at a party. Funny story, I gotta tell you sometime… Anyway, I keep refreshing the BBC homepage and guess what – they bring the breaking news story from Asgard. It’s just one minute old. I’m still kind of surprised that you don’t know about it…”

“Stark, I swear on my ancestors, I will…”

“Should I read it out? It’s just a headline – Jotun government willing to postpone plebiscite should the king agree to new negotiations. My brilliant brain naturally already figured out that that’s your doing. Why are you acting so clueless? Elaborate strategy? Or did the Jotun go to the press before even talking to you? Which one is it?”
Swallowing softly Loki tried to ignore the biting feeling that somebody at the other end of the world, who had nothing to do with all of this, had figured him and Helblindi out. If Odin was going to do the same, Loki was in deep trouble.

Play it cool. Don’t let him know that he caught you off guard. Their deal was history. Stark had nothing to do with this anymore. “I didn’t know you were interested in Asgardian issues, Mr. Stark.”

“To be honest, politics are mostly dull… but… I think there is more to Asgard than what meets the eye. And what meets the eye is already pretty pleasing. I guess I will have to keep an eye on the situation. Good night, your highness. Take care of yourself.”

Surprised by the complete lack of amusement in his voice Loki mumbled a soft “Yes, you too” before hanging out.

There was no time to think about Stark’s strange call, because Loki noticed the alert sign for a text message. It had been sent over an hour ago.

Unknown number

Fuck

*I gave you time. Your turn*

Oh, that damned… Taking a deep breath Loki put his phone down. It was so hard to think right now. Helblindi had gone to the press before even contacting the court. No, Odin wasn’t going to like that, but it was going to force his hand. Loki wanted to get dressed, wake his father, to talk about it. Not possible.

Officially Loki had no idea about all of this. He was lying asleep in his bed and was going to learn about this tomorrow morning. Until then Loki had to remain silent and wait. Or finally go to bed and sleep. Next to his sweet, lovable boyfriend.

Loki already knew that he was going to lie awake all night.

Taking off his dressing gown Loki tiptoed into the bedroom where Balder was still sleeping soundly. While lying down Loki tried to not make a single sound to not wake him up and sighed barely audibly when his head hit the pillow.

Good, at least one thing that he managed to pull off…

Loki’s breath got caught when an arm slid around his waist and a little kiss was pressed behind his ear. “Done with being alone?”
Hello again,

Be nice to Balder, he is a dear :)

Also, there is Tony. Did you miss him?

Have fun

“I am feeling terribly neglected, you know.” Rhodey softly nudged him into the rips and Tony made dismissive gesture with his hand, not looking up from his phone. “The movie is shit anyway.”

“Then talk to me instead of falling into your phone. What are you staring at anyway?” Rhodey grabbed phone, taking it away from Tony who yelped in surprise. “Hey!”

Glancing at the display Rhodey raised an eyebrow and then laughed, a little bit irritated. “Really? You are stalking your one-night-stands?”

“Is it stalking if you read a Wikipedia page? I don’t think so.” Tony took his phone back. “Also, it’s not about sex but about business.”

“Wow, I’ve heard you saying that sentence before. Are you sick?” Rhodey chuckled, taking a sip from his beer and Tony had to admit that he had a point. Tony starting to talk about business relations was definitely a rather uncommon thing to happen. Not very believable.

“No, I am not sick, I am intrigued. A state of mind that I don’t get to enjoy that often. So I am treasuring it.”

The movie was now definitely abandoned, Rhodey didn’t switch the TV off though, he merely turned down the volume. “Why? Anything new on that front?”

“Probably nothing I should tell you. Secret business. Royal business. For a second I was back in, now I am back out. Do I make sense? No? Great.”

“Glad to hear that.” Rhodey rolled his eyes and then nudged him softly. “Come on, I don’t need details. I think I don’t want details, but I would like to understand what is going on. It’s not like you’ve shown any real interest in anyone for quite some time. Now you are on somebody’s Wikipedia page.”

Interest. Huh. Tony didn’t know if he liked that word too much. “He is not too proud to ask for help and still manages to be a complete jerk about it. What is there not to love?”

“You are starting to scare me, Tones. You’re commenting on someone’s character?”

“Fine, he gives head like a pro. Sucking all life out of you. Does that make you feel better?”

“Strangely enough, yes.” Rhodey admitted with a soft smile. He had stopped a long time ago to feel
embarrassed about Tony’s tales. Stories about guys, naturally. No straight man had ever cared about a detailed description of how things went down with a woman. Completely different thing. 25 years ago, during their time at MIT Tony had still managed to make Rhodey uncomfortable by telling him about the hot piece of ass he had hit the night before. Watching his best friend squirm had almost been more fun than the sex itself. Unfortunately Tony had done it so much that Rhodey had ultimately got used to it and now he didn’t bat an eyelid.

Admittedly, over the years Tony’s urge to show off with his adventures had pretty much vanished. A prince was still something different.

“Okay, I know saying this will get me nowhere with you, but I’ll try anyway.” Rhodey shifted, trying to get in a more comfortable position. “Is there still something going on with the prince? Or do you want something to be going on?”

Oh, they were going down that road again? That time of the month again? When Rhodey was trying again to convince Tony that a stable relationship that lasted longer than three nights would enrich his life. Okay, Tony would be a nice boy and play along. A little bit.

“There was a lot going on already. I thought I just mentioned that he…”

“Yeah, yeah, gives amazing head. Best blowjob of the century. Stop being a dick. I wouldn’t be asking if you weren’t cyberstalking him.”

Fair point. Tony shrugged. “What? Do you want to write a fairy tale for me? The day that Tony met his very own prince charming.”

“Come on, you’d love that. You are a sucker for this kind of stuff.” Rhodey’s smirk got him and Tony laughed in response. “Yeah, that could be true. To answer your question, a question that ends up on Pepper’s desk about 100 times every single day. No, there is nothing going on between me and prince charming. I offered, but prince charming got himself a little boyfriend. They are really uptight about the cheating thing in Asgard. You flirt a little bit and he tries to bite your head off.”

“Your flirting is not exactly PG, Tony.”

“Yeah, because it’s fun. You’re happy now with my answer?”

“Not at all. Did you google the boyfriend?”

Fuck, now Rhodey got him. It was hard to play it cool with him. That was the problem when somebody knew you too well. The pokerface just didn’t work on them. “No, I am not a creep.”

“Aha and how does he look?”

Rhodey should be damned for not buying any of Tony’s shit. “He’s cute. In a very pretty way. I think I could take him in a fight, but then he might call Putin and have me murdered by palladium poisoning or some crap like that.”

“Care to explain?”

“His family has close ties to Russia. Business and even some blood relatives. Oligarchy. Not something to mess with. Very good connections though if you go for a political marriage.”

“I see. You totally didn’t google him.” Great, now Rhodey was laughing at him and Tony wanted to be mad at himself, but he couldn’t. It was nice to be finally intrigued again by somebody. To find himself wanting to know more. Until now Tony hadn’t been struck by disappointment. It was quite
the opposite. “I’ve made business with the Asgardian state. So I should keep up with what is going on, shouldn’t I? All that revolutionary stuff is quite entertaining, don’t you think?”

“Of course, but I don’t see you looking in the Jotun situation.”

Perfect opportunity to be his obnoxious self. Grinning from ear to ear Tony went through the vast number of images that Google offered him. No need to do that actually, every single one of them looked perfect to shatter the self-confidence of any man. “I am looking into the Jotun situation. I am looking into it very thoroughly. Want to see what I’m looking into?”

The expression on Rhodey’s face when Tony handed him the phone was extraordinarily funny. First the annoyance that Tony would show him the picture of another guy and then the realisation what he was actually looking at.

“Okay, now that’s the proof that god definitely plays favourites. Who is that?”

“Besides the wet dream of every gay man between 15 and 99?”

“I think there might be a couple of women too who might fancy perfect cheekbones and those… fuck, those have to be contacts, right? Nobody has eyes that blue…” Rhodey held the phone close up to his face, as if that could help him to make out of the eyes were really that blue or not.

They were, Tony had seen him on television. “Son of the Jotun lord and I swear to you – if all royalty looked like this, all of the annoying liberals and patriots who like to chant about how great our political systems is… they would immediately set up a monarchy. I would be in the very first line.”

“So that’s what you’re doing all day when you tell Pepper you cannot show up to board meetings? Stalking a one-night-stand and looking up men way out of your league?”

“Hey, I fucked about 50 playmates, 6 Misses, one of them Miss Universe, members of different Olympic teams and a prince. Who is out of my league?”

“Forget about what I just said. You need to get tested.”

“Screw you…” Tony huffed and took back his phone. “Anyway, yes I am looking at pictures of hot men, because I am only human and who wouldn’t want to look at that. Thank you very much. But there is also…” Sighing Tony shook his head. Sure, politics were a nuisance and a toxic minefield. Most of the time he tried to avoid it, but in this case he was willing to make an exception. It had more ring to it when Kings and Lords got their panties in a bunch, not the old republican against some democrat. Tony had been in the weapons business long enough, he knew how things went down and they could escalate ridiculously easily.

Despite him an annoying know-it-all he had way too little understanding of what was going on in Asgard. Or how things could turn out. One thing he knew for sure though and suddenly Tony felt an overwhelming urge to tell Rhodey. To share his intrigue. There was no reason not to, since there was nobody else Tony would ever want to tell anything.

“I can’t help but being fascinated… that somebody can care so deeply while not giving a shit at the same time. It’s intriguing, to not know what’s coming next and to poke the hornet’s nest. I haven’t felt that in a long time and I am enjoying it. Calling him out on his bullshit is a blast and gives as good as he gets. All this time I am just waiting for him to give up and admit how badly he wants to be king…”

Tony trailed, because he realised there was a good chance that he could go like this for hours.
Normally he would have felt embarrassed, but the prince was a great subject to dwell on. “Have I mentioned that he gives great head?”

Moaning exaggeratedly Rhodey seemed one second away from a face palm. “You just can’t help yourself, can you? Showing real interest in someone’s character – bad. Must make joke about blowjobs, so people won’t think I am not superficial. You happen to like a guy that you’ve slept with. Big fucking deal. You know, it’s quite relieving that show some interest. Now you only have to stop hanging out with a minor. People might start talking.”

Tony would gladly tell everybody to go fuck themselves, but that was another thing he probably shouldn’t do. For Peter’s sake. “I never hang out with the kid.”

“You pretty much served him a place at MIT on a plate. For free. People might get the wrong idea.”

“Well now you have to get more specific. Do people think that I’m fucking him or that I fucked his mother 16 years ago?”

Rhodey pulled a face. “What I really wanted to say is that it’s a shame that people don’t know that side of you. The generous one. A guy doing nice stuff without expecting anything in return. People always assume the worst… What I really wanted to say before bringing up something that made this whole conversation awkward… You like someone, go on from there. It’s quite nice to have somebody to come home to. Someday you will have to try it.”

“Sure, if you’re willing to lend me Carol for a week.”

That earned him a not very gentle kick. “There is a line and the line starts at my girlfriend.”

“Noted. How about I put the phone away and we watch a real movie this time?”

“You just don’t want talk about how charming you find prince charming.”

Tony shrugged. “Oh, I think he is amazingly charming… with just the right amount of being a jackass. Turn on Netflix. I want to see something gory.”

***

“This has to be some kind of strategy. Or some trap. They wouldn’t just… give in.” Thor knew that he was voicing everybody’s thoughts. What a strange way to start the day. Getting woken by the message that the Ymirsons had backed out. No plebiscite, because they were suddenly willing to go back to the negotiations? No, Thor wasn’t going to believe that for a second. Nobody changed their mind so completely in such a short amount of time?

Had they realised that the plebiscite would only cause more trouble? Had they suddenly admitted to themselves that they couldn’t win this fight or that they didn’t want to fight it?

They were famous for their stubbornness. Their fierce belief that they were right. After their insolence they couldn’t possibly believe that new negotiations were going to achieve anything.

Although that would be the best thing for every party involved. Finding a peaceful solution while sitting together at a table. Thor had little hope, they had shown that they weren’t willing to compromise. So why the sudden change?

“They are not giving in. They are reasonable. They are making us a gift. We should not refuse it.” Loki didn’t look like he had caught a lot of sleep last night. Thor heavily doubted that he had already talked to Balder, but it wasn’t in Loki’s character to lose sleep over another man. They would
probably have to have another talk. Whenever they were done with the Ymirsons.

Their father was sitting at the other end of the table. Until now he hadn’t really looked at either of them. To Thor he seemed lost in thought, trying to understand what had happened. Just like them. There was no way they could trust them and yet…

“Thor, what do you think?” The question was soft, without any form of urgency and Thor tried to answer the same way. Reflective, calm, but honest.

“I don’t really know what to think. They were so determined. We gave them no incline to believe that we were ready to go back to negotiations. In their statement they made it sound like we asked for new negotiations. I don’t understand their reasoning. If they were afraid of what would happen after the plebiscite or if this is some kind of scheme. I can’t tell. I don’t know about their motivation.”

Eventually Odin thought them worthy of his eyes and looked at him. Just like his voice. Calm.

“Alright. So what do you think would be the appropriate reaction?”

Thor had no idea. Shouldn’t he know that? He was going to be king. Wouldn’t it be nice if all the wisdom would come immediately with the title? There was a slight temptation to look over to Loki. No, Loki didn’t always know what to do either, but there was always something that he wanted to do. Was there something that Thor wanted to do? Maybe, but he didn’t know if it was the right choice. There was always a high risk involved.

“I don’t see anything wrong with going back to the talks. If they didn’t change their stance on the issues, we will know that instantly. They postponed the plebiscite, that was their doing, not ours. I say we see it as a step towards us, but we need to watch our backs. They clearly think they can get something out of this…”

“Yes. Maybe peace? A peaceful solution for all of us. Sounds good to me…” Loki mumbled softly and Thor thought it almost too good to be true. “If that’s what they want, I am perfectly happy. I say we don’t jump to conclusions…”

Thor couldn’t deny that his heart was racing. It wasn’t exactly fear. Nervousness? Respect? Apprehension? What was his father going to say? Scold him for being naïve? No, Thor didn’t think he was being naïve. A mob had set a building in the Jotun capital on fire. That must have woken them up, make them realise that thing could go south incredibly quickly.

Odin took his time, let them wait for a reaction. “I agree. What is our next immediate step?”

“Invite them to the court?” He hated the fact that his voice went up by the end of the phrase and made it a question.

Before their father could agree or object Loki joined the conversation once again. “I disagree.”

That was unexpected.

“I am listening, Loki.” Their father cocked his head and looked at Thor’s brother. No change was visible on his face, but Thor was sure that he was equally surprised.

“It was them who called off the plebiscite. Not us. Thor is right, we didn’t give them any sign that said ‘We want to renegotiate’. That was them. Therefore they have to come to us. Sure, the press will need some statement. The court has to release something. Something very vague. How we are happy about the new approach. That must have woken them up, make them realise that thing could go south incredibly quickly.

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“Not the approach I expected you to go with, Loki.” Odin muttered softly and leaned back in his chair. “Thor, what’s your opinion on this?”

Nodding slowly Thor met Loki’s eyes. “I think it’s a good idea. Has there been any word of the Ymirsons yet?”

“No, nothing. If there hadn’t been an official statement from them, I would have believed all of this to be an invention from the press.” Odin sighed and got up from his chair. Thor had to swallow softly when he saw the heavy movement. An old, wise man made an incredibly impression while sitting in a chair. Almost frightening. That instantly changed when he had to stand on his own legs. “As soon as they do contact us I will let you know. For now I leave you to your duties.” With a dismissive gesture Odin indicated them to leave while he walked towards the door himself.

Neither Loki nor Thor moved until their father had gone. “This day is already starting completely weird…”

Next to him Loki chuckled softly. “Could be worse. One problem disappearing overnight.”

“You know very well that another one is going to replace it. They are up to something. Laufey, okay, maybe he would pull back. I doubt it, but I might be able to believe it. Helblindi? That stubborn son of a bitch? No way.”

Loki shrugged. “Maybe, but he doesn’t make the decisions. It’s Laufey who does that. Of course they won’t to get something out of this, but perhaps we should just be happy that they made a step towards de-escalation. It’s a risk for them. They are disappointing a big part of their population. We shouldn’t forget that.”

True enough. Thor really wanted to believe that there could be a compromise, but he was going to keep his guard up. Nothing that a Frostgiant had ever done was trust inspiring. Nonetheless Thor was willing to try, it was for the best of Asgard. “Since none of us had breakfast yet, you want to eat something together?”

“Gladly, I promised Balder though we’d have breakfast together. Breakfast for 4?”

“Sounds good to me. Gold salon?”

“Reading my mind. Let’s get out of here.”

The distance from the conference room to the golden salon was pretty short and they fell silent while walking there. Not saying anything didn’t mean that Loki’s face wasn’t transmitting a lot of things. Thor thought that he perhaps would still be pondering the events of last night, but that didn’t make too much sense, considering the soft smile on his lips. “Penny for your thoughts?”

Loki quickly shook his head as if Thor had caught him doing something naughty. “Nothing, I just… got carried away.”

“Something about Balder?”

Raising both eyebrows Loki shook his head a second time. “No, the Jotuns. Not as pleasant, I know. But I couldn’t help thinking… how amazing it would be if this could be the start of a new chapter. If the Jotun conflict could actually be solved during our lifetime… we would need to write a lot of new history books.”

Only now Thor realised that he hadn’t even considered that. Why? The Jotun conflict had always been there. At this point it seemed like an essential part of Asgard. Yet Loki was right. The hope was
small, almost invisible, but it couldn’t be denied. What if they could end this? That wouldn’t just change the history books, it would be enough to create an entire legacy. No king could ever fail hard enough to stain his legacy if he had ended the animosity between the Jotuns and the court.

It sounded too sweet to be true. “I fear you are reading too much into this. Don’t get your hopes up.” Thor was definitely saying that to both of them.

Sighing softly Loki continued to smile. “Probably… but stranger things have happened… like you finding a woman who is willing to put up with you.”

“You are a jerk.”

“One of my best character traits.” Loki winked at him and Thor resisted the urge to nudge him. Not very gently.

They had Loki’s assistant inform Balder and Jane that they wanted to meet up for breakfast and the kitchen also got notified. So 10 minutes later the four of them were sitting a table and Thor should be listening to Jane talking about an article she had read about the integration of the trúa into modern medicine. She sounded genuinely interested, almost passionately about it, but Thor was so caught up in watching his brother with his boyfriend.

It hadn’t happened in years that Loki woke him up in the middle of the night, because he wanted to talk. Loki never said what bothered him. Talking of awful character traits. You had to pull information out of him when it was personal and even then he would only give you bits and keep the most important things to himself. Utterly ridiculous and nerve-wrecking.

So far everything looked pretty normal. No, Thor wouldn’t dare to say cute. Unlike him Loki and Balder were actually listening to Jane’s story and were answering her questions. Loki mentioned his up-coming check-up with Dr. Jørgensen and told Jane that she could talk to him if she found the subject that fascinating.

“You’re still seeing the same doctor as when you were a child? I bet he must have some stories to tell…” Balder was teasing him, causing Loki to raise his eyebrows. “Why? You knew me as a child.”

“That’s why I think he has a lot of good stories. Thor must have broken your nose at some point for always getting him into trouble.”

“Hey!” Thor huffed, feeling offended while Loki laughed out loud. “Oh please, he is such a softie. He wouldn’t even punch me when I put a snake in his bed.”

Jane almost dropped her slice of toast. “You did what?”

“It was a slowworm. Nothing dangerous about it.” Loki shrugged while Balder continued to laugh. That earned him a dark look from Thor. “It wasn’t funny.”

“Yes, it was. You screeched like a girl…” The glee in Loki’s eyes hadn’t changed one bit. Still the very same as 18 years ago and Thor still wanted to strangle him. “And you started to cry when you weren’t allowed to leave your room for a week as a punishment.”

“Only because you squealed on me.”

“A snake? Really?” At least now Balder pretended to be a little bit reproachful, still mostly amused.

“He took one of my books without asking.”
“That’s not a reason.”

“It totally is.”

Balder let out a noise that was something between a sigh and laugh. It definitely sounded charmed. “Remind me to never piss you off. I really can’t stand snakes.”

“Lucky you then, because I don’t use snakes anymore to get back at people.” Loki winked and his face showed all the mischievousness that had always intrigued people. Balder didn’t seem very intrigued, but charmed – again. The conversation took another turn when his answer was soft and sweet. “Yes, lucky me.”

It was a short kiss, not long enough to make him or Jane feel uncomfortable, like they shouldn’t be here. No, it was none of that, but still more than a peck. Sweet. Loki had never hidden his affection or intimate gestures. There were some very public photos of him and his last boyfriend. Involved in not quite as sweet kisses.

This was different. Not exactly what they were used to. Not what Loki was used to, but Thor knew his brother and he didn’t look uncomfortable. There was a smile on Loki’s face when Balder pulled back.

It was a couple of minutes later that Thor noticed that Loki had his hand on his phone during the entire breakfast.
“Okay, I surrender. I need a break. You’ve won. I feel terribly out of shape.” Completely exaggerated, but it was Loki’s way to say that he wanted a break. His security details would also appreciate a little stop.

Getting off his bike Loki simply sat down on a bench next to the path and demonstratively stretched out his legs. No, he wasn’t in bad shape. Anything but. Bicycling wasn’t his favourite kind of sport, Loki was more of a runner. With Balder it seemed the other way round. His face was all smiles when he sat down next to Loki, raising one teasing eyebrow at him. “Are you tired?”

“Kind of, I need a break. Whose idea was that again?”

“You asked what I wanted to do. That’s what you get for asking.”

“Yeah, that will teach me…” Loki let his head drop back and closed his eyes. The cold air felt nice against his heated cheeks and he liked the scent of moist grass. It had rained during the night and temperatures hadn’t yet dropped enough for the ground to freeze over. Loki felt like it was going to be a harsh winter. Therefore it was a good idea to get outside as long as they still could.

This was feeling rather nice, Loki was enjoying this and for a couple of moments his head had been cleared. Such things could never last. “I’d like to ask you something, but I’m kind of afraid that it’ll be awkward.”

“Have you ever shied away from an awkward conversation?”

Opening his eyes Loki turned his head to look at Balder who was still clearly enjoying himself. “Only when I was 12 years old… Okay, awkward conversation incoming. What did my mother say to you when she suggested that… we should date?”

“She didn’t actually suggest that we should date. She didn’t say ‘Balder, I want you to go out with my son’.”

“Yes, yes, but you’ve said it was clear that she had an ulterior motive. I just… couldn’t help wondering. What did she say?”

Loki’s heart was beating a little too fast. He couldn’t tell which answer would be the wrong one, but there was a sting of dread.

Balder didn’t seem to think too much about his question. “My mother and her are constantly corresponding. Family and all. When my mother mentioned that I was coming back to Valhalla, Frigga invited me. Eventually she said that it might be a good idea if you showed me around a bit.
She might have mentioned that you are single. That’s it. No advices how to charm you.”

“Was that your intention? To charm me?”

“Somewhere along the way. Sure. I came back to court and there you were. A good looking prince who is supposed to spend time with me and whose mother happens to mention that he is single. Who wouldn’t try to charm you?” Balder shrugged but the smile on his face was genuine.

“I could give you a list. A very long list… Okay, second thing I gotta ask you. Still awkward. Still about my mother.”

Balder responded with a laugh and made a gesture that told him to go ahead. Loki would be so glad once they were done with it. “Do you and Frigga sometimes talk about me?”

Thanks to Thor Loki already knew the answer and yet he still wanted Balder to say no. Sitting right next to him on this bench Loki thought that he wanted this to work out. More precisely Loki wanted to want this. Balder was sweet, calm and supportive and maybe he indeed needed that. The other way hadn’t worked out, so what did Loki know? A little distraction in the back of his mind, sure. Nothing more and nothing less.

Loki was very good at not getting distracted…

“You’re right, now it’s really getting awkward.” It sounded like Balder was trying to buy some time, but then he seemingly surrendered with a sigh and shrug. “Frigga worries a lot about you. Mostly she wants to know how you are doing. She says you are too hard on yourself and I think that too. Look, I really like your mother. She is family, but I would never tell her something that you trusted me with or anything else if I just suspected that you wouldn’t be okay with it. You are not keen on me and your mother getting along?”

There was some concern audible and Loki rewarded him with a dry chuckle. “I am not keen on you calling my mother family.”

An ever so soft frown appeared on Balder’s forehead. “Why? We are related.”

“Yes, thank you, I know. Distantly.” Loki felt a very urgent need to emphasise that and Balder laughed in response. “Okay, yes. Very distantly. I don’t consider you family. Not that way. Happy now?”

“Happier than before. To me it’s just a bit weird that you and my mother get along. She never has spent time alone with one of my boyfriends before… and she never tried to set me up with someone before. I am not feeling perfectly safe on this territory.”

“I promise – I am not secretly meeting with your mother to find out how to please you. I admit that would really be weird. Also, she would have probably told me that you really into cycling.”

That wasn’t true, so Loki protested. “No, I like it… I’m merely tired. I told you that you should choose something you like. I still owe you for accompanying me to that meeting.”

“Which turned out to be a very nice day, so don’t worry about it. I got you out of the palace, that is more than I had bargained for.”

Honestly, Loki himself was still surprised that they were here. Today should have been the plebiscite and Loki would have been praying all day to his ancestors. Asking them over and over to help him find a solution to not let their nation sink into chaos. Now the situation was entirely different. No Jotun was going to vote today and Loki was out with his boyfriend, enjoying the cool air of a late
autumn day. In Jotunheim it was probably already snowing.

They had to thank Helblindi for that and Loki would still have to do his part… that couldn’t happen in a single day though. It didn’t hurt to take half of it off. Balder deserved some attention. Other than Loki talking about him with Thor in the middle of the night after not having the best sex of his life. Which definitely wasn’t Balder’s fault. Another awkward thing to think about.

“But didn’t you promise me another trip outside of the city? That’s something I’d like to get back to.” Balder smiled and Loki nodded instantly. “Sure…” Loki tried to go over his schedule in his head, but ditched it altogether. There was always something else to do. “You want to do that tonight?”

“Really?”

“Why not? Any place you wanna go?”

Balder had a sweet thinking face. “Helheim? I might still be a bit warm down there… and I haven’t been there in years.”

“Yes, I’d like that. We have a penthouse in Éljúðnir, we can spend the night there. I’ll just need to make a few calls.”

“That sounds great.” It was obvious that Balder was surprised by how quickly Loki had agreed and was already organizing things. “Perhaps we should get going…”

“Why?”

Balder nodded subtly at Loki’s security details who were out of earshot. Turning his head Loki saw what he meant and sighed inwardly. They had chosen a secluded route, but it was still impossible to completely avoid meeting everyone. Two young women had approached them, at the moment they were vividly talking to Loki’s head security. Yes, sure, Loki wasn’t out on some event, he was on a bike tour with his boyfriend. Privately. Damn, Loki was wearing a tracksuit that had seen better days. Then again, Loki was in a good mood. For now the Jotun disaster had been avoided and Loki did feel like doing something nice to somebody. “It’s okay.” He called out and of course his security didn’t seem happy, like this he was only making their work more difficult.

They were thorough anyway, carefully examining both women before they let them pass through. Loki had gotten up from the bench, because the etiquette had to be respected. The encounter was surprisingly pleasant. To be honest, Loki still hadn’t forgotten about the Jotun girls which had tried to get to him at the art gallery. Angry, with a clear agenda. This was nothing like that. Excitement to see their prince, nothing more, nothing less. Politics weren’t even mentioned. They bowed their heads, whispered hushed words about how great of an honour this was and Loki merely smiled, asking them how they were doing and eventually wished them a pleasant day, but told them that he had to leave. The security details clearly agreed. One of them escorted the women back away from Loki who smiled to himself. It was pretty childish to find glee in the fact that you could make someone else blush by merely acting nice around them.

“See… you are too hard on yourself. They love you. Clearly for a reason.”

Loki shrugged and shook his head at the same time. “They were excited to meet royalty. It just happened to be me.”

“Oh, you don’t believe that for a second.” Balder took a hold of his hand and Loki enjoyed the soft tingle of his kiss. “Come on, you’re not done eating my dust.”

Balder was already on his bike when Loki’s brain had caught up to what he had been saying.
“Right... We’re leaving.”

A little nod to the security and then they continued their little ride. It could actually turn out to be quite a pleasant day.

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Slowly Helblindi lowered the newspaper. One sentence had perfectly led into the next one, together they formed a most pleasant, almost wonderful text. Hyperbole. Definitely. No need to exaggerate. Nonetheless Helblindi felt an immensely heavy weight being lifted off his shoulders. Their little stunt could have ended very differently.

Thank his ancestors and all the spirits that the newspapers were kind. At least the Jotun ones. The ones printed in Valhalla were asking way more questions and were tempted to see the canceled plebiscite as a Jotun failure. Luckily most of their population wasn’t checking out these newspapers, they were written in Old Norse. They were putting their trust into their own people... and into their family.

The article was very clear – if Laufey had called off the plebiscite, it could only mean that the King had given in, that it was him who wanted to re-negotiate. It was no celebration, definitely not, but the author was optimistic. No word about them backing down or falling to their knees. None of that.

They were so full of trust, absolutely convinced that Helblindi and his father would only ever act in their favour. A simple truth. There was no denying that it made Helblindi proud. To know that people had such a high opinion of them.

Things weren’t quite like they thought them to be, but the essence of the article was true. They were doing this for Jotunheim. Not another Jotun life was going to be dictated by the Language Act. Helblindi was going to make sure of that.

Until now things had gone down smoothly. Almost disturbingly so. Helblindi didn’t trust the easy atmosphere.

For now the people had reacted favorably which was very relieving. Helblindi was a bit put off by how quickly his father had given into his suggestion. Actually he had expected to have to use all of his rhetoric talents. Which usually didn’t work on his father. An hour. That was all it had taken. Sitting down at a table together, Helblindi explaining everything he had discussed with the young Búrison and then Helblindi had been trembling, waiting for his father’s judgement. Ready to start the discussion all over again.

It hadn’t been necessary. His father had agreed. At the moment Helblindi had almost been too happy to question his motives. Odin had been sitting on the throne for over 40 years. Why should he step back now? Especially when they now needed him to step back for their plan to work. The older prince was a fool, Helblindi could very well imagine Loki pulling his strings.

The real problem started there... with the young prince...

“Do you know what is the hardest part about seeing your children growing up?”

Putting the newspaper away Helblindi raised his head to see his father entering the winter garden, casually sitting down opposite of him. Nothing about his appearance looked the slightest bit agitated, he seemed perfectly indifferent. Which meant that he was relaxed.

“How would I know? I don’t know what it’s like to have children.”
“It’s the most wonderful pleasure and the most intense pain. Some children mean more pain than others.”

“You are the heir. I guess something would be wrong if you hadn’t given me a headache from time to time. Since you don’t have an answer to my question, I will give it you. The hardest part is see how you slowly lose the ability to tell what they are thinking. Just by looking at them.” Laufey cocked his head, as if he wanted to get a closer look. “You were an open book to me as a child. So eager to please and yet so easily upset. Incredibly proud. Your mother always said that even as a baby, you knew that you were a prince. When you were a teenager I could sometimes get a glimpse of what was going on in that smart head of yours. Today… I can only tell that you are deeply concerned, but the rest is shrouded in darkness. You will have to tell me.”

“You are right, I am concerned and I think it should be pretty easy to figure out why.”

A faint smile made its way on Laufey’s lips. “I guess so. The journalists were easy on us. It should last for one, maybe two weeks.”

Yes, time was of the essence, but there was nothing Helblindi could do at the moment. This was the bad, almost insufferable part of this arrangement. At this time the little Búrison had to act and Helblindi had to resign himself to write him texts to urge him on. Truth to be told, Helblindi didn’t know how far he could go with him. There was something in those green eyes. Mischievous and dangerous. Like if he was pushed too far, he might turn around stab you if you said the wrong thing. With that family it was hard to tell. Anything seemed possible.

“You want to know what I am thinking about, father? I am pondering. Trying to figure out what I might be able to do to have a hand in this game. I can’t just stand by the side. I don’t feel too good about somebody else’s hands on the steering wheel.”

“So my bright son is telling me that he entered a deal with another man where the other one is clearly in a better position?”

“Not a better position, not in the long run. He is completely vulnerable to blackmail, should it turn out that he is merely trying to stall… which I don’t believe. I still would like to interfere… I am not a fan of letting others do the main work.”

Somebody who came from a family of traitors and thieves.

Somewhat absently his father nodded, his eyes not on Helblindi’s face. Somewhere else. Not the first time. He sometimes got that look. Seemingly completely lost in thought and still capable to maintain a conversation.

“What do you think about him? The young one.”

Not the first time they talked about Loki, but the framework had changed. Helblindi felt like he was straddling a gap, not knowing which side to choose. “It’s similar to what you just said… I thought I had figured him out during the negotiations. Easy buttons to push. I believe that he cares. About all of Asgard. Not about us specifically, but about Asgard as a whole. He considers us part of it. Clearly enough he often disagrees with his father and he calls the Language Act by its name. Which is an anomaly… I don’t get it. He should have been raised in the same mind set as his brother or any other member of this family… I don’t know. I just feel like if I turn away for one second, I will end up with a knife in my back.”
It should be unsettling that Laufey thought that was another reason to smile. “You are thinking like a politician.”

“I guess so… I’d really like to think that he is doing this because of concern. Because he cares about all of Asgard equally and that this matters more to him than 500 years of bad blood… but then there is the complete willingness to use his brother as a puppet. Maybe this is just a game. His way to the throne through the backdoor. I still believe that he would be the better choice than Thor, but… harder to manipulate. What am I supposed to think?”

“Nobody puts all their cards on the table. You didn’t and you can’t expect him to do it. Do you believe that he is on your side in this?”

Helblindi bit the inside of his cheek, taking his time before responding. “I believe that he respects the trúa. He swore on his ancestors, he made a vow to abolish the Language Act. So I believe that, but I don’t trust him… Jotunheim could just be his way to get his foot into the door… I am not sure. After all he is one of them…”

“So what are you going to do?”

An excellent question, but it depended on what Loki was going to do first.

“For now? Hoping that he works a miracle and convinces the usurper to leave the stage. Without anybody having to help things along.”

“Words like these can easily break someone’s neck.”

Helblindi couldn’t say that he cared. The Búrisons had killed members of their family. Yes, they were still denying it and historians argued that there was no proof, but everybody knew it was true anyway. Whenever the old man was finally going to die, it would be one thief less. No reason to shed a tear. “I said them in Jotun, he wouldn’t even understand.”

Laufey slightly shook his head, but he seemed the slightest bit amused.

“Then even with the old man out of the picture… Who is to tell me that Loki can pull his brother’s strings the right way? For years he has been opposing his father’s opinions and nothing happened. The American policy is in place, he wasn’t able to do anything about it. Who is to say that he can influence his brother in a way that he couldn’t do with his father?”

“You should know like everybody else that fathers and sons sometimes are nothing alike. Perfectly different.”

Helblindi had expected a little bit more, but Laufey wasn’t saying anything else. “You seem very confident with this arrangement, father.”

“In my entire lifetime I haven’t met a single Búrison who was willing to do anything for Jotunheim. Odin would be too arrogant and full of himself to even suggest something like that to fool us. I do believe, like yourself, that the prince’s offer is genuine. Which doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be careful.”

Helblindi couldn’t agree more. “I’ve already said that I didn’t trust him. Even less when I look at the family he is probably going to marry into.”

It astounded Helblindi that this was the comment which evoked a more intense reaction from his father. “What makes you say that?”
The question itself confused Helblindi. It seemed so blatantly obvious. Was he being tested again? Like all the time. “He’s dating the young Fjörgynnson. Makes sense. They’ve always been in bed with the Búrisons. Why break a tradition? Now it’s an actual, not a metaphorical bed. It just shouldn’t be the younger prince lying in it.”

Laufey ever so slightly arched an eyebrow, which meant that Helblindi should continue. Good, so he had grabbed his attention. “The son of the patriarch? All the Russian business in the background? Nonetheless clean cut and nice image. They pretty much groomed him to be a king’s consort. This is a very ambitious family and now they settle for second best? That’s their side. Who knows what Loki’s motivation is?”

“Affection?”

Helblindi almost wanted to laugh. Sure, it was possible. Balder was nice enough, but the timing was beyond strange. Thor being actually so stupid to get involved with an American without any ties to Asgard and not a month later photos started to show up of Loki and an Asgardian sweetheart? Either this was an attempt to distract from Thor’s disaster of a relationship or… and this was the really interesting possibility, Loki was playing a really elaborate game here. Starting with the perfect spouse. Presenting himself as the clearly better option.

Helblindi thought back at the intense reaction when he had mentioned that position to the younger prince. It had seemed genuine Shocked. Offended. Outraged. Helblindi didn’t doubt that he was a good actor. Hard to tell what to believe and what not. He had to know, Helblindi was a great liar himself. Like when he told his father that their bloodline wouldn’t take back the throne.

“I’ll say affection when he starts seeing a guy from a family of lesser nobility or even a commoner. Balder Fjörgynnson after very publicly hooking up with Tony Stark? No… Enough of that. We will need to contact the court, to keep up appearances… setting up meetings for negotiations…”

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Sometimes it was shocking how easy it was to get away. Yes, Loki was an adult and he could do what he wanted, there was no actual need ask for anyone’s permission if he wanted to leave for a day or over the weekend. As long as he had no other obligations. That wasn’t the case today. Tomorrow evening he had to attend a fundraiser but that was all. Until then nobody would bother if he spent the day in Éljúðnir with Balder.

Okay, that wasn’t true. Frigga did bother. She seemed overjoyed in fact. At this moment there seemed to be nothing that Loki could do wrong in her eyes. First he had taken her advice to talk to Helblindi instead of relying on Tony Stark and he wanted to get away with Balder for a day. Since she had been pushing for this relationship the entire time. In the back of his mind a voice told Loki that he should stay and work on their plan, but it was clear that he had to take the slow route here. Attracting attention by wanting too much too quickly was the last thing Loki should do.

So, Loki had mentioned to his mother that Balder and him were heading for Éljúðnir and she had almost pushed him out of the door, smiling, telling him to enjoy himself. He was always working too much.

The air in Éljúðnir was still indeed warmer than in Valhalla, but there wasn’t much sunlight left when they arrived there. Enough for a little walk through the old center and then to have in one of the smallest but cutest cafés that Loki had ever seen. Again, his security detail wasn’t excited. At least he gave them enough space, lingering around the door.

The waitress seemed a little bit distracted when she approached their table, only partly looking at...
them. “What can I get you, boys?”

“A flat white for me please.”

She absently nodded, friendly enough and noted the order. “For you?”

Loki ordered a cappuccino and when the waitress locked up from her writing and met his eyes, he could see the recognition setting in. She reacted the way he appreciated most. Just the slightest hesitation and then she nodded. “Gladly… your highness.”

No mumbling or shifting around, just doing her job and acknowledging his title.

“I think you should get out of Valhalla more often. You seem far more relaxed…”

Loki smiled at Balder’s comment, eventually shaking his head. “That has less to do with getting out of Valhalla and more with a little bit of relaxation in the Jotun situation. Am I easier to deal with now?”

Balder shrugged before he smiled back. “No, but you are a lot calmer. Believe me, it shows. I like it.”

Yes, Loki couldn’t deny that he also did feel better. It was such a nice contrast to constantly feel like he had to be in three places at once. Right now he could just sit here, not worry about Helblindi unleashing complete chaos in Jotunheim.

“You’re right though, it was a good idea to get out.”

They spend about two hours over coffee before heading to the penthouse. Loki hadn’t been there in over two years, but like all the estates of the royal family it was in perfect condition. Also, the bar was stocked, which was always the most important thing. They settled on the couch with two glasses of wine.

First wine, then kisses and Loki was determined to make up for the last time which clearly couldn’t have been that amazing for both of them. Loki’s fault. For being distracted. The first time hadn’t been like that, so Loki could get things back on the right track. His hands slipped beneath Balder’s sweater and Loki enjoyed the sound of the little gasp. He was pushed back and pulled closer at the same time, Balder’s arm snaking around his hips and their kiss deepening.

Loki’s heart was beating a bit too fast, his head feeling a little too light and that could just be right. Until they were interrupted. Not the first time and definitely not the last time. A sigh was uttered against his mouth and Loki swallowed it with a new kiss, but that didn’t stop his phone from ringing.

“It’s important, isn’t it?” Balder mumbled and Loki pulled back, because there was no point in ignoring a call at this time. They would keep trying and if he didn’t answer, security would be alerted. No, that wouldn’t be fun. “Sorry…”

Standing up Loki reached for his phone and answered Leah’s call. “I hope it’s important.”

“I am sorry to disturb you, your highness, but the trúa doesn’t allow any delay.”

Loki winced and a cold shower was running down his spine. “What happened?”

So Leah told him and Loki responded by ensuring that he would come back to Valhalla instantly. As soon as he hung up Balder was next to him. “What’s wrong?”
Closing his eyes Loki rubbed his thumb over the bride of his nose. “Doctor Jørgensen had a heart attack this afternoon. He died…”

“I am sorry… That means we’re leaving?”

“Yes, I have to… pay my last respects…” Loki mumbled absently, he would have to write an epitaph, it was tradition. Figure out what to say about the death of the man who had brought him into this world and who had played an important part in his childhood. His mind was wiped clean, Loki didn’t even know how he was feeling right now.

He appreciated Balder’s embrace, but it didn’t help.
“I can’t help it. It just feels inappropriate.” Jane smoothed down the fabric of her dress, checking her appearance in the mirror. It wasn’t like white didn’t suit her, but she associated the colour with something else entirely. Especially lately. Different cultures, different traditions, but this seemed just weird.

A hand was put on her shoulder and Frigga smiled at her through the mirror. Not as brightly as usual, but the softness in it couldn’t be missed. “Everybody will be dressed white. It’s the colour of mourning. I know you are used to black. You don’t have to feel strange about this.”

“Why white though? I know there are some cultures that prefer white over black, but… even without the culture background… black looks more… sad. What are Asgardian brides wearing if white is the colour of mourning?”

“Whatever colour they prefer. It’s the cut of the dress that’s important, not the colour. We don’t consider white to be pure or innocent. It’s blank, empty. Nothingness. Something is gone.”

Jane slowly nodded, she had never seen it that way, but she could see where that idea was coming from. To be honest, she was terrified. Even more so than before the fancy dinner. This was a funeral, Jane had no idea what might be considered inappropriate and she might end up doing something wrong. “I’ve already talked to Thor, but… is there something I should know? Like… something everybody is supposed to do at some point?”

“Funerals are a very quiet affair. Not many words are said, hardly anything. You don’t have any reason to be worried. The celebrations will be held in a week.”

“Celebrations?”

“Funerals are for mourning someone’s loss. The celebrations for celebrating someone’s life. Today we’re mourning which is a silent process. It’s emotional, not following a strict schedule. Don’t be nervous, Jane.” Frigga squeezed her shoulder before turning away and Jane was once more facing her reflection, still feeling awkward about the white colour. Probably something she just had to get used to. Like many other things. Difficult but not impossible.

After Frigga declared that she was ready Jane could finally join Thor in the salon. As much as she appreciated Frigga’s company, she didn’t have a calming effect on her like Thor had. With him close Jane always felt like nothing could go wrong.

Her boyfriend was indeed waiting for her, sitting on one of the couches, a cup of tea in his hand. Jane instantly thought that he looked like he was going to a theme party, not a funeral. There was no denying he looked good though. Another inappropriate thought. When Thor spotted her, he started
to smile and got up from the couch to greet her. Yes, Jane was already feeling better. More secure.

“Hey…” His greeting was a light kiss, merely brushing their lips over each other. “That dress looks very nice.”

A somewhat awkward thing to say, but Jane liked the fact that he was always trying to make her a compliment. “Thank you…”

“A pity that you have to wear it to a funeral.”

“So you can wear white to other… happier occasions?”

“Of course. You can wear black everywhere too, can’t you?”

Jane blushed, her question suddenly seemed ridiculous. “Right… This is still very strange for me. A funeral during the night… everyone wearing white. Don’t leave my sight for a second, I am so scared of doing something wrong.”

Hearing that Thor continued to smile in the softest way. “It’s sweet that you get so concerned about things that would never even occur to me. There is no reason to be scared. We are honoring a good man and mourning his loss. The priest will hold the ceremony, there is nothing you can do wrong, because there is not much to do. Don’t worry.”

Probably to emphasize his point Thor kissed her on the cheek and Jane took a little breath, deciding to just go with it. Frigga and Thor had confirmed that it was okay to be okay. A funeral, Jane really didn’t have the right to constantly think about how it made her feel when she had only met the deceased once. “When are we going to leave?”

“A couple of minutes. Father and Loki have already left.”

Jane knew that the members of the royal family never drove in a car together and it made perfectly sense for security reasons, but she thought it was a pity.

She couldn’t help but notice that the car they got in was indeed black and not white. Another silly thought, because people all the time drove to funerals in their cars which happened to have all sorts of colours.

“You’ve been as close to the doctor as Loki?” Jane entwined her fingers with Thor’s, wanting to better understand the relationships in the family. It surprised her when Thor shook his head. “Not at all, he wasn’t my doctor. Just Loki’s. He was born a month too soon and the obstetrician of the royal family wasn’t at the hospital. Dr. Jørgensen was there and mother claimed that he knew exactly how to make her feel at ease and to reassure her. She liked him so much and was so grateful that she wanted him to become Loki’s doctor. Good decision, Loki adored him. I guess he must have been the only child in the whole world who enjoyed going to his check-ups. The doctor also clearly loved him. He wasn’t so fond of me though.”

That was something Jane couldn’t even imagine. Thor was such a kind man and she could perfectly imagine him as a child. A bit of a hot head, a typical boy who would spend an entire day on his bike or in the garden, playing football. Except that football wasn’t a thing in Asgard. “How so?”

“I didn’t have much to do with him, I barely even saw him. Why should I? He was Loki’s doctor. There was an incident when Loki was four. He was a little shit. Completely unafraid and totally keen on causing trouble.”

“Like putting a snake in your bed?”
“Yeah, exactly. Right up his alley.” Thor’s laugh was soft and full of affection. “I don’t actually
know anymore what he did. Something to get on my nerves. Could have been something as simple
as hiding my toys or eating my candy. I forgot. I wanted to get back at him for something. He was
four years old and he was already trying all the time to prove himself. He was quite small as a child,
you know. Kind of weird when you look at him now.”

Jane didn’t say anything but nodded. Looking at Loki today Jane couldn’t even imagining him being
a child. Especially since he was so tall and lean.

“He wasn’t old enough to actually care about his height, but he did care when it kept him from things
that I already could do. I wanted to piss him off, so I grabbed one his favourite cuddle toy and
climbed up the climbing frame we had in the garden. Then I just sat up there and mocked him. It
took two seconds until he tried to get up there too and I knew he wouldn’t able to do it, because he
was still too small. He tried and got further than I thought he would, but he fell down and broke his
collarbone.”

“Oh no.” Jane screwed her face up and Thor sighed. It was easy to tell that he was still feeling guilty
about this. “Yeah… I guess that was the first time in my life that I ever got in serious trouble.”

“Okay, but you didn’t want him to get hurt. How old were you? 7? 8? Not really old enough to
judge the danger. Loki turned out fine, right?” Jane almost had to smile at the fact that she wanted to
make Thor feel better about something that happened over 20 years ago.

“Yes, it healed just fine, but the doctor was furious with me. I was a little freaked out. Loki was
crying so much and screaming. The medical stuff that is always at the palace took care of him and I
stuck around, I didn’t want to leave him alone. They called for Doctor Jørgensen. When he arrived
he checked on Loki, as sweet and caring as always and then he went crazy on me. When you are
literally a little prince you are used to people being hard on you. That was very important to our
father. Not a second we should believe that things were going to be easy for us. Teachers and
nannies were very strict. Nevertheless they were kind… I never got yelled at. Until that day. Doctor
Jørgensen came in, took care of Loki and then he yelled at me. I don’t really remember what he
actually said, but… he was scaring me. I think by the end I was crying myself… because I was afraid
of it and because I thought I had seriously hurt Loki. Why else should he be so angry? My nanny
eventually pulled my away. I was completely worked up, scared and I wanted to talk to Loki. Then
my mother joined us and I fled to her, I guess I wanted her to comfort me, but she seemed so angry.
She pushed me away and went to check on Loki. When she knew that he was okay, she… I don’t
want what word to use. I could tell that she was angry, furious. But she didn’t yell at me, she was
cold. Told the nanny to bring me to my room. I had to stay there till the night, I don’t think I stopped
crying. Eventually father came looking after me and he managed to calm me down. Told me that
Loki was fine and that I could see him. That it wasn’t my fault that he fell. I got to go to Loki’s room.
He was all smiles, not angry at me at all. Father let me sleep in Loki’s room that night.”

When Thor was finished with telling this story he wasn’t looking at Jane, but out the window. Jane
was an only child, she had never had these kind of experiences. Yet it was easy to tell that this event
still managed to shake him up. “He shouldn’t have done that, you too were just a child.”

“Yes, I know… I am sure he felt bad about it later on. He loved Loki, that was so easy to tell. He
didn’t have actually to do anything with me. Still… I think you never forget the first time you’re
really afraid of another person. It didn’t last, whenever I saw him later on, he was the same nice and
sweet man as usual. I still haven’t forgotten about it, so I guess… it left quite an impression on me. It
wasn’t just him but also the fact that… Nevermind.” With his free hand Tony made a dismissive
gesture and shook his head. “It’s not important.”
It obviously was and although Thor had always been sweet and open with her, Jane couldn’t remember that he had ever told her something that he had moved him emotionally. Not like this.

“No, go on. I’d like to hear it.”

Thor put on a smile, clearing shutting this conversation down. “Maybe some other time…”

Jane was tempted to push, but she decided against it. This didn’t feel like the right moment. They spent most of the rest of the drive in silence.

Eventually the car came to a halt and Thor got out first before helping Jane out of the car. The security details were all around, Jane could easily make them out although her eyes hadn’t yet adjusted to the darkness. Luckily Thor grabbed her hand and Jane felt like somebody had wiped her mind. Had she asked any questions before they had got here? “Uhm… where are we exactly?”

“Gjallarbrú.” From Thor’s lips that word sounded beautiful. “It’s the place where the soul is allowed to pass to the afterlife.”

Not exactly the explanation Jane had hoped for, but she figured that this had to be so normal and so obvious to Thor that he didn’t think about explaining it. He was holding her hand and that told her that it was all going to be fine.

Looking around Jane saw that right behind them was a large, beautiful fence and a gate they had probably just passed through. Into a park? Judging by the outlines of trees everywhere around them Jane decided that she would go with a park.

“Loki…”

Hearing Thor greeting his brother Jane turned around and spotted Loki and Balder coming over. To her Loki looked like death all in white, his black hair a way too sharp contrast. Maybe that was the point in dressing in white. A faint smile was tugging his lips and he was giving Thor a short hug. “Thank you for coming… Hello Jane.”

He kissed her on the cheek and thanked her again, she would have definitely had more enjoyable things to do tonight.

“Don’t even mention it.”

Thor had been right, the funeral was quiet affair. Almost an hour passed in silence. Completely reassuring and comforting silence. Nothing Jane had ever read about compared to an Asgardian funeral. At some point Jane had to ask Thor who was actually organizing this process, but that question only occurred to her later on.

The first part was a procession. A succession of people moving through the darkness of park, cast away by the torches they were carrying. They kept walking for quite some time, perhaps 20 minutes until they reached a clearing.

A funeral pyre had been set up and for a minute Jane thought that the burning was going to be symbolical. That wasn’t the case. It was indeed the doctor’s body wrapped up in white linens. A body turning to fire and then to smoke. By the end Jane thought that all of it was completely surreal.

It was shortly before midnight when they got back to the palace. To be honest Jane was tired and just wanted to go to bed. Nonetheless they ended up in the salon with Loki and Balder to have a cup of tea. Maybe this was another tradition, Jane didn’t want to ask, so she simply sat down next to Thor. Loki and Balder were on the couch opposite of them and Thor’s bother continued his unusual habit of being perfectly quiet. He had a cup in his hands, but she hadn’t seen him drink from it. Somehow
he reminded Jane of Thor from three hours ago, in the car. When he hadn’t looked at her. Loki was doing the same, staring into nowhere. Obviously she wasn’t the only one who noticed. Balder was the perfect image of a worried boyfriend, his hand absently stroking over Loki’s hair. “You want to go to bed? You don’t seem to be too fond of company tonight.”

That caused Loki to look up and for the first time ever Jane got to see him sheepish. It would have been cute if they hadn’t come from a funeral. “I am sorry… I just thought about that I would have had an appointment with Doctor Jørgensen next week. Mother already talked about getting me a new doctor…”

“That’s nothing you have to decide immediately.” Thor pointed out and Loki nodded. “I know… I already have someone in mind and she is not going to like that… You know what? I’d actually like going to bed, I’m beat. You guys don’t mind, do you?”

Jane was quick to respond. “No, of course not. Good night.”

“Good night.” Loki offered them a little smile before he and Balder slipped out of the room.

Sighing softly Jane stretched out her feet and rested her head on Thor’s head. “Do you mind if go to bed too? I’m terribly tired…”

“Sure… I don’t mind.”

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Loki couldn’t pretend that he had trouble falling asleep. He had difficulties staying asleep. It was half past five when he woke up for the third time and Loki eventually gave up. Next to him Balder was still sound asleep and Loki slid out of bed extremely carefully not to wake him. Yesterday Balder had been nothing but sweet and supportive, so he deserved some sleep.

It was still early but a good time to start the day, so Loki took a shower and then sat down in front of his laptop to check his emails. He was doing a terrible job at concentrating though. His thoughts drifted back to his last meeting with Doctor Jørgensen and then back even further. The way the doctor had always ruffled his hair and the ever present smile. So fond and sweet.

Sighing softly Loki rubbed the bridge of his nose and shook his head. Yes, he was sad and he was mourning, but Doctor Jørgensen had been an old man. His death had been quick at the end of a long life. Without suffering or deteriorating health. Now he was gone and Loki would be a liar if he pretended that the doctor had played an important role during the last 10 years of his life.

A childhood hero, a man he had deeply admired and loved as a kid. It was strange to think that he wasn’t there anymore. That Loki wouldn’t see him whenever he was going to go to a check-up.

Nonetheless Loki had things to do, life went on. So he went through his emails and every 30 seconds he still thought Doctor Jørgensen telling him how special he was. How Loki had believed that when the doctor had said that.

Finally a mail was able to capture Loki’s entire attention. Not in a good way though. There was no denying that his heart skipped a beat. First his phone number and now his email. Where did this guy get his information from? Loki could already imagine what he written into this little message. Urging him on to fulfil his part of the deal and Loki knew that he had to do his part, but today he couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Releasing a long and, to his embarrassment, shaky breath Loki opened the email. It was short. Not a surprise. The words though didn’t make much sense. Which meant that they were anything but what
Loki had expected.

None of us come into this world alone. It’s important we honour those who help us being born. When they are taken from us, it reminds us of our own mortality.

You have my sympathy

Loki stared at the screen for half a minute. Of course Helblindi would know, there had been news coverage, but why should he even spend a single second thinking about it? Or even express his condolences. It so obviously had to be part of some scheme. They had already made clear that they didn’t trust each other. Why shouldn’t Helblindi try to present himself in a better light? Or he was just being a nice person? Loki didn’t doubt that he could be… the people didn’t just love him for telling them what they wanted to hear.

So what now? Was he supposed to write back? Ignore the message and mention it the next time they spoke to each other personally? Was this just Helblindi’s way of trying to get into permanent contact? To make sure Loki didn’t forget what he was supposed to be doing? Leaning back in his chair Loki took an intense look at the ceiling, sadly enough the answer wasn’t written there.

Loki was very familiar with frustration, but Helblindi was a special case. Was there something that Loki hated more than being unable to figure somebody out?

There was no way Helblindi had sent this message without a reason. Or was Loki being cynical?

It’s important we honour those who help us being born.

Helblindi’s mother had died a couple of years ago, so these words definitely meant something to him. They hit close to home. Would he be able to use them as a scheme? Loki had no idea. He might.

No, Loki didn’t want to be this cynical.

Putting his fingers on the keyboards Loki tried to come up with an answer. It should be fairly easy. Thank you. Be done with it. Loki had no idea how to even greet him. Helblindi hadn’t used a greeting. Which was kind of weird. Was that supposed to tell him something? Or was he overanalysing every single letter in this mail. Granted, Loki wouldn’t even think about it for a second if somebody else would have sent it.

“This is ridiculous…”

Another sigh and then Loki started typing. One word that he instantly deleted again. Hello was the worst way to start any conversation. He could address him by his title, Loki always did that in person. So why not?

My Lord Helblindi

Yes, why not. Loki seriously doubted that he would find a better way to start the mail. Short and simple, to the point. Nothing else.

Thank you for your kind words

Loki stopped and looked at his work. Didn’t look too bad.

Please stop writing my emails because they tend to terribly confuse me

Groaning at his own stupidity Loki deleted that line and wrote his name at the end. Should be more
than enough, right? It didn’t feel like it.

No, he wasn’t going to lose another second over this email. In a complete knee-jerk reaction Loki hit the send button and then was done with this. Utterly embarrassing. Despite having at least another five emails left to read Loki closed the laptop and sneaked back into the bedroom. Balder was now lying in the middle of the bed, his face partly buried in Loki’s cushion. Loki got his running gear out of the cupboard and tried to be as quick as possible. Yeah, he had already taken a shower, he should have thought of that first, but he hadn’t planned on going for a run when he had woken up.

That had been before that fucking email.

The park would do, no need to call a security detail for that. A few rounds, to catch some fresh air and clear his head. Loki hoped that he would get to spend half an hour completely alone. That was one of the aspect he enjoyed most about sports. He got his wish for the first three rounds through the park. The forth one was interrupted by his mother, standing the middle of the path. She liked to do that, getting him here when he was alone and had no immediate to excuse getting away. Not that he wanted to do that often.

Slowing down Loki offered her a smile. “Good morning, mother.”

“Good morning, sweetheart.” Her eyes might have been even kinder than usual with just a hint of worry. Frigga was touching his arm and then kissed him on the cheek. “How are you feeling?”

It was so like her to worry about him after the funeral. Loki shrugged and continued to smile at the same time. He would have liked to start this day in another way. “I am fine. A bit… not really sad, but more nostalgic. I am going to miss him, but I feel strange since… I haven’t seen him many times during the last years.”

Smiling Frigga linked their arms which probably meant that his run was over. “It would make him so happy to know that you will miss him. He loved you dearly, Loki. Ever since you were born. I could see it when he gave you to me. I don’t know how but you immediately put a spell on that man. Even as a new-born. It’s sad to lose a good friend.”

Loki couldn’t deny a warm feeling in his chest, but he merely nodded, not knowing what to say. That didn’t matter, Frigga went on talking anyway. “Have you taken a look at the news yet?”

Oh no…

“I haven’t had the time yet. Something I should know?”

“Just gossip. Photographs of you and Balder.”

Immediately Loki went through all the moments Balder and him could have been photographed and if any of it could cause trouble. He couldn’t think of anything. “And?”

Frigga’s smile couldn’t be brighter. “You look adorable together.”

When was he finally going to be old enough so his mother wouldn’t make him blush anymore?

“Unfortunately a magazine decided to do a double feature on you and Thor. Comparing Jane and Balder. They weren’t very kind to the poor girl, I’ve already sent Valkyrie to talk to her.”

The press usually was very kind on the royal family when it came down to their private life. Unfortunately they were far away from considering Jane part of this family. “Things I am not going to read then.”
“A wise decision… Anyway that’s not the reason why I wanted to talk to you. I was able to schedule an appointment for this afternoon with an excellent physician from Valhalla’s finest private clinic. You should talk to him and find out if you are feeling comfortable with him.”

Inwardly Loki sighed. “Not today, mother, I am sorry.”

“I know it is strange to talk about this so quickly, but your health is a too important matter to…”

“I thank you for the effort, but I actually already have someone in mind. I’ll make that decision myself.”

His mother stopped walking and Loki could see how displeased she was. It could be the first time he was not taking her advice? That had to be hard to accept for a mother. “Of course… if that’s what you want. I only wanted you to be in the best hands possible.”

“I know that and I appreciate it.” Loki kissed his mother on the cheek and then pulled away from her grip. “I have to finish my run. Will you join Balder and me for breakfast?”

So easy to bring the smile back to her lips.
Hello everybody,

Now that took a while, but it's a very long chapter, so there's that :)

Have fun :D

His run was done for day which wasn’t to Loki’s liking, but how was he supposed to tell his mother to leave him alone, so he could continue exhaust himself in the cold morning air? In the back of his mind Loki had this suspicion that she just maintaining conversation with him to stop him from running, because she thought he was doing too much sport. Loki didn’t share that opinion. Then again, it was quite nice to stroll down the path, next to his mother, conversing about trivial things of non-importance.

Eventually Frigga returned into the palace and Loki didn’t feel any inclination to continue his run. Instead he sat down on one of the benches, looking up into the sky as if waiting for the first snow. It was about time.

The soft vibrations against his leg made Loki aware of his phone. This early that could only mean bad news. He felt partially right when he saw Stark’s name on the display. Sometimes Loki wondered if that man was excessively bored. Could easily be the case if all that money and influence. In Loki’s opinion most democracies were just monarchies in disguise. A man that inherited a huge, international company from his father and millions with it, born in a closed system of wealth and connections. None of these people would ever visit a public school or do their own groceries. Don’t ask them the price of one carton of milk. Not that much of difference to actual nobility. The political power of the lords was real, legal, confirmed by the law. Stark’s was just as real, but he shouldn’t have it. It didn’t come from the law or his status but from money.

Loki was sure that Stark was bored. What better way to pass time than to annoy a prince who clearly had better things to do. Nonetheless Loki picked up the phone. “Do you ever sleep?”

“I consider it a sometimes pleasant waste of time. How about you?”

“Best time of the day. Allows me to shut down.”

“Is it a good or a bad morning then?”

“Mixed bag. Is it a good or a bad night for you if you’re calling me?”

“The jury is still out on that.”

Stark didn’t sound tired, but Tony doubted that he had normal sleeping hours. Not with that reputation of his. “What can I do for you, Mr. Stark?”

“Oh come on, that question is just asking me for making a comment that you can get upset over. Is that your intention?
“I was asking a completely normal question. You are always imagining implications.”

“Oh, you love it.”

“I’ll try to rephrase my question. Why are you calling me?”

He imagined Stark sitting by his desk, his feet on the table top, comfortably hanging out. “I told you I was going to keep an eye on Asgard. Not so easy though if you don’t speak Old Norse. You guys don’t get a lot of coverage here.”

“Thank god for that.”


Loki couldn’t deny a spark of appreciation inside of his chest. Granted, Stark was attentive, most people wouldn’t have noticed something like that. “Deities are not a concept in the trúa, you are right about that. English is not my first language, it’s a figure of speech to use. Citing the trúa in English would be a chore. I prefer the term agnostic by the way.”

In response Stark made an undefinable sound. “Okay, so who would you actually thank? If your religion isn’t a fan of old dudes with long, white beards who create the world in seven days. Santa Clause? The spaghetti monster?”

Loki really should have lectured him on not disrespecting the trúa, but what would be the point? Christians, believers or not, disrespected their own religion so often, how could you expect them not to make fun of another that seemed so alien to them. “My ancestors, the creators and keepers of my soul. You can’t look ahead if you don’t look back before to know where you came from. What you are and who made you.”

“Does that mean you pray to your grandparents?” Stark sounded a bit disbelieving and Loki thought it was funny enough. “Yes and to their grandparents. Every problem I could ever be facing, one of them has already faced it and probably overcome it. We write them letters, telling them how we feel, asking for inspiration and advice and we honour them.”

This was insane. Loki couldn’t possibly be explaining the trúa to Tony Stark, the merchant of death. Genius, playboy and philanthropist. Definitely not a devote Christian.

“Oh… so what if you are the spawn of a family of serial killers? The child from the guys in Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Are you still supposed to honour them?”

“Wait a second. Are we having a theological debate here?”

“I’m trying to understand, but you gotta help me out. What if your family is a bunch of scumbags? You’re still praying for their approval?”

Why did Loki have the feeling that this was coming from a personal place? None of business probably. “There is no family in the world that only consists of scumbags, I am sure you will find one decent person. You honour those who gave life. All of them have their flaws, but you wouldn’t exist without them. You can be selective in your prayers. Let’s say your father is murderer, you may be grateful for him giving you your life, but that’s it. You don’t owe him anything beyond that. Or you try to remember good and decent things about him and let those be the things that inspire you. We honour our ancestors, because it’s important to know where we come from. The good and the bad. The good to take as inspiration to aspire to, the bad to learn from and to stay away. You know you can get the texts of the trúa on amazon. That would be a lot easier and more informative, I am
not a priest, nor a religious scholar.”

“Now it’s me who says thank god. Or are your priests allowed to fool around?”

Loki laughed, he should have seen that coming. “Celibacy? No, we leave that to the Catholics…
Taking care of the temples and overseeing the rituals is sacred but very hard work. The ones who do it
deserve to have experience all the pleasures in life.”

Stark hummed in approval before turning surprisingly serious. “Since we’re already talking about
religion… I read in the news that you were at a funeral yesterday. Sorry for your loss.”

Had Stark made it his mission to surprise him today? “Thank you… He was a friend. He will be missed.”

“I hate funerals. They should be a time of honesty and raw emotion, yet people never lie as much as
at a funeral. Most probably because you are not supposed to talk bad about the dead and you’re still
supposed to make a little speech. Suddenly everybody is being turned into a saint after they bit the
dust.”

“I don’t believe that this has anything to do with funerals but rather with the crowd you frequent.”
Loki pointed out, still a bit amazed that they were talking about this. That Stark was able to talk
about this. To him.

“Guess that’s true…” Stark agreed with him, but suddenly changing topic. “So how is your
revolution going?”

Of course, he couldn’t help himself. “As always I have no idea what you are talking about, Mr.
Stark.”

As expected Stark didn’t seem overly upset. “Pity. Well, it was a pleasure talking to you. As always.
But I gotta go now, catch some Z’s. Hear from you soon.”

“One more thing, Mr. Stark. What is the point of these little conversations? Are you trying to get into
my pants? Fishing for information for your business? Or do you just have a really weird way of
trying to make friends?”

Stark laughed and it sounded honestly amused. “How about all three of them? Good night, your
highness.”

“It’s early morning here.”

“Perfect time to go to sleep.”

“Bye Stark.”

A weird way to start the day but Loki had had worse. After putting his phone away Loki slowly
walked back to the palace. Back in his rooms he found Balder, now awake, just finishing getting
dressed. “Hey, I was about to go looking for you.”

“No need to look I was taking a run. Or I was trying to, my mother interrupted me and now we’re
going to have breakfast together. Is that alright?”

Balder smiled, nodding. “Sure. I would love that.”

“Good, I’m going to take a shower.” Walking past Balder Loki pressed a quick kiss to his lips.
Perhaps it wasn’t going to be a bad day after all.

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“Sorry for being late, a car was blocking the road and my tram couldn’t get by. Thanks for waiting.” Edda apologized by kissing Steve on the cheek and he waved it off. “Don’t worry. I waited like three minutes. Also my friend called, he’s going to be late.”

“Okay, then I’m not the only one. Come on, it’s getting cold out here.”

The little café they entered was comfy and quite charming. It was definitely easier to find nice places when you were out with someone who had been living in this city than just a couple of weeks. Right now Steve appreciated most about this place that it was warm. Just a few minutes outside and he felt like his nose was falling off. Not so different from winter in New York. Edda was taking off her heavy coat as she slid onto the bench. “So you need to tell me about your trip to Jotunheim. I wouldn’t have gone there for a king’s ransom. Not at this time.”

“Yeah, heard that one before. It was nice. It’s definitely a beautiful place and for most of the time we didn’t notice anything about the… tense political climate.”

“Most of the time, right. You ran into some protests?”

For a second Steve thought her interest to be weird, but then it made sense. This was her home, of course she would want to know. “No actual protest, but a bit of public disobedience I guess?”

Steve summed up what had happened during their trip to Jotunheim, including their early return to Valhalla. Edda was listening interestingly, nodding every now and then to let Steve know that she was attentive. When he was down she huffed and pulled a face. “It’s such an ugly issue…They’re just hurting themselves like this. You could have been real tourists. That’s really great for your image.”

“I’m so curious… as an Asgardian what do you think of this entire situation? I know there’s a lot of news coverage, but that’s always something different, isn’t it?”

“Politics, really?” Edda smiled and then shrugged again. “Honestly I’m not the best person to ask. I was born in Valhalla and I’ve never lived anywhere else. I’ve never met a Jotun in my entire life.”

“What? Really?” Steve couldn’t help but be surprised and was met by a teasing smile. “What? Have you met a person from a very single state?”

Okay, she got him there. “Maybe, but I don’t know… Okay, I guess it’s totally possible that you have never met someone from Jotunheim. You still gotta have an opinion on it, right? I’m really curious…”

Sure, Steve always tried to make up his own mind, he read the newspapers, but he was never really sure what the general public was really thinking. When did you ever hear a person on the street discuss this kind of topic? Maybe there was a Jotun interview on TV and that was almost impossible for Steve to grab because of the language barrier. He was getting better, but there was still a far way to go.

Leaning back Edda put a strange look on her face, lost in thought from one second to another. She was tapping her forefinger against her cheek, pursing her lips. “I guess I get where many of them are coming from. I wouldn’t like it either if not a single street sign was written in my own language. I get it, but then I see those Jotun nationalists on talkshows and at debates and my stomach turns when I hear them talk.”
Now Steve was getting even more interested. Finally another opinion on this. Somebody with more insight than him. “Why that?”

“Last week I was zapping through channels and I stopped at this discussion and there was some kind of professor, I don’t know. He was Jotun and so unpleasant. There was no compromising with him. All he said was – the Language Act has to go and he wants Jǫtnar to be the only language to be used publicly. Which is completely insane.”

“How so?”

“Jotunheim is still part of Asgard. You can’t just… Okay, there are cities in the US with huge Latino communities, right? Or Italian, what do I know? It wouldn’t be okay if a city suddenly decided that the only language in this neighbourhood was going to be Spanish. Like all the signs, the administration, everything. You can’t do that, there are still a lot of people around who aren’t fluent in Spanish. Jotunheim is a very wealthy region. It has always been, the gold and the oil mines. Also it’s beautiful place, the mountains are perfect for skiing. There has always been a lot of tourism and a lot of jobs. They are more than just a few people in Jotunheim who aren’t Jotuns and who don’t speak Jǫtnar. So you can’t just say, hey, we only want our own language. I get it, right now you can’t find a word of Jǫtnar anywhere, but guys like that professor want the other extreme. Which is stupid. Not everybody who lives in Jotunheim is actually Jotun…”

“Okay, but that’s just one guy’s opinion. That’s not the official policy, right?”

Another shrug. “Who knows for sure? We don’t have too much insight on that. The Ymirsons want the Language Act gone, that’s no secret. They’ve wanted it for years. Centuries and the rest of the population does too. But they have a long list and we have no idea what they’re talking about in secret negotiations with the crown. Nobility, they’re all weird. They look at things differently than the rest of us and they’re probably already having new negotiations and… Enough of that. Let’s talk about something else. I know I started the Jotunheim thing, but that’s on the news everyday anyway. How’s your language training going?”

There was that amused smile on her lips, because she knew perfectly well that Steve was having a hard time with keeping all that new vocabulary in his head. Too many words and sounds that weren’t made for American tongues. Even less so for a tongue with a thick Brooklyn accent. “I’m trying, but I feel like every new word I am learning is replacing another one. Which is deeply frustrating.”

“It’s going to get better, believe me. You need to go out more, talk to people… or maybe I’ll just stop talking English.” She winked at him and Steve chuckled. “Then this would be a very one-sided conversation.”

“True enough… Is the waiter going to ignore us forever? You have to try the cake I’ve told you about. It’s delicious.”

Steve couldn’t emphasize enough how enjoyable it was to spend some time with a person who had nothing to do with his job and who was also completely upbeat. Edda had that cheerfulness about her that Steve deeply appreciated, but which he didn’t have himself. He also was pretty sure that it wouldn’t suit him. Peggy had called him out on that, telling him that he was too matter of fact. Steve didn’t quite think so, he had met people who had no sense of humour and who dragged every conversation down. No, Steve was fairly sure that he wasn’t that kind of person, but he also wasn’t the centre of the party.

Edda was somewhere in between, always in a good mood and a bit of a no bullshit attitude. Steve had clearly been missing out on having someone like that to hang out with.
Finally a waiter joined their table and Edda was taking over, ordering two coffees and two different pieces of cake, both of them she wanted Steve to check out. Wonderful idea, that stuff was delicious. Lots of crème and Steve would have to hit the gym later on, but it would be worth it. By the way who would have thought that pastry was something you could talk so much about? With astounding enthusiasm Edda told him about the cakes that her grandmother had made whenever Edda had visited her. How she had never felt anything that good again since her grandmother had died.

That conversation was cut short thought, because at that moment Steve spotted James entering the café. Even from a distance Steve could see his red cheeks, his mouth was still covered by a scarf to protect him from the cold. Steve asked himself if the wind had started blowing, since James’ hair was mess. Altogether though he looked rather nice.

“My friend has just arrived.”

With a small gesture Steve tried to capture James’ attention and Edda also became aware of him. “That’s James? You could have told me that.”

Before Steve even had the chance to ask what she meant, James had already joined them at their table. “Hey, sorry for being late.”

“Don’t worry, sit down. James, this is Edda. Edda, James.”

With the scarf gone James revealed his perfect white teeth in a charming smile. “Nice to meet you. I actually go by Bucky, not James.”

“It’s a pleasure… can’t say I have another fancy name. It’s just Edda.”

“Like I said, nice to meet you.” James sat down on the bench next to Steve, slowly peeling off the many layers of clothing that were supposed to make the weather bearable. “So you guys are having cake? Great idea, I need some of that too.”

Steve thought this could become one of his favourite ways to pass time. Just hanging out with friends and eat cake. It was a relief to see Edda and James instantly getting along. He smiled at her question how two such nice guys could possibly end up working for the government, something must have gone wrong in their lives. “Lack of opportunities?”

In moments like this Steve couldn’t help himself, even when they weren’t serious, he had to defend their job. “Come on, you enjoy being a DS agent.”

James was currently licking clean his fork and answered with a half-hearted shrug and shouldn’t rub Steve in a wrong way. “Sure, I do… but it’s not something I plan on doing for the rest of my life.”

“Okay, nobody does that. Lots of agents end up in government organisations or something familiar.”

“Yes, I know…” James was now prodding his piece of cake with the fork and Steve thought that he might have made him feel uncomfortable, which clearly hadn’t been his intention. “But I don’t think that’s what I’m going to do. I’ve been contemplating civilian life… not in the next couple of years, but… yeah.”

While Steve didn’t quite know yet what to say, Edda was clearly interested to find out more. “What part of civilian life? Is there another job you’d like to do? Like being a model for hair products?”

That got a laugh out of Steve while James was touching his own hair in confusion. “Uhm… no. Honestly I have no idea. It just would make sense to do something different since I’m playing the
thought of staying here…”

This was definitely too much information that Steve just couldn’t process the right way. “What do you mean? Stay here?”

Edda was jumping to the same conclusions as him, but unlike Steve she wasn’t afraid to voice them. “Staying here as in immigrating? Have fun, our immigration laws are harder than those of Australia.”

James laughed in agreement. “I know, I looked them up.”

This was going way too fast and Steve was still having trouble wrapping his head around it. To him it didn’t make much sense. “Slow down a bit. What are you saying? That you are thinking about emigrating to Asgard?”

The look on James’ face was answer enough, just the slightest bit uncomfortable. “Kind of, yes. Not in the next couple of years though.”

“Let me guess. You’ve met someone here and there is no way they’re going to come to America.” Edda asked the obvious question, in James’ situation love seemed like the only likely reason to leave the US behind. Then again James had never mentioned a girl and in his apartment Steve hadn’t seen any hint. No pictures and definitely no second toothbrush.

Edda’s question evoked a sheepish smile, one that Steve hadn’t seen before and made him believe that she was on to something. “No, I haven’t met anybody. It’s more like… I’ve been here almost two years now and I honestly can’t imagine leaving again… It’s that simple.”

No it wasn’t. By all means. Steve was the first to admit that Asgard had its charms. Lots of it. It was beautiful, calm, a remarkable standard of living and yet… it wasn’t home. It could never be home. “Really? You don’t want to go back home?”

Steve couldn’t help it, his voice was full of irritation and disbelief. Perhaps that wasn’t fair. James didn’t sound like he was defending himself though. “I feel at home here. I have a lot of friends, I like the language, I have a nice place that I’ve put a lot heart into and I like the way people are thinking…”

“You mean not standing the sight of an American?” Edda grinned and James huffed. “No, not that… and you’re doing just fine with two Americans right now. No, I like how straight-forward everything is. No bullshit. No need to put a name on everything or to explain things that are already quite obvious. Or define yourself as something that you don’t even understand.”

The last part definitely startled Steve while Edda just hummed in approval. “I get that. I am not the immigration office, but I’d approve of you. You’d make a fine Asgardian.”

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Putting down the sheet of paper Jane tried to keep her face even. To not let it get to her. Just printed words. Written by someone who had never met her, would probably never meet her. It didn’t mean anything and Jane knew that most people who would read this weren’t going to think too much of it.

“So what… this is just gossip, isn’t it?”

Jane wondered if Valkyrie was even able to smile, she seemed so stern all of the time. Unhappy with pretty much everything, not just with Jane.

“It would be gossip if they were talking about your wardrobe or where you are getting your nails
done. Instead they are talking about the implications of having an American as the potential spouse of the future Asgardian king. You may still call it gossip, but it’s a very important issue for most Asgardians. It’s talking about their worries.”

Jane was trying her best, but she couldn’t find it in her to appreciate Valkyrie. It was the constant coldness that set her off. Frigga had tried to be kind, by having Valkyrie talk to Jane, but the kindness had got lost on the way.

“I’m sorry, but this piece of… journalism is comparing me to Loki’s boyfriend. What has that to do with the worries of the Asgardian people?”

Maybe it was her mouth. Valkyrie was an astonishingly beautiful woman, that couldn’t be denied, but her roughness made it hard to see sometimes. “Miss Foster… I know you come from a very different place, but try to see it this way. All royal spouses to this very day have been Asgardian. The King’s consort has no direct political power, but nonetheless a very influential position. I fear that you are not aware of that.”

“You’ve said it yourself – Thor is going to be king. There is no queen. What is there to worry about if the spouse does not have any political power?”

That look again. Jane could tell that Valkyrie thought she was talking to a little child. “But the king’s consort is sharing a bed with the king. Private time and this is Asgard. The trúa doesn’t allow any misunderstandings there. The person that you are with, your spouse is the person you have to trust most in the entire world. That would be you. You have to see that this is indeed a powerful position. Or if you don’t see it… don’t be surprised that the Asgardian people see it. They don’t know you. You come from a country we’ve had a bad history with. That we’ve concluded a bad deal with just now. Of course they are reluctant…”

Jane refused to say anything, especially now that she could see Valkyrie’s point.

“Admittedly it’s a bad timing that the Duke of Glæsisvellir and his boyfriend got photographed interacting with common folk during their bike trip. The people love these kinds of things… they love Balder Fjörgynnson. He is a known public figure. The son of a Lord and directly related to the king’s wife. It’s such a sharp contrast, but they know they can trust him and more importantly they feel like he can understand them. To them you are an outside being pushed in a position you have no right to be in. We have to change your opinion and I can’t do that without your help.”

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The sun was setting down and the artificial light was starting to hurt his eyes. The pile of files on his desk wasn’t getting smaller despite a long day of work. To be honest, he wouldn’t want it any other way. Some people would claim that being a workaholic was something bad, something that reduced your quality of life.

No, he did disagree. People saying that were either people with shitty jobs or people with no ambition. Or they sucked at their job. Well, he was excelling at it and there was no better way to pass his time.

Unfortunately that didn’t mean that he couldn’t get tired or that the too bright lights were putting a strain on his eyes. Just like the tiny fond in the files. Sometimes it was really annoying to have to accept that the human body had certain limitations.

As if he weren’t aware of that. He was carrying some very painful reminders with him every day.
Enough of that. It was late, time to go home. He deserved a good glass of wine or a cup of tea. Maybe both. He was getting up from his chair when his secretary opened the door and peaked inside his office. “I am sorry, Doctor Strange, but there is somebody who wants to talk to you.”

Stephen couldn’t be bordered. “Then I suggest you tell them to make an appointment like everybody else.”

His secretary opened her mouth, but no words came out and Stephen raised an eyebrow in mild annoyance. “Anything else?”

“I am sorry, I should have said that immediately… it’s the Duke of Glæisvelliir.”
Hello everybody,

Merry Christmas! I hope you guys spend some nice days with your family and friends :)

Here is my little present for you - an update!

Have fun :D

Checking his watch Loki tried not to smile. It was odd to feel amused and annoyed at the very same time. Strange was letting him wait on purpose, to make a point, that was just blatantly obvious. Fair enough, Loki had shown up without an appointment and very late, he couldn’t expect the doctor to drop everything and immediately take care of him.

Well, the average Joe couldn’t expect that. Loki was still a prince.

Yes, waiting was annoying, but Loki could appreciate it that someone wasn’t pretending that him just showing up wasn’t an inconvenience. Intrigue and annoyance at the same time, what a weird mix.

Loki only felt a bit bad for the secretary who was clearly praying for Strange to finally get out of his office to see him. He could see her shifting in her chair, pretending to type on her computer while glancing at Loki every three seconds. She probably downright hated Strange right now for putting her into this situation.

“Your highness, the doctor will see you any second now.”

Loki smiled, feeling pity for her. “I am sure.”

That was a lie and by the end of 15 entire minutes Loki’s intrigue was in severe danger of being overwhelmed by impatience and frustration. It was only then that Strange decided that he had made his point. The door to his office opened again and the doctor finally showed himself. “Your highness.”

Strange respected the etiquette and bowed his head. Ever so slightly, barely noticeable and with a bit of sarcasm. Almost like an Ymirson would do it. Loki wanted to shake his head, absolutely the worst time to think about Helblindi.

“Doctor Strange, thank you for your time. I hope you will be able to excuse the inconvenience.”

“I don’t know about that yet. Please.” Strange made an inviting gesture, but then immediately violated a rule of politeness by entering the office before Loki. The poor secretary was dying a thousand deaths right now. Loki couldn’t deny his displeasure, but for now he wasn’t going to let it show. At least for now.

Inside the office Strange casually offered him a seat and then a glass of scotch. Loki gladly accepted the offer, but arched an eyebrow nonetheless. Alcohol in the office? Was Strange trying to make a
bad impression?

After handing Loki a glass Strange sat down himself and crossed his remarkably long legs. His entire body type wasn’t that different from Loki’s. Tall, lean… skin that was in desperate need of a tan. His hair was too short though. A nice cut, just too short.

“The offer is very tempting, your highness, but I have to refuse.”

Good, so the obnoxious arrogance hadn’t been a show for the lecture. “I’m sorry, I cannot remember making an offer.”

Strange arched an eyebrow in the most condescending way and Loki told himself that he wasn’t going to fall for this. These tries to get rid of him were way too obvious. “You are here in my office. I read the newspapers, your personal physician died very recently. You need a new one. I am a doctor. Thank you for the offer, but I must decline.”

Except that he wasn’t. Loki could easily tell negotiations from a clear refusal. “So you are voluntarily missing out on me flattering you and telling you why I’d even make such an offer?”

“I have tons of students, your highness. All of them are very eager to flatter me. I admit that it would probably mean more coming from you and I do appreciate you coming here, but the results are still the same.”

“May I ask why?” Loki crossed his legs, indicating that he didn’t intent to get up from this chair anytime soon. By the movement of Strange’s eyes Loki could tell that he had noticed. Good.

“I assume you’ve done some research on me?”

“Of course.”

“Then you know I am not a general practitioner but a surgeon. Not actually what you are in need of. Or are there any brain tumours the public doesn’t know about?”

Loki had to swallow a laugh. “Even if… I did my research. You are not a surgeon anymore, but you are still a doctor and you’re right, I do need one. About a year ago I visited the University of Valhalla…”

It was more than just rude to interrupt a prince, but Loki had the feeling that Strange was doing this with everybody. Perhaps he didn’t even notice. “Oh, I remember… The security measures were a nightmare. I had to convince a police officer to let me into my own office. Thank you for that.”

“Glad to be of service. Anyway, what I was trying to say… I attended one of your lectures.”

Finally Loki got something else than completely fake indifference. Strange looked honestly surprised. “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Sometimes I like to keep a low profile. Sometimes a cap is enough to achieve that. Anyway, I went to one of your lectures and you’ve left an impression on me. Granted, medicine or natural sciences aren’t my field, but I can tell when somebody knows what they’re talking about and I admire your resilience and determination to keep working despite the difficult circumstances.”

“As much as I appreciate the flattery, it won’t get you very far, your highness.” Strange was back to being bored and by now Loki wondered how much of it was really just show. It didn’t make Strange especially sympathetic, but Loki wasn’t looking for a friend.
“Fine, I can be more direct if you prefer that. You are right, I am in need of a new doctor. I am offering you a job. Very few hours but highly paid and prestigious.”

Strange nodded softly. “I see, but I’ve never worked in the private sector and I’m not particularly interested in starting now.”

“I doubt that this would interfere with your research or your teaching. Mostly routine check-ups. You would be considered as a member of the Royal Household and your pay check would be most generous.” Loki wasn’t entirely sure what Strange wanted to hear, but judging by his office money couldn’t be the issue. The position on the table was something every doctor in this entire country should be chasing. You couldn’t climb the ladder much higher. Reading about Strange’s career had made it blatantly clear that the man had always been driven by ambition. Even after his accident Strange had continued to make quite a name for himself, Loki didn’t really believe that he was feeling fulfilled working in research and as a teacher. There was no way Strange would ever work again as a surgeon and until now Loki had done a pretty good job at not staring at his hands. It would be pointless anyway, they were covered in elegant black gloves. Loki couldn’t help but wonder what they would look like.

First the accident, then a countless number of surgeries. Scar tissue. Crooked fingers. Red, rough flesh. Such unimportant details and yet Loki was fascinated.

Folding his hands Strange leaned back in his chair. It didn’t look like he would ask Loki immediately to leave. “I am still not particularly interested in the job, but I have to admit that I am intrigued by your reasoning.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Absolutely. I am wondering, given the present mood of the population and your own political agenda, why you would offer such an important position to an American.”

Loki’s answer was plain and simple. “You aren’t American.”

Strange shrugged and he perfectly managed to convey his indifference. “A passport is just a piece of paper. I wasn’t born here and I don’t have a shrine to pray to my ancestors. I am definitely not the Asgardian poster boy.”

Now was a good time for Loki to shrug himself. “You went through the correct and legal process to obtain your citizenship. You are Asgardian. It doesn’t matter which passport you had three years ago.”

“So migration background has nothing to do with this? You don’t happen to pursue some political agenda that you want to make me part of?” Strange’s gaze had something condescending about it. Like he wouldn’t believe Loki anyway if he tried to deny it. “I have my reasons, Doctor Strange, but they are not political.”

“Again, you may care to elaborate.”

Fine, that was only fair. “You have a reputation of not being very good with people. Which is exactly what I am looking for. Also I want an outsider as my new doctor, not someone who has already been working for the court.”

Humming lowly Strange tapped one finger against his cheek. “You just might have started to make this offer interesting.”

“Not exactly my intention. I offered you a very lucrative job, Doctor Strange. You either want it or
you don’t. It’s unusual for a prince to do these things personally and I don’t have a lot of time on my hands. It’s late. I am sure you want to go home and enjoy closing time. So is your answer still the same?”

Chuckling quietly Strange shook his head. “I don’t have all the parts of the big picture yet, your highness. I know that you will never get in this kind of situation, but people usually need a lot more information before they accept or refuse a job offer. Working hours, salary, insurance… do I get a parking lot at the palace?”

Now they were getting somewhere. Casually Loki reached into his bag, pulled out the tablet and handed it to Strange. “It’s a draft of the contract. You of course can suggest alterations anytime.”

“You don’t happen to suffer from a very rare and complex genetic disorder that would be horribly time consuming but also fascinating?”

“I fear not.”

“A pity…”

“Your highness, I feel… honoured, but these kinds of decisions aren’t made within five minutes. Give me the number of your assistant and I will let you know within the next three days.”

Loki would have preferred an instant answer, but he could see that Strange might want some time to think. “Alright, but one more thing that is very important to me. There will be an absolute obligation to confidentiality. You only talk to me. I need to give my permission if you should talk about my health to anybody else. That includes doctors and members of the royal family. You only talk to me.”

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“You really want me to help you with this? Shouldn’t you do this with Loki?”

Thor waved off Balder’s question and held the door open for him. “If there is something that Loki has no idea about, it’s women or romance. After Sigyn he has maybe dated one girl and that didn’t last long. He would be completely out of his depth.”

“Yes and I am the certified expert on engagement rings? I don’t think so.” Balder sat down at the table and Thor joined him.

“I don’t need an expert, I need someone with taste and who doesn’t think that romance is a complete waste of time. I thought looking for engagement rings was… your kind of thing.” Thor was well aware of how weird that sounded, but Balder had been the first person he had thought of. He was the sweet boyfriend who definitely had experience with making presents… maybe even jewellery.

Balder didn’t seem confused nor offended. “My thing? Is that your not very subtle way of telling me that I should propose to your brother?”

“Oh by the love of all of our ancestors, no! You’ve been dating for how long? A month? He would jump out of the window and then instantly come back to kill you.”

Both of them had a laugh about that before Balder turned serious again. “I am happy for you and what you’re planning on doing is really nice. Everybody knows that you are going to marry eventually, so she deserves some spectacle.”

“Yes… for a while it’s all been about language training, the trúa, culture… it’s all very clear where things are heading, but… she deserves a gesture and something that ensures her that for me it still is
all about her. That it is about the two of us."

It wouldn’t be enough to even out the score. Jane was going through so many unpleasant things for him and their marriage wasn’t going to be an easy one. Not with the entire country observing and judging their every move. Despite their many qualities Asgardians could be cruel like everybody else. Yet Thor knew that Jane would win over their hearts like she had done with him. It would take them some time to realise that her American origin didn’t mean anything. Jane had no political ambition whatsoever, their relationship was purely romantic. Everybody would get to see it for what it was and suspicion and bad sentiment would turn into dust and be blown away. Thor was absolutely sure of that.

“She is going to be thrilled.” Balder gave him a perfectly convinced smile, like any other possibility was completely out of the question.

“If I find a good ring. The most amazing ring. That can’t be that hard.”

“Sure and if she doesn’t like it, you guys can just exchange it for another one.”

“That would just be a complete failure. I want her to like the one that I chose for her. That’s the whole point why you are here. Don’t you let me down.” Thor grinned at him when Balder sighed. “The pressure…”

It was then when one of the guards led in Mrs. Grímsson, the jeweller Thor had invited. A woman in her late fifties with rosy cheeks who seemed overjoyed to be here. “Your highness. A pleasure to meet you for this wonderful occasion.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Thor smiled before offering her a seat. Before taking it Mrs. Grímsson took a look at Balder. Her eyes soft and appreciating. “My Lord…”

“Nice to meet you.”

Sitting down the jeweller put her case on the table and to Thor it seemed she was vibrating with excitement. People looking for engagement rings had to be the most fun part of the job and incredibly rare. It wasn’t an Asgardian tradition after all. “May I ask if you are here to help making a choice or are you interested in a ring yourself?”

Thor swallowed down a laugh. At this point Loki would probably get on the next plane and fly to Australia or Tibet if someone even mentioned marriage to him. Their mother would be thrilled though. Probably even more than about Thor’s engagement. Who was Thor kidding? Frigga would definitely be more excited about Balder and Loki than about Jane and him. But that didn’t matter right now, he was supposed to get Jane the most amazing ring right now.

“No, I am just here for support.” Balder pointed out matter-of-factly and Mrs. Grímsson had the decency to not look too disappointed. “Then we should get right to it, shouldn’t we?”

She opened the case and Thor was immediately out of his depth, confronted with all the silver, gold and different stones. “Oh, wow… they are beautiful, but… I just realised that I have no idea what I am actually looking for.”

“That’s perfectly normal, your highness. What kind of jewellery does your partner usually wear? It might give us an idea what she likes?”

Thor thought of Jane and how she dressed, the way she looked on an average day. Jeans, boots, a sweater or a blouse. There was no doubt that she was always pretty, but never in a fancy way. Clothes weren’t all that important to Jane. “She doesn’t… wear any I think.”
Damn it, Thor was such a typical male…

“I’ve seen her wearing silver earrings. So I guess she would prefer silver to gold. If that’s helpful.” Balder suggested and Thor thought that it was funny that he could perfectly remember the scent of Jane’s hair and the awkward way she twisted her wrist when looking at her watch, but he had no idea if she had ever worn earrings. “You see, that’s why you’re here.” Thor patted Balder’s shoulder and the reaction was a slight blush.

“Then let’s take a look at the silver collection.”

Thor had taken the whole afternoon off for this and he was still surprised that it took them over an hour to make a choice. Balder was supportive, but not as helpful as Thor would have hoped, because he wanted Thor to make his own choice. It turned out to be a very delicate, small silver ring with a petit diamond. Thor was confident that Jane was going to like it.

“It’s lovely.” Balder agreed with him, the jewellery was charmed anyway and Thor thought of how Jane’s eyes would light up at the realisation that she was going to get an engagement ring after all. “Yes, I think so too.”

They thanked the jeweller and had one of the guards escort her outside. Thor felt good about his choice and it was finally a step towards making things official. Jane deserved as much, her position should never be put in doubt and this ways his father had to come to terms with their relationship. There would never be the same approval with Loki and Balder, but Thor couldn’t let that bother him. Jane was more important than that and she was going to win everyone over anyway.

“So with the ring in your pocket… when are you going to propose? With a lot of spectacle?” Balder was clearly delighted by this prospect and Thor could easily understand. During the last weeks there had barely been good news, it was nice to talk about something positive.

“To be honest, I am not sure if that is her thing. Dinner and candlelight, sure. I want her to know that it’s just about us. As a couple. That it has nothing to do with the country or the monarchy… whatever. I fear that part of the relationship isn’t getting as much attention as it should.”

Balder nodded in understanding. “It’s funny how you have such different opinions on that.”

“What? Me and Jane?”

“No, you and Loki. For him the monarchy always comes first. He is very clear about that. It’s not a bad thing, this is not me complaining. It’s just… you can’t help but notice it, right?” There was nothing fake about Balder’s smile and Thor believed him when he said that he perfectly understood where Loki was coming from. Their position made that set of mind necessary.

Nonetheless, who wouldn’t want their partner to put them first?

Thor felt the urge to say something in Loki’s defence although Balder hadn’t voiced a real reproach. “Loki is… a real politician. The rarest kind. If he had been born a commoner I am sure he would have ended up in politics anyway. He loves the debate and the cut-throat attitude you have to have. He wants the best for Asgard… and most of the time he thinks that he is the only one who knows what is the best. He and father are horribly similar in that regard.”

“That’s true. By our ancestors that might have been the truest thing ever said.” Balder laughed and shrugged eventually. “I’m still looking for a way to take his mind off these things. If only for a couple hours.”

It’s a stupid thing to do but Thor snorted with laughter. “Good luck. Tell me when you found it.”
“Oh, I will. Now come on, tell me what you have in mind. You only get to propose once and your girlfriend already knows that you are going to propose, so it’d better be good.”

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“Very good, my Lord. Another one.”

His teacher tightened his grip on the sandbag and Helblindi nodded, taking a breath and getting into position again. They were one hour into his training and Helblindi could already feel his body giving up. Last night had been rough, he had barely got any sleep. After getting out of bed he had played the thought of cancelling his training, but that was out of the question. There would be lots of other nights of bad sleep.

Helblindi delivered another kick and he knew his technique was sloppy and there wasn’t much power in it. The look on his teacher’s face said it all and Helblindi forced himself to not come up with some excuse. No, he was just going to do it again till he got it right.

Eight times.

The muscles in his legs were burning, feeling too short and his skin started to itch from the drying sweat. At least his teacher had mercy on him, probably realising that he wouldn’t get anything better from him today. A shame.

Helblindi was rubbing a towel over his face as his teacher was leaving the gym and Byleistr was slipping into the room. His little brother slightly raised an eyebrow at the state that Helblindi was in. “Wow… you look rough.”

“Little sleep, hard training… I’m going to hit the showers now. Anything you wanna talk about that can’t wait?”

Byleistr raised his right hand that was holding a newspaper. “I guess you didn’t take a look at it yet. You should though.”

Helblindi felt instantly intrigued and reached out expectantly. “Which page?”

“Front page.”

No way to overlook it. Helblindi’s eyes scanned over the article, then immediately read it again to make sense of it. It didn’t come as a surprise. Pretty much everybody with some knowledge of how the economy worked had predicted such a thing happening. Now it was here, a little faster and a lot more drastic than expected. Definitely bad news, bad for everybody, especially for the people.

And yet Helblindi couldn’t stop that smile from making its way onto his face. “That’s going to dominate the news for weeks to come…”

“Yes, it made break the king’s neck… but it will also distract from Jotunheim…”

Helblindi shook his head. “No, I will see to that… One interview or official statement might be enough that they have been treating us like that for centuries… this is glorious. They will want to crucify him and we, little brother, are going to make sure that this fire is not going to stop burning.”
Fanning the flame

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody and Happy New Year :) 
So that chapter didn't quite turn out as expected...
Have fun :D

“You won’t like what you find out…” Loki shook his head determinedly, but Balder turned out to be surprisingly stubborn. “Come on, it will be fun and tonight we’re going to do what I want.”

Sighing in defeat Loki shrugged and sat down opposite of Balder. “But why do we have to sit on the floor?”

Smirking in amusement Balder gestured at the fireplace right next to them. “Because it’s cosy. Drink your wine and relax.”

Loki surrendered, mostly because he knew that Balder was right and his upbeat attitude was kind of sweet. Also the wine was good and the cheese delicious.

“I’ll start. I got a couple of questions from the internet.”

Loki made an inviting gesture and Balder read a question of a piece of paper. “Would you rather find true love or 10 million dollars?”

First question and Loki already wanted to spit out his wine. “Really? That’s the question you start with?”

Smiling softly Balder shrugged. “I didn’t write them and it’s a long list. Go on, I’m listening.”

After another sip of wine Loki shrugged. “I am a prince of a ridiculously rich country. What would I do with 10 million? I’ll go for true love.”

“Your reasoning is incredibly romantic.”

Loki smirked and shrugged again. “I told you, you wouldn’t like it.”

Balder laughed, probably not taking him seriously. “Alright, your turn.” He handed Loki the list who read the next question. “Would you rather fight Voldemort or Freddy Krueger?”

“Freddy Krueger. I hate Harry Potter.”

Loki almost dropped his glass when he heard that. “You are having me on?”

“No, I never got into it. Every other kid read it and I thought they were incredibly childish. Everything of importance happens to Harry or one of his friends… I didn’t like it.” Balder made a dismissive gesture and Loki softly shook his head in disbelief. “Really? That’s weird. I thought I was the only one who didn’t like those books.”
“You are definitely not the only one. Okay, next question. Would you rather be loved or feared?” Balder looked at him expectantly and Loki knew that he shouldn’t be able to answer this question so incredibly fast. There was no way Balder was going to like this.

“Feared.”

As expected Balder’s eyes widened a little bit. The corners of his mouth twitched before he finally got himself ready to ask a question. “Really? Why? Why would you prefer that? Especially as a prince?”

“I’ve read Machiavelli. He is very clear on this. As a ruler you cannot be hated, because people will turn against you. Love will not stop them from walking over you and taking advantage of you. It’s better if they fear you.”

Balder raised an eyebrow and Loki knew that this conversation was far from over. “Alright, I’ll accept that. As a ruler. But the question wasn’t designed for princes or politicians, but normal people. In everyday life… would you still prefer being feared?”

What was Loki supposed to say now? That he wanted his whole life to look like this? Balder couldn’t seriously believe that. “Do I give that impression?”

“I don’t always know what impression you want to convey. It changes from moment to moment. I never know what to expect from you.”

That sounded like a good thing to Loki, but clearly not to Balder. Loki had to give him something. “Me neither. I don’t want to need anybody, to be strong and independent by myself. Then at the same time I think that’s a very sad thing to want and it’s not like I don’t want to be with someone or have somebody who is important to me. I just want to believe that I could be alright on my own…”

Only when the words were out Loki realised how personal this was and he felt strange about giving this away. Uncomfortable even. Balder though clearly didn’t want him to regret it. “Why would you even doubt that in the first place? I know that you would be completely fine by yourself… It would be a shame though and I wouldn’t like it for personal reasons…”

Loki couldn’t fight the smile that Balder’s words had just made appear. No, Loki didn’t think that he needed this, but it was definitely nice to have it. “Is this working out for you? The two of us? Because… most of the time I am not sure that this is what you’re looking for.”

“You really think I am a hopeless romantic, don’t you?”

“Don’t pretend that you aren’t.”

Balder shrugged, offering Loki another sweet smile. “Okay, you got me. That’s partly true, but you are not as dark and brooding as you pretend to be. Do me a favour and stop wondering about what I might or might not want. I’ll tell you.”

That seemed perfectly fair. “Alright. I can do that.” Loki downed the rest of his wine and as he wanted to reach for the bottle his eyes fell on Balder and who he sat there right in front of him. There was no denying that he was beautiful and Loki felt that he could trust him. If Frigga was willing to give them more space and not get involved in anything. Loki had to have control about these parts of his life.

Putting the glass aside Loki moved forward and smoothly slid into Balder’s lap. An action which clearly startled the other one and his hands went straight to Loki’s hips as a reflex to steady him. “Woah… what…?”
Loki smirked at him before brushing his mouth over Balder’s neck. “I’m being romantic. Taking advantage of the fireplace and the lush setting. How about you get to do what you want with me in front of the fireplace?”

His lips were trailing Balder’s jaw line while the other audibly sighed in pleasure. “Where is that coming from?”

Nuzzling his face into Balder’s neck Loki put one hand on his waist. He smelled good, familiar which Loki tried to ignore. Balder was lovely and he wanted to be Loki’s and Loki wanted something to be his. Free him of others desires that he shouldn’t have. If Balder was supposed to be that for him Loki had to open up. Be frank. How should it work out any other way?

Loki’s lips were still touching Balder’s skin as he mumbled the words that he wasn’t ashamed of but which nevertheless weren’t easy to voice. “I like that…”

Balder’s hands closed more firmly around Loki’s hips and the latter could feel his breath in his hair. “What?”

Shifting slightly Loki pressed a kiss on Balder’s throat. By now his voice had become a whisper. “I like it when the other one takes charge… when… they push me around a bit and… tells me what to do.”

Their chests were touching, Loki could clearly feel how Balder’s breath got caught. “You… you do?”

Loki let his hand slip underneath Balder’s sweater, his fingertips only grazing his skin. “Yes…”

The hands on his hips were pulling him closer. “So what annoys you in real life is okay in bed?”

Hiding his smile Loki nodded. “Kind of… yes. Is that strange?”

“No… surprising though…” Balder moved his head, kissing Loki’s mouth just as sweetly and softly as he always had. Loki gave into it, his free hand sliding into Balder’s hair. It didn’t stay there long since Balder had clearly listened to him and suddenly pushed Loki flat on his back on the floor not breaking the kiss.

There was no way to deny the soft tingle he was feeling given the new position. Loki wrapped both hands around the edge of Balder’s sweater and pulled it off him in one quick motion. As soon as he had discarded of the sweater Balder grabbed his hands and pressed them against the carpet, his mouth moving from Loki’s lips to his neck. Letting his eyes slide closed Loki enjoyed the kisses Balder was trailing down his throat. His own shirt got in the way and Balder quickly got rid of it. The rest of Loki’s clothes quickly followed.

“I love your skin…” Balder punctuated his words with little kisses on Loki’s chest. “… so pale… almost like…” That one word wasn’t said and Loki was grateful for it. “You’re beautiful…”

A shudder ran down Loki’s spine. He had heard that one before. Different and it had shaken him to the core. Loki didn’t want to hear any of it. Putting his hand in Balder’s neck Loki pulled him into a kiss. This one wasn’t as sweet anymore. A lot of tongue, a bit of teeth and Loki’s hands tugged at the jeans that were rubbing against his bare skin in a very unpleasant way. He fought back a whine when Balder pulled his hand away and pressed a kiss onto it.

“Don’t tease me, it doesn’t suit you…” Loki muttered, realising he sounded slightly out of breath.

Balder’s teeth grazed the tip of his forefinger before he answered. “You would be surprised…”
Instead of answering, Loki wrapped one leg around Balder’s hip, arching an eyebrow at him. That earned him a husky laugh and Balder ran his hand up his leg to his thigh. “Okay…”

Finally they worked off Balder’s jeans together and Loki sighed in relief when there was only soft, heated skin against his own. They kissed again, Loki was feeling light-headed, while his heart was hammering in his chest. But he was still right here, not somewhere else. A place where he shouldn’t be.

“I want you right here…” Balder whispered right into his ear and Loki shuddered. Why were there always problems with being spontaneous? “Just a second…” After a quick kiss Loki untangled himself from Balder and got up to his feet. The way to his bedroom had never been so long. Loki quickly grabbed the lube and condoms and rushed back to the salon. Balder had sat up and instantly pulled Loki back down into his lap and into a kiss.

This time he was going to keep his eyes open. That would ensure that his mind won’t wander.

Balder got what he wanted, he had him on the floor in front of the fireplace with Loki’s arms and legs wrapped around him. The deep and steady rhythm made Loki bury his fingers in Balder’s back. With every movement Balder coaxed soft sighs and moans out of Loki and despite his best efforts Loki’s eyes fell closed. Which made everything all the more intense, but it also brought up images that Loki didn’t want. Or maybe he wanted them more than anything.

Tilting his head up Loki smashed their mouths together in a deep kiss. This was good. That sweet mouth on his, a strong, warm body on top of him, smooth skin beneath his fingers and the sensation of having someone inside of him. Loki let it all wash over him and he might have bit Balder’s lip as he climaxed. He thought he could taste blood.

They kept lying in front of the fireplace for some time, waiting for their heartbeats to slow down. Again Balder was right next to him, his fingertips drawing patterns on Loki’s shoulder. “We spilled some wine…”

“Huh?” Turning his head Loki spotted that one of the glasses had been knocked over. Fortunately there hadn’t been much wine left and there were like two small stains on the carpet. “Shit… Well, I can’t be bothered with that right now… We should get into bed. I am so done…”

“Good idea.”

Loki slept easy that night and that should have been a warning. For once Balder was awake before him and that turned out to be quite nice because Balder actually brought him coffee to bed. “Morning. In the mood for some breakfast?”

Groaning sleepily Loki sat up and reached for the cup of coffee before saying anything. He didn’t feel quite awake yet but a little sore. Not the worst way to start the day. “Thanks… I’d like to take a shower first.”

“Alright.” Balder kissed him quickly on the lips before leaving him alone and Loki went about his morning routine. Except there would be no running today, he didn’t really feel like it. After a refreshing shower Loki slipped into his clothes and checked his appearance in the mirror. Good enough. Eventually he joined Balder in the salon who was already sitting at the table, face hidden behind the newspaper. Loki’s stomach growled at the sight of the food. He was dying for some dark bread and ham. Sliding onto his chair Loki was already reaching for his knife when Balder lowered the newspaper and his tensed upper lip wasn’t a good sign.

“Uhm, Loki?”
That was it. Bad news, Loki could tell from his hesitant tone. “What does it say?”

Balder handed him the newspaper. “Næss is delocalising their production. They’re moving it to the States.”

As soon as the words had reached Loki’s ears he was ripping the newspaper open, looking for the confirmation of what Balder had just said. His heart sped up, pumping his blood through his veins way too fast. It was rushing to his head, making him feel a slight nausea that he blinked away. No, he wasn’t going to be distracted by anything.

Loki’s eyes scanned over the article, almost too impatient to actually read it. Almost perfect in its repulsiveness. “They can’t do this!” Loki was shouting, his voice going too fast, but it seemed beyond his control.

Balder, right opposite of him, made a vague gesture and he sounded a bit timid. “Actually they can.”

“Yes, I know that they can.” Loki growled and once again read the article. “I know what the trade agreement says, but…” He was grasping for straws and Loki knew it. “I mean… ethically… they can’t do that!”

“It’s bad, yes…”

Putting the newspaper away Loki stared at Balder as if he was a drop of water in the desert. “You are the economist! Tell me what I can do about this! How many jobs are we even talking about here?”

“I am not sure… Næss has their headquarters in the suburbs of Valhalla and their one of the biggest employers of this country… According to the article they aren’t moving the entire production… 2000 jobs maybe? I don’t know.” Balder clearly wished that he had more information to give to Loki.

“This can’t be happening… Since this article is a leak we can assume that about 2000 people are right now learning that they will lose their jobs… Fantastic… Okay, I need to… What do I need to do? Talk to father, sure… or the CEO of Næss… perhaps there might be…”

“Loki…” Balder’s voice was surprisingly firm and it stopped Loki from rambling. “Don’t get me wrong, you are a great politician, but not a businessman. I don’t think you talking to anyone at Næss will be much help.”

Despite his anger Loki could still feel surprised. That Balder of all people would tell him that he wasn’t good at something. “What am I supposed to do? Sit around and do nothing? They are doing damage to the country and even worse to its people.”

“Yes, I know. You see it that way. You are right, but it’s an entirely different thing for them. A business man is always going to do what is best for his company. Money has to be your number 1 concern or you are damned to fail. The trade agreement opened a lot of new possibilities for companies and if they don’t take advantage of them they’re profitable… that would be suicide, because everybody else is going to use them. You look over the numbers and they’re what counts. Production in the US is cheaper, the trade agreement allows them to go there without any repercussions. It’s economically the smart and right thing to do. So they will do it. It’s business, it has nothing to do with ethics or morals.”

Right and that was going to make Loki sick. “Yeah and it might also have something to do with Asgardian law about industrial safety being way more distinct… Fuck… so people are going to lose their jobs… a huge company outsources their production to the United States which means that
Asgard is going to lose money. There is nothing we can do about it, because the king signed a trade agreement which allows them to do all of this. Why for Búri’s sake did my father sign that agreement?”

It was a rhetorical question, Loki knew why. It all came down to Russia anyways. Loki would have chosen them over the Americans anytime. What did that help when the decision so clearly wasn’t up to him?

“There’s got to be something that can be done about it…”

“Not with the trade agreement in place. As long as the production in Asgard is more expensive than in the States…” Balder shrugged in defeat and Loki felt that resentment coming up again. By all means he had almost forgotten about it after the Jotun disaster. Which wasn’t right. Loki had no right to forget about that kind of injustice and stupidity. This had had to happen, it was anything but a surprise.

People had been upset before, now they were going to be furious. Now they were indeed losing their jobs and another country was going to profit from that. Why? Because the king had signed a piece of paper that was only in favour of big companies and businessmen. The ordinary citizen was out of the picture.

As much as Loki hated to admit it, Balder was right about this. Not much he could do about it. Naess was acting rationally. They were a huge, multinational concern, of course they were searching for ways to make the most profit. Odin had opened a door for them and of course they had walked straight through it. Other would follow.

What now? Changing the laws to make Asgard more attractive to them as the location for their production? By making life for the employees harder? Out of the question.

First things first. Loki had to find out how much of that article was even true. It could all be even worse… There had to be talks with the board of Naess and Loki would be present during those.

And what where they going to say to the people? At first they would direct their anger at Naess and then people would remember who enabled them in the first place. 2000 jobs… that was enough to thrust them right into a new crisis.

Thor and Jane should definitely keep a low profile for a while…

“Why not a single day without some sort of catastrophe…” Loki was rubbing his temples, trying to fight an up-coming headache.

It was not enough though. Leah proved why she was the best assistant / secretary that Loki had ever had. She knew when something was going on that he couldn’t afford to miss. A link was sent to Loki’s phone.

The website of an Asgardian newspaper. With a new video. Loki felt his throat closing up when he read the description.

Son of the Lord of Jotunheim comments on Naess’ decision to delocalise production

Now his heart was racing again and his skin was suddenly feeling too tight. How could that guy be so fast? Obviously because he was smart enough to know what this meant and reckless enough to immediately use it to his advantage. To drive a few extra nails in the coffin. Loki had no doubt that he would be brilliant at it.
Luckily his hand didn’t tremble as he started the video. The first look already made him feel a disgusting mixture of frustration and admiration. For once Helblindi was dressed casually, not wearing the colours of his house. Clearly to remind everybody who was watching that he was Asgardian after all. Like everyone else.

Loki was getting so wrapped up in these details that he didn’t hear the first couple of words that Helblindi said with that smooth, melodic voice of his. “… the newest developments with great concern. It’s a simple rule in democracy that the population, the people are always right and their will has to be respected. Our country has never been a democracy, it has never aspired to be one. That doesn’t mean that the Asgardian people can’t think for themselves. When the recently signed trade agreement between Asgard and the United States was announced they immediately voiced their worries and anger which are now proven to be justified. In front of you today you see a man who is very proud of his heritage. As a Jotun and an Asgardian. This country has a proud history because its people are courageous, righteous and wise. They’ve been through Civil War, sieges, discrimination and oppression. Every Asgardian deserves better than what they are getting right now. The United States don’t owe us anything, they are looking out for themselves. Næss is a business which should be held accountable for the treatment of their employees but they’re ultimately only jumping at an opportunity given to them. We have to hold the ones responsible who created this opportunity. With the trade agreement the crown allows Næss to dismiss thousands of good workers and more will follow if nothing is done about this. Your Highness, your people deserve better. There has been more than enough unfairness and discrimination in the history of our beautiful country. It’s time to stand up for at least some of them.”

Helblindi’s marvellous eyes were looking straight at the camera and right into Loki. Conveying just the right amount of disquiet, anger and a little bit of spite. Now Loki’s hand was definitely trembling. He would like to think it was because of the rage he was still feeling.

“Damn, I hate that brilliant bastard…”

For so many things. Right now for saying exactly what Loki would have said in his position.
Hello everybody,

Here we go, dealing with the new crisis and a couple more personal issues. Answer to the comments of the last chapter are still coming ;)

Have fun :D

“You are not helping!”

“Good morning, your highness. How are you doing? You sound a bit agitated.”

Two seconds in and Loki was already willing to reach through the phone and strangle him. “Don’t give me this bullshit. What are you doing on television, telling people how my father is fucking all of Asgard over?”

Helblindi had the nerve to chuckle and Loki’s fingers tightened around the phone. How could he dare to be amused by this? He was probably even happy about this disaster, because it reaffirmed his belief that Odin was a demon coming to destroy Asgard and most of all Jotunheim.

“You highness I was merely stating the obvious. One has to be quick to get one’s message out if you want people to hear it.”

Loki opened his mouth but it was hard to remember how to form words when he only wanted to sizzle in anger. “Have you any idea how much harder you made this? We’re supposed to calm the people down and you’re just adding fuel to a raging fire.”

“Calm them down? Why? They should be enraged and they are. You think so too. You’ve been the loudest person of all who spoke up against the trade agreement and now that it blew up in everybody’s face you want people to calm down? Don’t go for hypocrisy your highness, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Will you listen? Yes, what Næss is doing is unacceptable and they need to be talked to. The public needs to be left out of this for as long as possible. Or be assured that something will be done to take care of them. All you’re doing is to make them angry and to rile them up. Don’t make a matter of state personal.”

“At least I am doing something, right? You’re for sure taking your time.”

“I thought you were smart. You can’t seriously believe that I can get rid of the language act in a week.”

“Not when you’re too busy going on biking trips with your boyfriend. I don’t know why you are so upset, your highness. I am clearly helping you.”

Loki clenched his teeth, they weren’t going there. He couldn’t allow that. “This situation isn’t helping anyone.”
“I disagree. The politic your father started and which nobody wanted is going to end up costing 2000 people their jobs. That’s a great way to make yourself popular. Let’s get rid of the old fool who prefers the American economy over our own. Who is next in line? The crown prince with the American girlfriend. We’re not going for that, untrustworthy, probably doesn’t have our interests in mind. Let’s go with the younger one who hated the American policy in the first place. He might even figure out how to solve the problem with these annoying Jotuns and their instance on equality.” Helblindi clearly loved to hear himself talk and he wasn’t the only one.

“Stop giving interviews. This is my order as your sovereign.” He tried to sound cold. How ironic that it wasn’t possible with Helblindi out of all people. A descendant of the Frostgiants. Loki winced for even thinking that word, he felt like his mother was standing right behind him, staring at him with dark, disappointed eyes.

“I am sorry you highness, but you aren’t my king yet.”

Helblindi hung up on him.

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“This is going to be so much fun…” Steve was leaning against the wall right next to the window, watching the small crowd in front of the embassy getting bigger.

“Day?” Next to him James huffed. “I have a feeling that this will go on for a couple of weeks.”

“Oh, I get it, but shouldn’t they rather be standing in front of the company building than here?”

“I’m sure there are enough people to protest in several places. Let’s hope they stay away from the fences, because I really don’t want to be the one who has to go out there and tell them to back off.”

Steve glanced out of the window again. “It looks pretty calm… like the kind of protest you want to have. If there is such a thing.”

Bucky hinted at a smile. “Yeah…” Steve didn’t like the underlying sadness and he couldn’t help but comment on it. “You’re worried, right?”

“A bit… things are just messy. During the entire last year the situation was completely different. Easy. Relaxed. Well as easy as the situation with the Jotun could ever get. Now? The Jotun crisis is worse than ever and the second people stop talking about the American policy, 2000 jobs are being outsourced. It’s a shame you haven’t been here, one year ago. Asgard would have definitely made an entirely different impression.”

“Politics are a mess every way. My impression isn’t bad… but a day without another huge headline in the newspaper wouldn’t be too bad. Or something a little more small scale that doesn’t bring people out to the streets.” Steve shrugged, again looking out of the window. He would never pretend that he was expert on economic agreements between two countries, but Steve clearly felt for the people who would find themselves without a job, because it was easier and cheaper for the company to produce in the US. Their anger couldn’t be more understandable.

Nonetheless a crowd of angry people in front of the embassy was a clear security risk and they had to watch out. James was standing right next to him, more or less watching Steve while he was watching the people.

“So are you also going to protest in front of the embassy when you’re going to live here?” Steve hadn’t meant to make it sound like he was mocking James, but it clearly did. At least James was nice enough to pretend he didn’t notice.
“I’m already living here… so are you by the way.”

“Yeah, but you know what I mean. You never think that’s weird? How would you react to these things?”

James raised an eyebrow, a bit of confusion visible on his face. “I don’t see your point. My opinions wouldn’t suddenly change. Just because I might give up my citizenship and get a new one.”

“That’s not really a small thing… which I still don’t get. Yes, it is a fascinating country, but you can already work and live here. Do you really have such a big emotional connection to it that you want to become part of it?” Steve looked at him questionably and he knew that this conversation wasn’t going well when James crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Why is it so hard to believe that I don’t have that connection?”

One didn’t need to have a lot of social skills to know that it was about time to let it go. For some reason Steve couldn’t do that. Because he simply couldn’t understand. “Okay, I just wonder…”

No, this was going to come out wrong and Steve felt his cheeks heating up. There was no way to make this more awkward. Unfortunately now it was James who couldn’t let it go. Probably because he felt the need to make Steve see his point. “You just wonder what?”

To be honest Steve wasn’t exactly wondering anymore. It had become very clear during their conversation with Edda. Still nothing had been said out loud and Steve hadn’t dared to ask, it was making him feel uncomfortable when it clearly shouldn’t. There was a good chance that Steve knew that and that was why he was insisting.

Steve licked his lips to win a few seconds to have time to think. “Is it because how they deal with homosexuality?”

He could have found worse words to voice that thought. Nevertheless Steve could instantly see that he had offended James whose features hardened. Steve felt the urge to add something, probably even stupider. Like ‘whatever you are into, that’s fine’. As it should be. It wasn’t though. The idea of James being with a guy was strange to Steve and trouble to point out way. Worst of all that was simply something nobody could say out loud. ‘You are into men? Strange, picturing you with one is just weird’. Was there a way to not misinterpret that? To make Steve not look like a complete asshole.

James sat down on the windowsill, the faintest smile lingering on his face. It didn’t look particularly happy though. “Did you know that the word ‘gay’ doesn’t exist in Old Norse? Or at least it didn’t for a very long time? Foreign movies and literature brought it here, but it still doesn’t have any meaning. The concept of both homo- and heterosexuality are completely alien to the people of this country. And the best thing is that there is no attempt to change that. There are no papers written about who is attracted to who because of what. People just go out and date and that’s about it. There is no lobby, no flag you have to carry, no specific lifestyle attached to it… not a particular party you have to vote for. It doesn’t fucking matter. You know… couple of months ago I read an article on a British news site that more or less implied that all the people here are secretly homophobic, because that huge Oscar bait movie about two gay teenagers coming out to their parents flopped so hard here in Asgard. Nobody went out to see it, because it doesn’t make any fucking sense to them. If being gay isn’t a concept how should they be interested in a coming out story? There is no way I can tell you how much I enjoy this. No expectations, no awkwardness, no misunderstands, no categories. Everybody can just be and nobody cares about that stupid shit that is so important and necessary for us… So I think it’s really great that you’re trying to make this a coming out story for me.”
Steve swallowed softly, squirming beneath James’ glance. If he got that right James just wanted… What? Not making a big deal out of it. Because he didn’t put himself in some category he didn’t want other people to do it either?

“Look I’m sorry if I… I didn’t want to upset you in any kind of way. I just really feel like I am just one step out of the area where all of this makes sense. I think I get what you mean, but I’ve never even thought about any of this.”

The smile on James’ face changed, suddenly it looked way more real and even friendly. “You know that’s not a bad thing. Quite the opposite actually. People are thinking about this stuff way too much anyway.”

Steve definitely agreed with that.

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The smell of the books was so completely different from everything Jane was used to. During her time at university she had done most of her work at the computer, reading articles on a screen. The few times she got actual books from the libraries they had always been very new editions. Which couldn’t be said for these.

By now Jane was kind of familiar with the main library of the palace, but this was something different. Only yesterday Frigga had pulled her aside and led her to this two-story room in the private wing of the royal family. Unlike the main library which contained all sorts of books this one was more focused on Asgardian history and most of all the history of Thor’s family.

There was something incredibly strange about the fact that she was looking at entire volumes written about her boyfriend’s family. Books that were covering centuries. Looking up someone’s Facebook status suddenly seemed terribly plain and pathetic.

Jane had never been a history geek which made perfect sense. She was a logical person that was why biology, chemistry and most of all physics made her feel right at home. Natural sciences were bound to very clear rules. There was no other way than obeying them, pieces fit perfectly together and there was beautiful harmony even to chaos.

History was a nasty mess that not even the most brilliant mind could decipher. It was created by human beings and sometimes for no other reason than raw emotion. So hard to follow.

So obviously Jane wouldn’t normally dive into this stuff, but those were indeed special circumstances. She couldn’t deny the fascination that lay in reading about former kings and queens knowing that they were related to Thor. It was a lush setting, in a breathtakingly beautiful room, on a comfortable couch with a big book in her lap.

To be honest Jane was more scanning through it than actually read it. A biography of Thor’s grandfather written by one of his closest consultant. Jane wondered how unbiased such a book could be, but the perception was definitely fascinating. Borr had become king very young. 19 years old. Accessing the throne in the Mid-thirties in Europe. Couldn’t have been the easiest time. Odin had been born a couple of years later right in the middle of the Second World War. At this point Jane also learned that it was Asgardian tradition to fire a 100 gun-salute the day the heir apparent was born. Also all the bars in the country would choose one drink that would be free the entire day.

Jane smiled at that thought. Sure, it still seemed antiquated and out of this world, but on the other hand it was beautiful that the entire country could be united by an event like this, getting together to celebrate. There was no denying that fuzzy feeling when Jane realised that the same thing was going
to happen when her first son would be born.

“Wow… I think I haven’t been here since I was a child…”

Looking up Jane saw Thor closing the door behind him, indeed letting his eyes wander across the library as if he was seeing it for the first time.

“What? It’s so beautiful. If I had had a place like this back in college I would have done all my studies there.”

Thor smiled and gave a shrug. “One of the problems of being privileged, I have my own study. Back when I was 13 or 14 I would be here all the time. Looking for Loki… Whenever I couldn’t find him and his nannies had no idea where I was I would simply come here and every single time he would sitting here.”

Thor sat down on the lowest step of the wooden spiral stairs that led up to the gallery. “Always a book in his hands. I’d like to tease him, telling him that his eyes would fall out from being tired of reading so much. Too bad that he stopped believing me when he was about 10…”

The expression on Thor’s face was heart-warming. A fond memory that made his eyes just a bit brighter and brought a joyful smile to his face. Jane wasn’t the best at pointing out why she felt attracted to somebody, but she was sure that Thor’s easy-going nature. In her professional life she had always had to deal with people who were very down to earth but also kind of dry. They would get excited about their work, but everything had always had to be in perfect order and before even daring to voice their joy things had to be analysed, to make sure it was indeed a success.

Thor just seemed happy in general. Always finding a small thing to put a smile on his face. Not just that, he was actively searching things that would bring him joy. In Jane’s opinion not a lot of people actually did that.

“And you would annoy him while he was trying to read? You’re a really a nice brother.”

“No, it was annoying me that he was always reading… Well, not exactly, it was only getting on my nerves that he wasn’t fitting the stereotype…”

Jane raised an eyebrow and made gesture that indicated Thor should explain. Still amused by his own memories Thor got back up and slowly strolled over to the couch, sitting down next to Jane.

“I wasn’t bad in my courses. Not the fastest learner, but I was always doing pretty decent. Loki was making his teachers swoon and even when he wasn’t learning, he constantly buried his nose in books. When we were teens I kind of figured that I would the really cool one who got all the dates and he would be the awkward bookworm.” Thor grinned like he was making fun out of his younger self.

Smiling Jane put her head on Thor’s shoulder. “But?”

“Oh, he was a bookworm, but not different than he is now. The second he put down the book he was as great with people as he is now. At least when he wanted too which wasn’t always the case, but the girls were all over him which really pissed me off… which doesn’t mean that I wasn’t also popular with them.”

“Sure…” Jane laughed and thought of the childhood pictures she had seen of Thor. He had always been very good looking. She could see teenager girls being all over the blonde, fit, tanned boy. “Girls falling for Loki I can see, but they must have been so disappointed…”
Pulling slightly back Thor raised both eyebrows at her. “Why? He is smart and beautiful.”

“Yes, sure, but Loki isn’t into girls, isn’t he?”

Thor laughed again in pure, soft delight. “Loki had his first girlfriend even before me.”

In confusion Jane quirked an eyebrow. “But… he’s only with guys now, isn’t he?”

“It has been several years since he has been with a woman, but he might end up with another one again. Which I don’t really want, because it would be great to see things work out with Balder.”

Jane nodded quickly, not wanting to ask another silly question. Also she wasn’t that interested in Loki’s love life. Instead she closed the book and patted its cover. “So I have a question.”

“Please stop reading about my family. This is so strange and unfair, I can’t read up on your family.”

“No chance. So were there also 100 gun-salutes when you were born?” Jane smirked and poked Thor softly who smiled. “Yeah… we’ve been doing that for over 300 years. Except that when I was born there were 200 salutes.”

“Yes, sure.” Jane waved him off but Thor insisted. “I swear. Always special treatment for me. No, father said himself that he was so overcome with joy that he changed the protocol. Always exceptions for the long awaited crown prince.”

“Because you were born so late?”

“Kind of. You know… My mother is my father’s second wife. He became king in his early thirties. By that time he had already been married for over 10 years. No kids. He told me that they had consulted several doctors. Nobody could find an issue. She eventually fell sick and died. About three years after her death my father married my mother. I was born another four years later. Father later told me that at this time he had already given up hope of having children. So yes, they were quite excited to have me.”

A sentiment that Jane could understand very vividly. She pressed a soft kiss on Thor lips before smiling at him. “I am sure of that… What did she suffer from?”

“Cancer. I’m actually not sure what kind… It’s weird to think that I’m only here because my father’s first wife died… It must have been a rough time for my father. Ten years without a child, without an heir, then losing his wife… I guess that’s why I got the 200 gun-salute. Finally a new family, a male heir to secure the family line and the monarchy…”

Jane thought that she might open another can of worms, but with Thor she didn’t have to worry. He was always glad to explain her something, enjoyed to share his life and culture with him. “And… what would have happened if you had been a girl?”

Thor’s fingers were casually running through her hair, brushing over her scalp from time to time. “I am sure they would have been just as happy… but according to the constitution only a male can inherit the crown. It’s incredibly important to guarantee stability.”

No, Jane wasn’t going to point out how out of this time this was. And sexist. She was pretty confident that Thor was already aware of that. “So what would happen if we were to only have girls?”

“First of all they’ll be beautiful girls. Gorgeous princesses and I’ll be terribly overprotective and annoying…” Thor smiled to himself as if he could already see them. “As for the throne… if I can’t
produce a male heir Loki is next in line and then his son.”

“But if things work out between Balder and Loki... how is he going to have kids?”

Thor laughed in honest amusement and Jane playfully glared at him. “What?”

“Come on, that would have been a problem 50 years ago. It isn’t now anymore. I admit it’s a bit complicated because the trúa demands that a child has a father and a mother.”

“Explain, I wanna know. If they want a child what are they going to do?”

“Get a surrogate. It’s very important though who you choose because the mother is going to play a big role in the child’s life. In Loki’s case the mother would receive a royal title, a very prestigious position. She would live at the palace and be involved in the kid’s education. That’s it.”

Jane nodded in understanding. “And what happened 100 years ago? When the king was married to another man and science wasn’t advanced enough to have a surrogate?”

“Same thing as now. They wouldn’t have been able to have kids, so the next male in line would become king. That was always the main reason why any king should have as many kids or sons as possible. When you look into the family archives and check out old diaries and correspondence it becomes quite clear that some of them didn’t follow their heart and married a woman to secure the line...”

All that information was slowly making Jane’s head spin but what did it matter to them eventually? Jane wanted kids and she wanted them with Thor. Sure, it was a strange thought that her future son was going to a king and that they would to prepare him for that from early childhood, but at the same time that was something very reassuring about the knowledge that their children would always have what they needed. No money issues, a stellar education, all the possibilities in the world. And they would have Thor and her as parents.

She couldn’t quite think of what to say anymore so Jane leaned up and kissed Thor. It was during these moments when she knew that everything was going to be alright.

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“So you’re saying that we can’t do anything to force Næss to not outsource their production?” Loki’s head was throbbing, the ache getting more unpleasant by the second.

Hjort was shaking himself. “I am sorry, your highness. The trade agreement doesn’t leave us many loopholes here. Legally you don’t have any ground to stand on if you want to punish them for doing something that they are clearly allowed to do. The only other possibility would be to make keeping the production in Asgard more attractive to them.”

Loki snorted and felt another sting right in the centre of his brain. That policy was now physically hurting him. How wonderful. “Like how? Changing the laws so they can cut down on the employees’ wages and raise the amount of working hours? No, that’s not going to happen.”

“I am sorry I couldn’t be of more help, your highness.”

With a dismissive gesture Loki tried to convey that it wasn’t the expert’s fault. Loki had known before he had called him to go over the trade agreement again. It had been foolish to hope they would find a way to out of this.

When Hjort had left Loki propped his head up in both of his hands. This was going to be a disaster.
The entire blame would be on them. Rightfully so. As if that wouldn’t be enough Helblindi was only lying in wait to remind everyone of the Jotun crisis which was far from over. Loki had to deliver on that front too or it would come around and hit him with full force.

No, Loki wasn’t envious of Thor who was going to inherit this entire mess as soon as he was going to be crowned. And then again…

His phone started to ring, only intensifying his headache. It was definitely time to get some fresh air. The dry air in the conference room didn’t help. Answering the call Loki sighed. “Yes, Leah?”

“Your highness, doctor Strange from the University of Valhalla wants to talk to you. May I put him through?”

Why not? “Sure…”

There was quiet click and Loki heard the deep, very smooth voice with the soft accent. “Your highness, I am not interrupting by any chance?”

Loki wanted to laugh sarcastically, because there was no way the doctor wasn’t reading the newspaper and didn’t know that Loki was up to his neck in deep shit. “No, you’re not, but I don’t have a lot of time. Have you come to a decision?”

“Indeed I have. I’ll take the job. But I won’t come to the palace. For your check-ups you will have to come to me. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, it is. Thank you. My secretary will be in contact with you to schedule appointments.” Hanging up Loki rubbed his temples. This could have been a good day.

The phone immediately rang again and Loki groaned. Great, what was there still to say? “Something you still want to ask, doctor?”

“Doctor? Now I don’t get called that a lot. Which is pretty ridiculous since I have three doctorates. I really should be more a dick about that. Usually I only remind people of my incredible wealth and good looks. Anyway, how are you doing, prince? Is the big bad company giving you trouble?”

Loki closed his eyes in defeat. “No, everybody is giving me trouble.”
It was a shame to go at such a slow pace. This car was made for long, straight roads. Not snowy mountains. Maybe an exaggeration. The scenery was indeed majestic, the mountains only in the distance while Natasha was contemplating the soft hills that led up to her destination. For about a mile now she had been following the lakeside. It was hard to not to glance at the water every other second. So perfectly blue that it had to be a reflection of the sky. Otherwise how would that be possible? All the trees were covered in snow, no soul to be seen, everything perfectly remote. No matter where Natasha looked, all of her surroundings could or should be immediately immortalised on a painting, photographs… turned into a postal card.

Sometime Natasha might consider getting a weekend home here. Not the most remote place of Jotunheim, the next small town was only ten minutes away. Yet if somebody wanted some silence this seemed like the perfect way to find it. Perfect place for secret meeting.

After another turn and Natasha could finally see the main roof and the tops of the towers of the castle. What a contrast to Valhalla and the royal palace. No gold to be seen here, just your average early medieval castle. Average. A very crude word.

Gras-geilar was a paradigm of most excellent medieval architecture and craftsmanship. Very rustic, thick walls of stone. It was beautiful.

The low land castle was located on a small island, located about 100 metres away from the shore. It was connected to the mainland through a stone bridge. No, the structure didn’t disappoint. Natasha could make herself at home in any place. Cold, dirty, no running or warm water or windows. Been there done that. Yet if she had the choice, she would definitely go with the majestic castle.

Sure, who wouldn’t? It just felt very nice to be able to work in a pleasant atmosphere. Some of her former teachers had criticised Natasha for her rather expensive taste, but I had never done anything to hurt her or to get into trouble. Considering that Asgard was like costume made for her. The world has become such a plain and boring since most of monarchies had been abolished. Presidents and premier ministers just didn’t have the same glamour to them. Technically it was all the same, all the political systems. As long as people were involved. Aristocratic titles just had a good ring to them. Most politicians were also made for life as soon as they were elected. All one had to do was to open the newspaper to realise that all of them were already making sure they would continue their comfortable lifestyle after their term of office was over. Their kids wouldn’t grow up struggling but inside of the best universities. Later they would grow up to work in important positions too. That was the way it worked and the monarchy at least wasn’t subtle about it.

To be honest Natasha didn’t care about the system she was working in. They all could be twisted and bent, all you had to do was to know what framework you were working in. Natasha enjoyed the
monarchy because its drama. It was so much more personal and opened up countless opportunities. Like this one.

As she approached the castle the illusion of being in the Middle Ages was finally shattered. The bridge was secured by a highly modern gate and a quite intimidating fence secured the access. Natasha didn’t want to know how many cameras had already spotted her coming closer.

She slowed down the car and eventually rolled up to the gate. The guards, who were most definitely behind the fence, didn’t show themselves. Instead the intercom spoke up to her after Natasha had lowered the window. “How may we help you?”

Natasha had to smile when she heard the familiar sound of her mother tongue. Good, so nobody was pretending, how lovely. “I am here on the invitation of the Lord Ymirson.”

“Welcome to Gras-geilar, Miss Romanoff.”

The gate opened and Natasha took another second to admire the castle now right in front of her. When she had crossed the bridge the main gate of the castle had already been opened for her. Natasha parked her car in the courtyard and an employee was there to greet her. “Miss Romanoff, thank you so much for coming out it. I hope you had a pleasant journey?”

“I had indeed. It’s kind of risky not to get into a car accident when you have to look out of the window all the time. The place is breathtakingly beautiful.”

The Jotun smiled and made an inviting gesture for her to follow him. Breathtakingly beautiful. Maybe Natasha had used that term to soon. The inside of the castle was vastly different from its exterior which made quite clear that it had been restored more than one time. All the rooms were flooded with light that streamed through the big windows. Bright and polished wood everywhere. Gorgeous panelling. No gold though. Nowhere to be seen. A bit strange for a region that was famous for its gold mines.

Natasha was led into a salon that was exactly after her taste. The fireplace was burning and a bottle of expensive red wine was standing on the couch table. Two empty glasses already waiting.

The first tingle of excitement was starting. For whatever reason she might have been summoned here, Natasha knew that she was going to walk away with some kind of information. There was no doubt about its usefulness. At this time Natasha could admit to herself that she needed a new and most of all better source. Her relationship to the royal court was very cold at this moment. The king had let the whole world know that he had chosen the United States over Russia. The crown prince pretty much agreed with his father on everything and the younger one… Well, he was a sore spot for Natasha. At a certain moment in time she had even feared that the prince might cost her her position. It made her stomach clench every time she thought about the fact that even now Natasha had no idea how she had alienated him. A complete disaster, a failure on her part and her superiors had been everything but happy when they had realised that her invitations to formal events at the court became rarer and rarer.

Today was a perfect opportunity to make up for that, to establish a connection even more important than that. No, she wasn’t nervous, Natasha had danced this dance before. Several times, but she couldn’t deny a slight eagerness.

“The Lord wants you to make yourself comfortable. He will join you in a couple of minutes.” The employee poured her a glass of wine and handed it to her before smiling at and ultimately leaving her alone.
Natasha took his advice and sat down on the wonderfully comfortable couch, sipping on the wine. It tasted rich and heavy, the way Natasha preferred it. French or Austrian. Hard to tell. Perhaps should ask him about it later on. When the door wasn’t opened during the next three minutes Natasha got back up again and strolled around the room. Casually drinking her wine she stopped in front of the fireplace. The painting above it showed the entire castle and the lake, reminding Natasha once again of how beautiful this place was. Not just the motive, the artwork was also quite fine.

Finally somebody opened the door and stepped inside while Natasha couldn’t be bothered to turn around. She was his guest, he had let her wait, so he should come over. Which he hid, slowly, like he had all the time in the world. When he stopped right next to Natasha he let another 30 seconds pass before he spoke up.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it? One of the most beautiful places in all of Jotunheim.”

Natasha smiled to herself when the smooth melody of the words reached her ears. His Russian was flawless, just the slightest bit of an accent. Impossible to spot for somebody who wasn’t a native speaker. Knowing a bit of Russian wasn’t unusual for a Jotun. The region was so close to the border, there was a lot of cultural and economic exchange, so yes, for a Russian to ask for the way or get grocery shopping done in Jotunheim. Yet it was hard to find somebody who spoke with such skill. One had to love the aristocracy and their access to the best education imaginable.

“It indeed is. Thank you for the invitation, my Lord. I know that only a few people have the privilege to visit Gras-geilar.”

The second Natasha’s eyes finally fell on him she tried to take in as much information as possible. Somewhat casual clothes. Dark slacks, a grey blazer, his hair was pulled back from his face and a designer stubble was decorating his face. That was new. Until now Natasha had only seen him clean shaven. Granted all public events. Maybe he just thought shaving was a nuisance that he didn’t have to bother with when nobody was holding a camera into his face. Or he was making a point. Trying to show Natasha that he was at ease, relaxed. Around her. Helblindi was smiling and it was hard to tell with him. It could be fake. He was trying to make her feel comfortable, that much was for sure. There could be a million reasons for that. Natasha was going to find out the old-fashioned way and she was looking forward to that.

“Thank you for taking it upon you to come out here. It is rather remote. I hope you had a pleasant ride. I took a moment to admire your car. I am not very in anything that has to do with cars or other ways of transportation, but I can still appreciate it being beautiful.” The smirk on his face said everything that his words didn’t. Teasing her about how he exactly knew that her ballet shoes weren’t enough to buy her a BMW convertible. Well, she was well aware of him knowing about her second occupation. That’s why both of them were here in the first place.

“I have many flaws, my Lord, but lack of taste isn’t one of them. Same with you I can tell from looking around.” Natasha offered him one of her prettiest smile and slowly sipped her wine, while her eyes darted across the room.

Helblindi nodded, then walked over to the couch to get his own glass of wine. “I would love to take credit for that, but my grandmother chose the furniture for this room. She tried to keep most of it like our ancestors had set it up, but the castle is over 700 years old. For some time it wasn’t even in my family’s possession. Things change.”

“You lost it in the Civil War?”

Helblindi turned back to her, with the glass of wine in his hand and it was for Natasha to decide what to make of this spiteful smile. It fit perfectly and that realisation was slightly disturbing. The Jotun
had a face that made people on the street turn around and look at him. Natasha just knew that there had to be men with terribly low self-esteem who ripped pictures of him out of magazines and brought them to their plastic surgeon. The beautiful features weren’t distorted though by his contemptuous smile. Spite suited him.

“Lost… Robbed. Look around, you’ve said it yourself. This is a beautiful place, full of history, strong and proud. It was the first place they took. Búri tried to keep most of Jotunheim’s noble families down by sending other nobility from all over Asgard to live in Jotunheim, stealing their homes. The Búrisons took Gras-gélar and kept it. Maybe because it is the most beautiful castle in Jotunheim, probably because it belongs to our family. For 200 years they used it as a weekend home. Not stepping a foot in any Jotun city, but enjoying the comfort of someone else’s home.”

Hardly anyone wore the sore point this wide in the open. Helblindi didn’t even try to hide it. Why should he? His motivations were clear to everybody.

Natasha made herself comfortable on the couch during the little history lesson. “How did you get it back?”

“A human being ascended to the throne.” Helblindi shrugged. “Donar the first. For some reason he was different than all the other despicable figures that have been sitting on the throne since the usurpation. Perhaps his mother dropped him as a baby. Or he was just a smart man that could read the signs of the time. That he couldn’t keep Jotunheim down much longer without another severe revolution. He was probably the only king to not just come to Jotunheim to enjoy the scenery. He went to the cities, look after the administration… there are reports that he actually made the effort to learn enough Jǫtnar to greet people. No Búrison had ever cared to do that. During his reign he loosened a lot of restrictions imposed by the language act. Lowered taxes and gave most of Jotun territory back to its original owners.”

Natasha took advantage of his small pause to make a deliberate comment. “How generous to do the right thing that should have done years ago.”

Sitting down next to her Helblindi’s anger seemed to wane at least for a moment. “I like your sarcasm, Miss Romanoff, but I have to admit that I admire his courage. Something can clearly be wrong, but when it has been that way for so long… people get used to it and it becomes harder and harder to push for a change. Especially when you are not going to profit from it yourself. We need another king like that, somebody who is not afraid of us. We might actually get one, but there is also a good chance that we won’t. That’s where we’re getting into the reason why you are, Miss Romanoff.”

Nothing about his smile was trustworthy and Helblindi clearly didn’t want it to be. That man was cutthroat through and through. Which meant that Natasha was probably going to get somewhere here. No need to run in open doors though. “Oh? I thought I was here, because you enjoy my company, my Lord.”

Helblindi casually leaned back, stretching his upper body a bit. He was deliberately showing off his lean and appealing figure. Nothing about it was circumstantial, Natasha could tell, she had the same trip up her sleeve. Those were the gracious and subtle movements of a man who was all too aware of his physique and its effects on people. Who had learned very early to use it to his advantage. “Indeed. I am a lawyer. I enjoy the presence of liars and thieves.”

Natasha smiled at him although it felt a little bit harder to do so now. A liar. Sure. Everybody lied for different reasons. A thief though? Natasha dealt in information. Most of it was given to her voluntarily, not everything though. Even though Helblindi was well aware of these circumstances, Natasha would have appreciated it if he had kept his mouth shut. What to expect? That man was all
about provocation and pushing boundaries if he thought it could get him where he wanted to be.

“Aren’t most lawyers themselves liars and thieves?” It took her merely a second to turn her smile back to sweet as sugar. It was important to not have any illusions about this. A man in Helblindi’s position could offer her information of incredible value. Even more than that. There was no way Natasha would let that opportunity pass. Both of them knew what kind of game they were playing, happy and nice faces. Hands that were holding knives.

“Oh, they most definitely are. I’ve only finished my studies and internships only a couple of months ago. Time will tell how much of a dirty lawyer I will turn out to be. One thing I already know for sure… not the one who settles matters in a courtroom. That much is for sure. Now back on topic if you might allow…” Helblindi looked into his glass before continuing. “We’ve already talked about how beautiful this place is. All of Jotunheim is. It never ceases to be beautiful no matter what hardships it has to go through. We’re going through a difficult political time. Jotunheim and all of Asgard. Jotunheim is on the edge of change, the people no longer want to put up with injustice. Meanwhile the rest of Asgard is outraged about the American policy that allows a foreign nation to destroy our economic power and stability. All because the king chose the United States over your nation, Miss Romanoff.”

All true, but Natasha liked playing the ignorant little girl. “Now why would he even have to choose?”

“Very good question. Perhaps because your president and the American president are constantly growling at each other. Asgard’s geo-political position on the mad is priceless and I guess Odin felt like he had to go with one side. The wrong one. Russia and Asgard have had a prosperous relationship for hundreds of years. I would like it to keep it this way.”

“Most lovely to hear, my Lord. Now why am I here?”

“I want security.” Helblindi stated coldly. “I know my homeland. I know my people. I can see the state of turmoil. My people trust me and my father. That’s the only reason why things haven’t escalated after that idiot was made secretary of state. The very second the first company is going to outsource Jotun jobs, there will be people in the streets and violence. They will storm the government buildings and chase away the Asgardian administration. Also if my people should ask for their independence again, we will give it to them. Odin will react with a military intervention. All these things don’t have to happen, but if they do, I want to be able to count on Russia’s support.”

Natasha’s heart skipped a beat and her limbs were tingling. This was even bigger than what she had hoped for, but she wasn’t going to let Helblindi see that. “Support as in military intervention?”

“If push comes to shove… That probably wouldn’t be necessary. A verbal declaration of support might be enough. Jotunheim and Russia have always been friends. I want to keep it that way.”

Slowly Natasha nodded. “Shouldn’t you be talking about this with the Russian ambassador?”

“Sure, if I wanted this to be an official cooperation or my father to know about it. I am here, talking to you and I want you to take my proposition to the people who need to hear it. I am sure we will come to an agreement. Jotunheim has always been the most valuable part of Asgard to Russia, hasn’t it?” A knowing smirk appeared on Helblindi’s face and at this point Natasha couldn’t deny that his almost obtrusive beauty had effects on her. Absolutely, they were going to come to an agreement. Oil and gold were always the best arguments.

Natasha crossed her legs and leaned forward, holding her glass up for a toast. “I am sure we will figure this out, my Lord.”
Obviously content Helblindi raised his own glass and took a big gulp. “I don’t have to return to Útgarðar until the early morning. Would you like to stay for dinner? When was the last time you had Jotun cuisine?”

The young Lord had already made her a very happy woman, so whatever else he could suggest would only be the icing on the top. “And here I thought that you invited me for merely professional reasons…”

Not bothering to hide his cruel streak Helblindi laughed. “As much as I enjoy your presence, Miss Romanoff, that’s not going to happen. My type is very different.”

“So what is your type?”


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“You are a terrible motivator…” Loki sighed and continued to rub his eyes. He was feeling sleepy and the couch was too comfortable.

“Just telling you like it is. Don’t pretend you don’t like that.” Stark’s tone was still flirty, causing to Loki to think that he wasn’t unable to talk differently.

“I don’t like what you have to say. I don’t like business men, managers and big companies. I hate the fucking globalisation and I would like it every much if everybody would just to business within their own country. Life would be good then.” Loki mumbled into the phone, shifting around so that he was now lying on his stomach. Didn’t do anything to make him less tired.

“Wow, you would feel right at home in the Middle Ages, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, those were the good times… when you only had to worry about harvests, pestilence and your liege being at war with someone… I wish I could sue them.”

“Who? Your liege? You’re a prince, so that would be you.”

Groaning Loki rolled his eyes. “I am talking about Næss…”

“Hmm…” Loki could hear Tony clicking his tongue. “Normally a good idea, because we evil business men only react to money and the possibility of us losing some of it. But thanks to your beautiful trade agreement you don’t stand a chance. You can still make them miserable.”

Loki’s ears perked up when he heard that. “I’m listening.”

“You can’t punish them directly since they’re not breaking the law. But if you get a little creative there is a lot you should be able to do indirectly. I’m sure you’d be able to come up with some sweet little new law that’ll give them hell. Find some quota that they can’t match… or try to find a way to make other companies benefit from not going down the same road…”

This was strange. Completely new territory. Loki didn’t know how to react to Stark actually being helpful. Little ideas were already being born in his head. He had completely lost focus. The damage with Næss was already done, now they had to stop others from doing the same.

“That is actually a good idea.”

Stark huffed playfully. “Yeah, why do you sound so surprised? I am a genius, you should listen to
me more often.”

“Half of the stuff you say to me is innuendos.”

“And what is wrong with that? You’re so stressed out and up-tight about your work, you need a little unwinding. Your boyfriend doesn’t do his job?”

So much about the unknown territory. “Careful, Stark…”

“I know, I know. But seriously, don’t you ever want to get out of there for a second? Crisis after crisis. Scandal after scandal. The never ending storm of political bullshit? Vacation is a great thing, go try it.”

Loki waited for the suggestion to go to Hawaii together or something like that, but it didn’t come. Instead Stark sounded legitimately curious. “There is no pause. In my position this is everyday life. There should be no vacation from taking care of a country.”

“That idealistic bullshit would make a little more sense if you actually were king. You are second in line. You have the sweet spot. All the glamour and none of the responsibility. Why aren’t you partying all the time? Instead of racking your brains out about things that you can’t change anyway…”

That kind of talk should make Loki angry, but what else to expect from Stark? He was projecting his own way of life on everybody else. “You mean taking advantage of my privilege and telling everybody to go fuck themselves, because I want to have a good time?”

A soft chuckled came through the line and Loki couldn’t roll his eyes enough. “Why not? That would be a nice change… Yeah, I’m only messing with you, don’t worry. I got it, you want to be king so bad that you cannot risk messing up that perfect reputation of yours.”

Now he had Loki sitting up and the words came instantly. A reflex. Like bringing your arms up when you were being hit. “You’ve said it yourself, I am second in line. Thor is going to be king. That’s not my place.”

“No, what I’ve said was that you wanted to be king. So bad…”

“I am content with the place that my ancestors wanted me to have.”

“Wow, I haven’t heard that much bullshit in a long time. “ For the first time during their conversation Stark didn’t sound amused but honestly annoyed and Loki felt tempted to immediately end this call. No, Stark wasn’t the first one to suggest that Loki had ambitions, but unlike Helblindi, he didn’t have an ulterior motive. The American wasn’t trying to talk Loki into anything, he was merely expressing his disgusting opinion.

“I am sorry, Mr. Stark, but you don’t know me as well as you might think.”

“Well, I know that you’re hot, a smartass, reckless, but all in all a good guy. The type of guy who doesn’t sleep or eat when he tries to figure out a way to do what he thinks is right. Unfortunately you’d need to be king to do that… I don’t get why it’s such a difficult thing to admit that you’d like to be king. It’s a shit job, anyway… you would look good with a crown though…”

Loki fought it, but the corners of his lips twitched and formed a little smile anyway. “The Asgardian king doesn’t wear a crown. He…”

“Wears a precious filet for special occasions and on normal days a bracelet. You’ve already told me
that. I can listen, you know?"

No way possible to deny his surprise. “I didn’t think you are getting a single word from what I was saying. You seemed to busy thinking about getting me into bed.”

“I am shockingly good at multitasking.”

The strangest thing happened and Loki laughed. Which felt like a wonderful relief. That he could actually still laugh after such a day. “So what are you doing? Tell me something that has nothing to do with Asgard, politics or businesses.”

Stark took a couple of seconds and then started talking again without asking any questions beforehand. “Well, I’m working on a super-secret but incredibly cool project that I can’t tell you anything about, because it’s super-secret. You’re clearly missing out there. What else? Yesterday I read in the newspaper that I bought an English soccer team which is insane, because I don’t know shit about soccer, but then I thought that maybe I just had forgotten about actually buying it… Since I also like to buy paintings that I don’t get and that I don’t ever look at. Turns out that I didn’t buy a soccer team, but now I am contemplating the thought, because I could force the team to wear neon blue jerseys with pink spots… My assistant’s birthday is next week and I thought about buying her a Ferrari, because that woman is putting up with me, so she deserves one… but then I would have to admit that I actually know when her birthday is and I can’t have that. She’ll expect me to remember… also I thought a Ferrari might not be enough, so she gets a free pass to get whatever she wants with my credit card. What does she do? She buys a dress for 2000 dollar when I wanted to get her a Ferrari. That woman seriously needs help. Talking about cars – I’m currently building myself a Hot Rod…”

Since Stark clearly didn’t need to breathe Loki simply interrupted him. “You can do that? Building an entire car?”

“What is with you? Don’t you google the people you sleep with?”

“Strangely enough – no.”

“That is shocking. Of course I can build a car. I can build a nuclear reactor. Do you need one?”

Closing his eyes Loki shook his head. “No, not really. Thanks for the offer though. You could buy your assistant a Ferrari anyway. I am sure she wouldn’t mind.”

That suggestion seemed to baffle Stark. “Absolutely impossible. She would figure out that I am actually a nice guy with a heart of gold and God forbid she might tell somebody else about that. Can’t have that.”

This conversation was getting more interesting by the second. “Why? Do you prefer it if people think you’re an unpleasant asshole?”

“Sure, it makes so many things so much easier. A terrible first impression is very important. I know that you agree with that. Just think about how we’ve met…”

Loki was chuckling, because that was obviously true. “Isn’t that just another way to say that you enjoy rubbing people the wrong way to get a reaction out of them?”

“Yep. Another thing that you know nothing about, huh?” Stark was teasing him and Loki shrugged, still smiling. “Only if they’re begging for it… most people do.”

“Oh, I bet…”
Just as Loki was about to reply he heard somebody calling his name and it clearly wasn’t Stark. Opening his eyes Loki saw his mother standing in front of him, looking at him with raised eyebrows. It made no sense, but Loki suddenly felt like he was in trouble.
Hello everybody,

Loki has talk with his mother, Jane has a talk with her teacher and Steve has a talk with Bucky :D

Tell me what you think and have fun

Wasn’t it weird that there were times during which people never stopped to feel like children? Loki was going through one of these moments right now. These were his own rooms, he had complete liberty to do as he pleased in here. Even outside of them Loki could talk to anybody he wanted to. Nonetheless his mother’s penetrating made him feel like he was doing something very wrong. Which was ridiculous.

“Hold on a second.” Loki told Stark, then lowered the phone and raised an eyebrow at his mother. “Something important?”

“I knocked. You didn’t answer.”

Somehow Loki doubted that, he would have heard her if she had knocked. “I’m sorry, I’m having a conversation…”

“That’s fine. I can wait.”

What else could Loki do but look at his mother in awkward silence. Did she really intend to stand next to him until he was finished talking? A couple of seconds Loki was completely stunned. “You want to wait? Here?”

“I came here all the way to talk to you, didn’t I?”

Sure, but… Loki definitely knew who he inherited the stubbornness from. Not bothering to suppress a sigh Loki turned back to his conversation. “I’m sorry, but I gotta go now. I’ll call you back.”

“What now? I thought we were exchanging your tactics how to annoy people. Or are you doing that with me right now? Not cool.”

“I’m being serious. Something came up. We’ll talk about the ability to make people miserable some other time. Have a good day.”

“It’s for sure going to be better than yours. Bye.”

Stark hung up first and Loki went to battle. Strange to think like this about a talk with his mother. For now Loki would pretend that he didn’t expect to be criticized. “What is going on?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation.” Frigga sat down next to him and Loki wanted to huff, but instead he merely arched an eyebrow. “But you weren’t going to let me continue it in private either. What is going on?”
Loki didn’t get an answer but another question. “You were talking to the merchant of death?” Not that much of a question since Frigga had listened to the conversation and Loki didn’t even know for how long. He responded with a mere nod.

“I thought you had given up the plan to seek out his help in the Jotun matter. At this time the mere thought of American involvement would cause more bad than good among the people.”

Sure, Loki was aware of that and he wasn’t crazy enough to even think of trying another stunt like he had previously in mind. The hostility towards the United States was overwhelming right now, any cooperation whatsoever would only be met with more rage. “Nothing of that sort. It was a private conversation.”

That earned him a raised eyebrow. “You have private conversations with Tony Stark?” The reproach was hidden well enough, but Loki could hear it quite well. “Yes, I do. He has proven to be very entertaining.”

“I don’t think that that’s a wise idea, Loki.”

“What? Me talking to someone? To someone who I had sex with? It’s none of that sort and it’s my business who I decide to have phone conversations with.” There was no denying that his mother’s concern annoyed him. They and the country had about 1000 problems right now and Stark wasn’t one of them.

“Of course it’s your business, Loki. I am your mother. It’s normal for me to worry about you. Sometimes because of the people you surround yourself with. I am not a fan of Tony Stark, nor of his reputation.” Frigga offered him a little smile and Loki felt his annoyance fade the slightest bit. Still he would prefer to talk about pretty much anything else. Before Frigga brought up Balder in this discussion like he knew she wanted to. “What can I do for you, mother?”

“I’ve wanted to talk about several things… Most of all how I am surprised that you haven’t sought out your father. I expected you to go at him after you’ve been protesting the American policy so ferociously.”

It wasn’t like Loki hadn’t been tempted. Wasn’t tempted. “I don’t see the point. I’ve spoken my mind several times and father is a smart man. He knows what the policy entails, he knew that this might… would happen. He decided that the relationship to the States is more important than that. For father that’s a necessary sacrifice. We’ve been over and over that. Again and again. Why should I bring it back up now?”

Frigga hinted at a smile, the one that would make any grown man feel like he was again eight years old and needed mommy to explain him how the world worked. “It’s not like you to give up. Where is that coming from?”

“Giving up? You sound like you want me to rebel against it even more.”

“I know you and I can’t help but notice when you’re not acting like you usually would. What kind of mother would I be if I wasn’t concerned?”

Sighing in defeat Loki shrugged. He felt way too tired to have this discussion. Where was it supposed to lead anyway? They both knew that sooner or later Loki would tell Odin exactly what he was thinking about this fucked up situation. Right now Loki wanted to feel drained for a while and not be reminded of what was going on. Stark had done a pretty good job as a distraction and now Loki was back to square one.
“There is no reason to be concerned. You might just say that I’m growing up, because I am thinking about what I’m going to do before I’m actually doing it.”

At least that made his mother laugh and she lovingly kissed his cheek. “You’ve always been doing that.”

“I’ve got more than one thing on my mind. Not just the American policy. I listened to your advice, didn’t I? I talked to Helblindi and he called of the plebiscite. Now I am in his debt and I have to pay it. Unfortunately I will not be able to do that as quickly as he wants me to. Quickly… he wants all of that done yesterday. There’s that… I need to convince the king or the crown prince to abolish the language act. I can’t really afford to start bitching around how utterly stupid the American policy is. I don’t want to move myself in a bad position. Does that help you to feel less concerned?”

“Very much so, because that actually sounds like my son.” Frigga seemed perfectly happy. “I think you don’t have to worry too much about the young Lord of Jotunheim. He is a brilliant young man and a realist. He knows what is possible and what isn’t.”

“A lot of things are possible if you are ruthless enough and I believe that Helblindi would be very keen on applying measures that I wouldn’t be comfortable with… and I don’t have the impression that he is very patient.”

Why were they talking about Helblindi? Of all people. Loki really had a talent for self-manipulation. Driving that thorn deeper into his side and into his mind.

The change of topic turned Frigga more serious. “He is a fierce believer in the Jotun cause. Maybe the fiercest one of all. You are wrong though. He is very patient. There is an old proverb that most Jotuns are.”

“Since when do you believe in any kind of stereotypes?” Loki quirked an eyebrow at his mother who smiled at him in the sweetest way. “You are right, but in this case I am more talking from experience. I talked to him at every public even that I saw him at. He likes the reputation and the façade of the radical Jotun, but I do believe he is well aware of what is possible and what not. You should be able to negotiate with him.”

Loki genuinely hoped that she was right, but he doubted it. Perhaps because of his eyes. Constantly burning. Also his words…

“I guess we’ll see.” Another thing that Loki wasn’t going to continue talking about. Helblindi should be the very last thing on his mind. He really didn’t appreciate his mother bringing all these things up that he could perfectly do without. At least today.

“What I actually wanted to talk to you about…”

Despite himself Loki had to laugh. Of course there had to be something else. “Yes?”

“I’ve heard about your choice for your new doctor.”

“ Heard about? You mean you checked my schedule.” Loki didn’t the reproach but Frigga ignored it. For him that was just another way of looking after her son.

“Do you really think that a university professor is the most adapt person for this important position?”

Another conversation that Loki should be able to end with one single sentence ‘It’s none of your business. Unfortunately that had never worked before with his mother. “Doctor Strange isn’t just a professor. He was one of the world’s best surgeons.”
“Right, he was. After his accident he has only been able to work at the university and in research. He hasn’t worked as a surgeon in years.”

“Mother, I don’t need a surgeon. I need someone to do my check-ups, to check my blood pressure and so on. He is more than qualified to do that. As a surgeon he had the reputation of being thorough and a perfectionist. Those are the qualities that I want and need. I offered him the job and he accepted. It’s done. I am perfectly happy with my choice.” Loki hadn’t mentioned Strange’s best qualities and he wasn’t going to. Despite his terrible mood, he would never want to upset his mother in any kind of way. Not on purpose.

Unfortunately Frigga could be just as stubborn as him. She wasn’t going to let this go. “I am not criticizing his credentials. His CV is quite impressive. But he is a foreigner. In every way to this country and to the court. How do you know that he is trustworthy?”

“Actually you’re only speaking in his favour. He has obtained the Asgardian citizenship over three years ago, so he is not a foreigner anymore. I don’t care about his life before that. If you are worried that he might play loose with information… I ran a check on him. No close ties to the United States. Also… I was explicitly looking for somebody who isn’t close to the court.”

The moment the words left Loki’s mouth Frigga’s face couldn’t hide her displeasure anymore. “I hoped you would consult me and listen to my advice in this question.”

“Mother, I appreciate your concern and you know that I highly value your advice. This is a different matter though. I am perfectly able to choose my own doctor.”

Frigga hinted at a smile and squeezed his wrist. “I would never doubt that. I am merely asking the question if you should make this choice alone.”

It hit a very sore spot. Loki almost had to force his fingers to not form a fist. He reminded himself of how she only ever wanted the best for him and sometimes that care presented itself in the form of overbearingness. “It’s my doctor. Who but me should decide that?”

“Your health is a matter of state. You alone can decide what you do in the privacy of your rooms, you can choose who to be with or what politics to believe in, but your well-being is too important to this country to take lightly.”

“How am I taking it lightly when I engaged a doctor with only the best credentials?”

“An American doctor. Shortly after you took an American lover. That could make the wrong impression.”

This conversation was weighing him down in the most uncomfortable way. “Strange is Asgardian and I made my decision. I don’t want to discuss this anymore and frankly… I would prefer it if you stayed out of this matter from now on. I’ll handle these things alone.”

Loki had hurt her, he could see it in her eyes which were so similar to his own. He felt his throat constricting although it was all pointless. Nothing he had done could be considered an affront. Frigga’s hand was still on his wrist, her grip getting a little tighter. She was looking at him, letting him see her pain and the intensity was almost too much to bear. Loki wouldn’t let himself fall back into patterns where he felt like a little boy who had to believe his mother everything. Her voice was soft but firm. “I don’t want you to doubt even for a second that there might be anything in this world that could be more important to me than your health, Loki. Nothing.”

Not knowing what to say Loki nodded slowly and that seemed to be enough to bring the smile back
to his mother’s face. Leaning in Frigga kissed his forehead, then stroked his cheek. “Have you eaten anything yet?”

“No, except for breakfast…”

“Then let’s get you something to eat.”

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“Good. Really good. We need to work on your pronunciation but it was quite good.”

Jane smiled in response, it felt sure good to receive some praise, but it was still no reason to get overexcited. Now she was able to tell somebody her name, her age and her hobbies in Old Norse. What an achievement. Jane had a doctorate and now she was back to square one. Languages had never been her field of expertise and then it had to be something as complex as Old Norse. No similarities to English whatsoever.

Her teacher was nice and doing a pretty good job at explaining to her, but the process was slow and unnerving. Maybe Jane was unfair to herself, in some cases it was necessary to take one’s time and learning a language was no easy task.

“You don’t seem to content.” Gaea tilted her head, her tone was soft and Jane laughed in lithe embarrassment. “Sorry, I’m glad that I did good, but… I’d like to already be a lot further down the road.”

“That’s a very common mistake. Believe me, we’re moving at the perfect pace. We have to thoroughly cover the basics or you’ll always have trouble when you want to reach a higher level. We’re doing just fine. Have you looked at the different short stories that I gave you?”

Quickly Jane nodded and reached into the folder where she kept her notes. During their last lesson Gaea had given her a list of stories that she might be interested in reading. Fairly easy stuff. Uncomplicated. Jane had looked all of them up online and had made a choice. Not quite for kids, but still very simple tales.

After a quick explanation of which book would be her favourite Gaea seemed content and wanted to end their session. “Can I still ask you some questions?”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

Taking out another sheet Jane pushed it across the table towards. “I’m looking for something else to read and I was wondering if you could recommend me something.”

Nodding absently Gaea let her eyes run across the list and her eyebrows almost went up immediately. “Those are classics. High literature. I admire your ambition, but I think we should start with something a bit easier.”

Laughing lightly Jane shook her head. “God no… I don’t want to read them in Old Norse. I can barely make out the most basic stuff. No, I want to read it in English. I guess it will help me to understand some of the history better if I read some Asgardian literature. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I see…” Gaea’s eyes travelled across the sheet and Jane could see her lips twitch as she recognized some of the titles. “Let me guess. You typed ‘most famous Asgardian books’ into google, right?”

“About right. I compared three different lists and printed out those that were on every single one.”
“They are all classics, no matter which one you read you get quality. It depends on your taste. Would you like something more amusing or serious? Because some of them are really… heavy stuff. All of the top three will stick with you, but they are not feel good stories.”

Not what Jane was looking for anyway. “It’s not just for entertainment value. I want something that’s typical Asgardian. A story that couldn’t have been written by an American author. A story that can’t take place anywhere else but in Asgard.”

That obviously narrowed their possibilities down very quickly, because Gaea immediately pointed at number 4.

“Here… barn-svíkja. Probably the most controversial one on the list, but it couldn’t have been written anywhere else.”

Interested Jane nodded and tried to remember the plot synopsis she had read. “What is it about?”

Gaea leaned back in her chair and took a breath as if she was going to hold a speech. “It’s rather complicated, but if I had to sum it up in a couple of sentences… It’s about a child that is born from infidelity. A married woman had an affair with a married man and a child was born from this… union. The book is about the child growing up and… its life in general.”

“Alright… that doesn’t sound very controversial to me…”

Jane could see that her statement made Gaea uncomfortable. The usually calm and collected teacher shifted on her chair and cleared her throat. “It’s… how familiar are you with the trúa?”

“I know that cheating is considered… sinful.”

“That’s a very Christian way of putting it.” Gaea smiled weakly. “Cheating destroys your luonto and it never recovers from it. A horrendous act that cannot be undone. The trúa is perfectly clear on that… it isn’t on other implications. It doesn’t even mention the possibility of children being born from infidelity. For hundreds of years that topic was taboo, people didn’t talk about it and… actually society is still unclear how to deal with a barn-svíkja. That’s the term for a child born from both parents cheating.”

Jane raised her hand to stop Gaea from talking, because she didn’t really like where this was going. “Wait… it’s not the child’s fault what their parents did…”

“That’s one of the theories treated in the book… the problems is that… the act of cheating actually destroys your soul. It’s been generally accepted that nothing good could ever come from that. It’s something that nobody talks about and… officially… I don’t think that there are any barn-svíkja. Sure, there are stories about women getting a very rushed divorce and lying about the birthday of their child. That’s one possibility. Abortion is the other one. The book was written 25 years ago and it doesn’t give any kind of answer, but it was the first to actually address these things. It’s fascinating and… very uncomfortable at times, but it definitely is Asgardian.”

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Steve had been gnawing on his lower lip for about half a minute. He was so terribly bad at this sort of thing. Back in school every kid had had to prepare a little speech and talk about a topic of their choice.

That was no problem. Steve could go on for hours about baseball, American politics, the Second World War and so on. A speech was something you had to do alone, you could prepare it and hopefully you got to talk about something that you felt great passion for. Steve’s teacher had been
ecstatic and full of praise. Yeah, Steve would feel so much better if he could hold a speech.

People weren’t interrupting you and you didn’t have to change direction suddenly. Facts were something beautiful, you couldn’t get offended by them. Or at least you shouldn’t.

This was something way more personal. A minefield and Steve had no idea what he was allowed to say or what would be deemed inappropriate. It was so strenuous to think over every single sentence in his head so many times and then he still had no idea if it was okay to say it that way. It gave Steve a headache, especially he didn’t mean any harm in the first place.

There was no way around this though. Steve had come here with a plan and he was going to stick with it. Taking another deep breath Steve quickly rang the doorbell and then there was no way back. No time to even hope that James wasn’t at home, because Steve could instantly hear footsteps coming closer.

The door was being opened and James looked at him with a clearly surprised expression on his face. The thought crossed Steve’s mind that maybe he wasn’t glad to see him and that was a horribly unpleasant feeling.

“Hey Steve… we didn’t set up something that I forgot about, right?”

“No, I…” Steve forced himself to remind himself why he was here and then talking actually was a bit easier. “I knew that it was your day off today and I thought I could come over bring some beer and we talk for a bit?”

That was a fine start, right? Steve held up the six-pack and the relief was undeniable when James started to smile. “Sure, come in… I gotta warn you though, you come unannounced, I didn’t have time to clean up the apartment.”

“Oh, I don’t care.” Steve shrugged as James let him inside. The apartment was by no means in chaos, just a few books and clothes lying around that normally weren’t there. The television was running, some movie in Old Norse and James quickly turned it off as they settled down on the couch, both of them a beer in hand.

“So how was your day?”

“Okay. Nothing special. People still hanging around in front of the embassy. Things are still calm enough, but I’d really like that protest to end.” Steve sighed and James swallowed a laugh. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen any time soon. The Crown hasn’t commented on the situation yet, rumours didn’t get confirmed. That’s only going to get worse.”

Not really the thing that Steve had wanted to talk about. Politics were taking up too much space anyway. “Listen… you said that you preferred it if people didn’t make a big thing out it and I’m really trying to do this and if I fuck something up, just tell me, but I would like to know a couple of things.”

Now that was a terrible beginning, Steve was well aware of that. Nevertheless he couldn’t think of a way to phrase it better.

James was still smiling, he always did, but it was frozen in place. “Yes?” He sounded suspicious and Steve wanted that strain on their relationship to go away. That was why he was here, wasn’t it?

“I didn’t know how to address a couple of things… Damn, I’m doing it again. I think you’ll appreciate it if I just come to the point. Have you ever been in a relationship with a guy?”
Steve swore that time stopped that very second. There was only his heartbeat and the agonizing wait for James’ reaction. Was he going to be mad, because Steve had fucked up again?

The soft sound of laughter coming to his ears made Steve release a long sigh of relief. James was clearly having fun and he wasn’t even trying to hide it. “You’re dying right now, aren’t you?”

“Totally yeah…” Steve also laughed, because it felt like the thing to do. No way to hide the embarrassment. At least James wasn’t angry and went easy on him. “There was a guy in Russia and one in Wakanda.”

And Steve already running out of words again, so instead he took a sip of his beer. James was smiling again, it was pretty and open. So there was a good chance Steve hadn’t messed this up completely.

“You want to hear about my past relationships? You don’t have to, you know. I know what you’re trying to do and I appreciate it. I’m actually sorry if you think we aren’t completely okay. We are okay. Totally fine.”

No, Steve hadn’t known that, he had come here to fix things and as it turned out that wasn’t even necessary. “Good, that’s… good. Wait a second. Russia? You must have been what? 14?”

“13. I was an early starter, but it was completely platonic. Well mostly…”

“You are right, I don’t really wanna know.”

James almost choked on his beer laughing and Steve was just happy to hear that.
Hello everybody,
Not much to say this time ;)

Bucky was feeling a little buzz which told him that the beers hadn’t been the best idea. His eyelids were getting heavy and he was in the mood to tell Steve the most ridiculous and embarrassing stories about himself. Of course he wasn’t going to do it, but right now Bucky just felt cozy and content. That didn’t happen too often. At least not in this kind of setting.

“Are you tried?” Steve wanted to know and Bucky realised that he was looking at him through half-closed lids. No way to deny that. “A bit.”

“I can leave if…”

Instantly Bucky shook his head. Something rather hard to explain. When you were sure about what you wanted, but you had no idea why. In this case Bucky wanted Steve to stay. Sure, he was tired and yet sleep couldn’t be further from Bucky’s mind. “No, I’m just a bit sleepy. I don’t have to work tomorrow. You?”

Steve lazily shook his head. “No and that suits me fine. I can easily go a day without having to see Coulson.”

A small smirk made its way on Bucky’s face. “I thought you liked him. He definitely likes you. He thinks you are the definition of the perfect American.”

Bucky liked the way Steve’s eyebrows shot up. How he couldn’t fool absolutely anyone. His emotions were always right there, on his face.

“Yeah, he is alright, but I really don’t have to see him every day. At work is definitely enough.” Steve shrugged somewhat casually and then took a sip from his beer. Third or fourth? It couldn’t be the second one. Bucky’s eyes drifted to his own bottle and he honestly couldn’t figure out how many he had drunk himself. That had less to do with him being drunk, rather not paying attention.

“Does that also count for me? You see me at work. Am I annoying too after some time?”

“I didn’t say that Coulson was annoying. I just don’t want to spend time with him in my free time. I can’t even imagine him not wearing a suit. What would he even look like wearing a t-shirt? No tie… I can’t see that working.” Steve shook his head while shifting around, stretching out his legs to get more comfortable on the couch. It was getting a bit small for them.

“Okay, I got it. Suits are bad. Associated with work and bad things. Remind me to never wear one.”

Steve chuckled in amusement. “Do you even own a suit?”

“Sure, I do! I wear it to special occasions. Weddings. Or whenever I get a medal.”
“How often does that happen?”

“How often does that happen?” Bucky was ready start listing up all the reasons why he should already be sitting behind Coulson’s desk. What he didn’t expect was Steve to reply a hint of sarcasm “Yeah, you are.”

It was one of those rare, sweet compliments that completely take you aback. Although it was so simple. Perhaps it was the way Steve had said it. That small smile and how he shyly lowered his eyes for just a second. Details. So unimportant. Fleeting. Most people would probably never notice and yet Bucky was completely charmed.

Of course Steve had no idea. It would be a first one…

“But seriously – what would you do if you were to quit service? You’re going to do that eventually. Any plans?”

A perfectly normal question. This time Steve wasn’t implying anything or trying to tell him that leaving service would be a terrible idea. He just wanted to know.

“Something similar I guess. Consulting or working in security. Something of that sort. It’s not happening tomorrow. Maybe I’ll spend a month on a tropical island before that. Get tanned.”

“No, you’ll have to get used to the cold. That’s one of the reasons I couldn’t stay here forever. I prefer the summer.”

“It does get warm during summer. Warm, not hot. Lots of people hang out around the river. Relaxing not swimming. It’s nice.” Bucky smiled to himself and Steve nodded absently. “I want to eventually move back to Brooklyn. It’s weird but sometimes I feel like a small town boy, I like the place where I come from, because it’s familiar and the neighbourhood is close, people know each other… and yet it’s definitely not a small town. I guess it’s the attitude. The place where I grew up, the place where I want to live… I guess that’s a bit narrow-minded.”

Bucky’s buzz wasn’t by far strong enough to let him not realise that this statement was utterly stupid. “Why? Because you happen to like the place you grew up in? There’s nothing wrong about that and it definitely has nothing to do with narrow-mindedness.”

Steve made a dismissive gesture and Bucky got the feeling that he regretted bringing this up. “Right, it doesn’t matter, because it’s complete bullshit. You aren’t narrow-minded. Like at all. We shouldn’t even talk about this.”

For Bucky the conversation was over, but Steve’s eyes suddenly became a bit more attentive and he liked his lips rather unsurely. “Really? Because I thought that I didn’t earn a lot of bonus points. Especially with you…”

How did that make any kind of sense? Even Steve should have noticed that he could hardly do anything wrong in Bucky’s eyes. No, Bucky wasn’t deliberately making up excuses for him, but he was pretty confident that he was good judge of character. There was in no malice in any of Steve’s actions, none of it could be motivated by bad intentions. “Why? You didn’t do anything.”

“No, but…” Steve turned away like he was actually looking for words. “I got the impression that things were a little uneasy. That’s why I came here today. To set a couple of things right.”

“There’s nothing to set straight. You did nothing wrong. You’re having trouble adapting to a couple
of things that you were either not very familiar with or that aren’t your thing. You’re making an
effort and that’s more than you’re obligated to. Nobody can force you to understand or appreciate
another’s way of life. It’s totally fine as long as you’re a nice guy about it.”

“That’s what you believe? Because lately I’ve been feeling like… I’m a jerk for not understanding.”
The words only slowly passed Steve’s lips. He seemed to be reluctant about them, almost trying to
keep them in.

“That’s ridiculous. No one can demand you to do that. Don’t feel guilty about that. I would feel bad
if you did.” Bucky wanted to make that as clear as possible. The idea that he was making Steve
uncomfortable in any kind of way was strange. Unpleasant even. Steve may be a bit old-fashioned
and would never be as outgoing as Bucky, but there was nothing wrong with that. A guy who was
unable to hide the tiniest bit of his personality and character and Bucky thought it was lovely.

The silence which settled in between them was easy and it ended when Steve nodded. “Okay. It’s
good to hear that. I was more worried about… that you would be mad at me or think that I am an
idiot. I really don’t want you to think badly of me.”

It was raw honesty and Bucky had to swallow before even trying to find an answer. He was tempted
to shout out the word ‘No’, but he still aware how ridiculous that would be. Also the truth. Normally
Bucky was pretty straightforward, anything else was a waste of time to him. Only a short time after
they had met Bucky had considered bringing it all up, making his intentions blatantly clear. Looking
back Bucky thought that he had more or less done exactly that. Still he hadn’t been straightforward
enough. Obviously his attempts had still been too subtle for Steve which was infuriating and cute at
the same time. For Bucky the idea of having to actually tell someone ‘Hey I like you – Do you want
to go on a date with me?’ was endearing. Part of him wanted to do exactly that. A stupid idea. Steve
had just come around and the last thing on Bucky’s mind was to alienate him.

Then again – what was the point in pretending things were different from what they really were?
Bucky had been subtle, because he liked to be a tease. Sometimes. Why should he act like Steve
wasn’t somebody Bucky felt a connection with? It always depended on how you were saying it
rather than what you were saying.

“I told you once that everybody has to like you. Maybe that’s not true. Some weird asshole is surely
going to find a stupid excuse why they don’t like you. Me personally, I can’t imagine to think badly
of you. Ever.”

Steve hadn’t really been moving, but Bucky could see him freeze anyway. A couple of seconds that
made Bucky regret saying anything or for caring. Until that small and quite sweet smile made its way
on Steve’s face. “Thanks…”

Almost overwhelming. The words were already lying on Bucky’s tongue. Wanna have dinner
sometime with me? Something like that. Instead Bucky took another sip from his beer and enjoyed
that things were easy for now. He could complicate them another time.

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Lecture of Helblindi Ymirson interrupted several times by thunderous applause

As Loki lowered the phone he had a tight feeling in his stomach. By the end of this week he would
have developed an ulcer. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go. Newspapers filled with angry
letters from ordinary citizens, accusing the king of letting a foreign nation exploiting them. Forgetting
about his most important duty – protecting the Asgardian people. To serve them.
In the meantime the University of Élivágar had to hire extra security before Helblindi’s lecture, because too many people came to see him. They adored him. Not just the Jotuns, but every person in this country. Loki could see it. So easy to look up to. Ancient royal blood. Beautiful. Charismatic. Saying the things that everybody wanted to hear but that normal politicians usually didn’t voice.

At this time nothing could get easier for Loki.

Slowing down Loki greeted the guard in front of his father’s office.

“Your highness.”

“I want to talk to my father.”

“I am sorry, your highness, but the king doesn’t want to be disturb.”

“It’s a good thing then that the king knows that I never do what I’m told to do.” Loki knew that the guard wouldn’t hold him back. They never did. Which meant that Odin had given them an order to let Loki pass. While everybody pretended that Loki did whatever he wanted.

Stepping inside the office Loki noted once more how easy it was to overlook all the pomp and luxury in this room. What really mattered was that desk. Where all the laws and treaties were signed. This was the place where you got to be king.

The F rolled off Loki’s tongue but the rest of the word wouldn’t make its way past his lips. The paintings on the wall, the trimming on the desk, the window with his beautiful sight over the park. None of that could capture Loki’s attention even for a second. Then there was his father. Was he really Loki’s father in this moment? A frail old man, sunken deeply into his chair. At first glance Loki didn’t even recognize him. This had to be an imposter in his father’s chair. The Asgardian king was larger than life. Had always been like that. A stout man with broad shoulders, imposing his impressive presence on everyone in the same room. Who had easily picked Loki up to carry him around on said strong shoulders.

And that was just his father. There was also the King of Asgard. Who had every person bowing their heads in a sign of real respect. The one who held the keys and yielded the power. It was one of Loki’s earliest memories that everybody had always looked up to his father. Not literally like Loki, a small child. No, they accepted him without a doubt as their sovereign, had faith in his powers and abilities.

That was the man Loki was looking for, but he hadn’t found him yet. He recognized the face and the light blue eyes. Familiar lines and calloused hands that had always softly patted Loki’s hair. Unfortunately that was all. In front of Loki was a man who wasn’t able to hide a single one of the many years he had lived. Every political scandal, every crisis had left a trace and Loki had never seen them standing out so obviously. Because they were alone? Because this was the room where no weakness was allowed?

Clearing his throat Loki tried to capture Odin’s attention whose eyes were still fixed on a several documents on the desk. His gaze was empty though. “Father?”

“If you are here for a fight, Loki, it’s definitely the wrong time.” Even his voice Loki could hear the weariness. Loki swallowed, because he was immediately tempted to back off. To go easy on his father. No, that wasn’t an option. Asgard came always first.

“Sometimes I just want to talk without escalating things immediately.”

“That doesn’t sound much like my son Loki.”
“I don’t want to fight, I want to understand. We’re slipping. Losing control and I want to know why.”

Finally Odin looked up, his eyes met Loki’s and it was clear that this conversation wasn’t going to happen without a fight. “Before you start one of your speeches that I’ve heard before – I don’t sign any document without fully knowing what consequences it might entail. Everything that is happening at the moment is completely legal and not very surprising. As you should know.”

“Exactly. That makes it even worse. That means we’re deliberately throwing Asgardian employees under the bus to please several big companies and one nation that we’ve never been on good terms with. That’s the wrong choice to make…”

Odin reacted by shaking his head, almost in defeat. “How can your mind be so sharp when you lack to see all the different colours between black and white?”

“The situation seems very obvious to me. It benefits the ones who already have enough. Who don’t struggle to make ends meet. The policy makes the ones richer who already have more money than they can count. Are those really the people that need the support of the government?”

Once more Odin released a sigh that sounded like he had heard these same words over one hundred times before. “Loki, please, not now.”

“Not now? I’m sorry, father, but it’s happening right now. People are already losing their jobs and besides how terribly immoral and wrong that is… It makes the crown look terrible while the Ymirsons can wander around, telling the people how terrible we are and gain more support everyday. I’m making this sound so simple, because for the people it is simple! We’re the one who make their lives more difficult and the Ymirsons are merely pointing it out. It’s a disaster all over and-“

“Enough!”

It made no sense. Seconds ago Loki had wondered how his father had been reduced to such a tired and unimposing figure and now his thunderous voice made Loki flinch and take a step back. One moment that brought back the king which only needed to look at a person to make them feel small and insufficient.

“Who are you? The son I’ve raised? The one who was always calculating and wanted all the pieces of the puzzle before trying to put it together. Now you storm into my office like a child, having only read the first page of the book, assuming that you already know the rest. You don’t! You could if you weren’t captured in your ideas of right and wrong. You know better than that. You’ve always known better than that. So why are you doing this now? Acting like somebody who has read one single newspaper and believes he has worked it all out.” The energy slipped away terrifyingly quickly. At the beginning Loki could still feel his father’s anger at him. The outrage. But it had to make way. Exhaustion easily caught up with it.

It wasn’t the first time. Loki had heard that reproach before. People telling him that he had no idea what he was talking about, because he didn’t share their opinion. Ministers, journalists, lobbyists and even friends. Loki had never pretended that he cared much. The man in front of him was his father, the king and his critic cut deeply into Loki’s flesh. They had argued more times than Loki could count. Mostly about policy. Not once had Odin accused him of not knowing what he was talking about.

Loki swallowed and he felt that doubt inside of him. That he could be wrong, that he was missing something, that he was indeed guided by anger. Reality was on his side though. “I am the very same,
but I begin to wonder if you are still worrying about the lives of our people when they aren’t the ones that profit from our politics.”

Having his father stare at him with eyes that were judging him was harder to stand than Loki had expected. His body was trying to squirm, but Loki tried to fight it as best as he could. Eventually Odin released him and turned his head away, looking past him. “Why are you doing this to me, Loki? Now. When I need to know that you are capable of so much more. You can’t seriously believe it to be so simple.”

Loki tilted his head up daringly. “Then I explain it to me.”

“I shouldn’t have to explain it to you. This is your own field of expertise. Don’t you claim that all the time? Can it really be so simple that I turn against the people that I have to serve? Or may things be a little more complex. Like actual politics.”

“I am fully aware that this was a choice between American or Russian affiliations, but that doesn’t mean I agree with it.”

His father laughed without any happiness. “Again, a little too simple.”

“Then explain it to me and stop patronizing me!” Loki was rapidly losing his patience and his father closed his eyes.

“We are wealthy and quite influential. Yet such a small nation in comparison. It’s not us who writes the script of how things are going. Most countries of the world are only pawns in someone else’s game and you know that. At least we are strong enough to choose our own affiliations. Have you talked to the Russian ambassador lately? Or to Fury? No, you are too busy to alienate him. The signs aren’t good. Nobody is talking about war, but a political ice age between the most powerful nations of this world is going to affect anybody. We would get pulled into it if we wanted or not. Our position on the map leaves no doubt about that.”

“You mean Jotunheim.”

Odin huffed slightly. “Yes, Jotunheim and its border to Russia. It has always been an important geopolitical spot. During my entire reign I have had Russian requests to let them station troops behind our borders or to set up bases. I have never given them the permission to do so and I won’t give the Americans permission to do so either. Nonetheless I felt that it was necessary to improve a relationship that has strained for centuries.”

“So you chose to go with the Americans… over a nation that we’ve had friendly relations with for centuries…” Loki wouldn’t even try to keep the spite out of his voice.

“Again – not as simple as you might think. Did it never cross your mind that the Russians would somebody stop asking me for permission?”

Loki frowned, trying to find the information that he seemed to be missing. “I don’t see…”

“I came to my ears that Laufey has been receiving visits from the Russian ambassador once a month. Only two days ago Natasha Romanoff has met Helblindi Ymirson at Gras-geilar. Show me that you’re smart. What could be the reason for that?”

It took some afford to not start biting his lip. How was Loki supposed to see the big picture when he was lacking important information? And it had to do with Helblindi. Of course, Loki started to feel an unpleasant burning in his gut that he knew wouldn’t go away for a while. “Russia is taking a shortcut… They want a foot in Jotun territory and are talking to the Jotun Lord directly… and
thereby disrespecting you as the sovereign.”

Finally Odin seemed to be pleased with something that Loki had to say. His tired features relaxed a bit. “And how could Jotunheim possibly profit from all of this?”

Now it was Loki closing his eyes. Damn that horrible man for having the guts to do something that Loki only made up in his head as a distraction. Helblindi would go through with anything as long as he thought it would help Jotunheim. Loki had been merely creating a play that had never come to fruition when he had contacted Stark. Helblindi wasn’t afraid to make a deal that would eventually get him military support if the crisis should escalate.

“You went with the Americans, because the Russians have already turned to the Jotuns… Okay, I understand, but there would have still been other possibilities. Better one. Ones that didn’t affect the general public. “

“Do you really believe that I will leave them alone? Every Asgardian will be cared for as long as I am King of Asgard… which I am not going to be forever. Therefore I need you to understand. I need you to see the whole picture, Loki. I need you.”

The entire atmosphere shifted again. Loki felt like being pushed back by the sudden honest and raw emotion that his father put on display. “What are you…”

He shouldn’t have said anything. Odin quickly collected himself, put his hands flat on the table. His eyes remained on Loki, still as urgent, but his tone had changed. More calm and collected. Like a King was supposed to be.

“You see it yourself. I’ve told both of you all my life. Ruling is hardship. There is no easy part in it and it lasts forever. Your mind and body weaken while the crown never gets lighter. Soon the time will have come for Thor to take on this burden and during the last months he has done nothing to make it even harder for himself to succeed. He chose a wife that cannot provide him any support but who will ultimately make him an easy target for attacks. You can be a hothead and he is even worse. I know he will be kind and fair, but I can see how he is underestimating the toll it is going to take on him. I had to do it alone, but I grew up in different times. I didn’t get the childhood that you had. I was prepared from the moment I was born. It was the right decision though, I wanted you to grow up differently, to enjoy being young like ordinary kids… and yet… can anyone ever be prepared enough? I was younger than Thor. Maybe I am doing him wrong. I hope I am doing him wrong, but I know that he will need you. For council and advice. To see the whole picture. To not trust the wrong people and you will need him to start trusting anyone. So please… don’t start being rash now. I need you to take everything into consideration before acting. Thor is going to need you to be smart and unafraid, but also to be the one who looks behind the scenes. Please, Loki… I need to know that I can rely on you.”

“Of course you can… but you’ll have to know that I’m not always going to give the council that you would want me to give.”

A tired smile decorated Odin’s lips. “Unlike you my son, I don’t lack trust in you.”
Blindingly his hand was searching for the alarm clock, finally turning off that unforgiving beeping sound. Whining ever so softly he rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. There was this short moment of deliberation. It happened every couple of weeks. Like what would be the consequences if Aðalherr decided that he wasn’t going to get up. Forget about going to work, he wasn’t even going to brush his teeth. Staying buried between the pillows the entire day and catching up on the sleep that he had been missing over the last couple of year.

He hadn’t even finished dreaming about his fantasy when Aðalherr was already getting out of bed. Maybe in five years, who knew. Yawning softly Aðalherr left the bedroom and headed for the bathroom. The shower helped to wake up him up and he was brushing his teeth when Úlfarna entered the bathroom. It was a relief to see that his wife definitely had the same dream of crawling back into bed. Black, tousled strands were covering her eyes and she rubbed the back of her hand over her face.

“Good morning.” Aðalherr kissed her on the cheek and then left the shower to her. The routine was the same every morning which was quite important. Otherwise chaos would erupt and nobody would leave this house on time.

Checkpoint 1 was Týlaugr’s room. Aðalherr knocked softly before entering. “Morning. Breakfast is ready in ten minutes.”

Týlaugr mumbled softly and rolled around, pulling the blanket over his head. The similarities brought a smile to Aðalherr’s face. Like father like son. Checkpoint 2 was the kitchen. Humming softly Aðalherr put two slices of bread into the toaster and then prepared a bowl of cereal for Týlaugr. When everything was put on the table Aðalherr turned on the radio to listen to the news. For now it was only background noise since they would be talking only about Valhalla for the next 15 minutes.

Eventually Úlfarna joined him the kitchen with their youngest one on her arm. Aðalherr smiled amusedly and let his hand run over the small shock of black hair. “Good morning. So tired that you forgot how to walk? Or why does Mommy have to carry you?”

Their daughter mumbled the word ‘carry’ like she always did when she wanted somebody to pick her up and Úlfarna smiled. “Guess we have to put you to bed sooner. Come on, Daddy made you some toast.”

The entire family sat around the table three minutes later when Týlaugr walked in still in his pyjamas, looking rather like a zombie than a 7 year-old boy. He ate his cereal without a word and almost asleep with his face in the bowl two times. Like any other day.
After breakfast Aðalherr made sure that Týlaugr brushed his teeth and got dressed. Úlfarna pecked him on the lips before saying goodbye and driving off to bring Sangríðr to the play group. Aðalherr waited in the doorway for Týlaugr who slowly caught up with him, his back bag wrapped around his shoulders. “You didn’t forget anything?”

“No. Mommy put my lunch box in my backpack.”

“Good, then let’s go.”

Checkpoint 3 Týlaugr’s school and then off to work. It was an ordinary day, he spent the entire noon working on the same design. At the end of his lunch break he called Úlfarna to check how she was doing. They liked to have that call every day since Úlfarna had gone back to work two years after Sangríðr’s birth. Since she was only working part-time she was done for today and now had to pick up the kids. Then she had to drive around half of the town to bring Týlaugr to his lessons in Old Runes. Of course she had to take the little one along and their solution was anything but ideal. Hopefully there soon wouldn’t be any more reason to pay for the teaching that couldn’t be covered in school. Aðalherr found his pulse accelerating just thinking about the possibility.

It was a Wednesday, so Aðalherr left work early to pick Týlaugr up from his Jòtnar lessons. During their drive home Týlaugr kept complaining how difficult the runes were to learn and he always mixed them up with the ones he learned in school. Fortunately it took only one stern glance from his father to fall silent. There was no way Aðalherr was going to tolerate hiss on even voicing one word against his lessons.

Back at home he sat down with Týlaugr to help him with his homework. For dinner they had Úlfarna’s fantastic baked gilt head bream recipe. With the kids playing in the living room Aðalherr and Úlfarna settled down on the couch and tried to relax for bit. As much as you ever could with two little kids. Eventually it was getting late and Aðalherr said goodbye to his family and told the kids to be good before leaving the house.

It was a 15 minutes’ drive to restaurant and Aðalherr worried slightly that he might be late. A couple of people were already there when he arrived, but the discussion hadn’t started yet. Nereiðr had saved him a seat and greeted him with a smile. “Hey, did the kids hold you up?”

“Yeah, Týlaugr just realised that he is the strongest man in the world and he was to prove it every five minutes. He wants to wrestle and when I don’t go down immediately he complains.”

“He has a point. What kind of father doesn’t let his 7 year-old beat him up?”

They chatted for a few minutes until the door of the séparée was being closed and locked. The entire room quickly feel silent and Koðrán stood up and cleared his throat. “Thank you all for coming tonight. Unfortunately I have to start this meeting with bad news. I talked to the major last week and this information is still unofficial, but the government plans to raise the fees for afterschool child care.”

The very first thing he said and instantly the room filled with tension, murmurs and loud exclamations erupted at the same time with all of them having the same tone. Offence. Outrage. Protest.

Koðrán was the head of their group for a reason though, he knew how to talk in front of people and how to keep things civilised and under control. “It might not come to that, but the mayor seemed very convinced. We don’t know yet how much of a raise it’s going to be, but we’ll probably have to estimate about 50 percent.”
Aðalherr felt his pulse speeding up. “50 percent? How is anyone supposed to afford this if they have more than one kid?”

Next to him the expression on Nereiðr’s face made it hard to believe that there had ever been a smile. Darkness and spite had so easily replaced it, because his features were used to them as a constant allies. “That’s the entire point. People not being able to afford it.”

“That’s not all. There are rumours that there is also talk among the government to change the laws about afterschool childcare in general. They’re going to get tougher on the requirements. Like who is actually allowed to take care of the kids. A lot of the established care centres might not the stand up to the test.” One had to admire Koðrán for being able to talk about this like a news presenter although everybody knew that he was just as furious as the rest of them. Admiration had to take a step back though since they were all grabbed this urge to do something. Scream, riot, anything before the helplessness took over. Like it always did. When there was nothing you could do.

For almost a minute everybody was talking over each other, loud voices using different words but all saying the very same thing. Eventually Koðrán managed to get the upper hand again. “I know, I know. I still want to emphasize that we don’t have any confirmation yet. Maybe these are really just rumours.”

Somebody laughed humourlessly, bringing even more darkness to the subject matter. “A rumour, right. Of course it’s true! It’s what the usurpers have always done and what they always will do.”

“Exactly and they do it in secret until they’re going to pass the law!”

“New laws for all of Asgard or another special treat for Jotunheim?”

“Are you seriously asking that?”

Aðalherr sighed, his own anger getting overshadowed by sadness when he thought of Týlaugr and how he struggled with the Old Runes. “Okay, so the usurper goes after the care centres, because Valhalla knows that they are secretly being taught Jǫtnar. Isn’t there a way to privatize the centres?”

“Oh, they’ve covered their asses years ago. Laws on private schools are a mess, it’s basically impossible to legally start one. Unless you are Asgardian of course. Sure, we wouldn’t call them schools, but there’s a fucking reason why there is no official word about the language courses.”

“There was to be a way to get around this. Most people won’t be able to afford that and in small cities we don’t have the same possibilities as people in Útgarðar. It’s not just about the Jǫtnar lessons but about the actual care. People have jobs they have to go after.”

Koðrán nodded at all of the comments. “Right, this is way we have to come up with ideas how to move forward and find a way how to the secure Jǫtnar lessons for our children.”

“I am so sick of this…” Nereiðr muttered softly before speaking up loudly, a dangerous growl in his voice. “We shouldn’t have to do anything about it. No, we shouldn’t do anything about it. Our children have a right to their education. A right to their language.”

Lots of murmurs of agreement and Koðrán sighed softly. “Of course, but unfortunately idealism isn’t helping us, we have to play with the cards we’ve been dealt. I suggest we contact the crown prince. Given the usurper’s unpopularity at the moment he might be…”

“What is the crown prince supposed to do? What has he done until now? Nothing.”

Not many things could have changed the already tensed atmosphere in the room. The whispers
hadn’t vanished, they had died. All eyes were on Nereîðr and the people they belonged to still had to
decide if they were only shocked or furious. No, that was a misstatement. Lots of them were
perfectly clear on what they felt and Aðalherr was too. There was this immediate need to speak up
and to make a couple of things very clear. “Are you disrespecting the crown prince, Nereîðr?”

His friend turned to look at him and his face seemed to have turned into stone. All seriousness, no
room for banter or jests. “Don’t doubt my love for the crown prince. I pray for his health everyday
and it will be one of the most beautiful days of my life when he will finally wear the filet that’s his
birth right. My devotion runs as deeply as yours, but I can’t help but feel that we have to stop
believing that the crown prince will magically change everything as soon as he gets the chance. He is
tied up in politics and although I know that his Jotun hearts only beats for us and that he is willing to
go very far, he cannot do it alone. Cut the ties with Valhalla? Make that decision for all of us? By the
great Lopthæna the usurpers will never allow a plebiscite to take place and they will never grant him
any leeway on the Language Act. We’re teaching our children secretly and now they even want to
take away that. I don’t want to wait for the crown prince to change all that. I want to help him to sit
on the throne like he is supposed to. We don’t need to wait for the prince’s help, he needs ours. To finally make
things right.”

“What are you saying?”

“That something needs to be done and we should do it. No more reacting.”

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Loki hadn’t too much experience with democracies, but that didn’t mean he didn’t recognize a
campaign when he saw one. There was a short video clip of Helblindi visiting a hospital in
Jotunheim. Naturally they had to film him with the kids. Just glimpses and Loki couldn’t tell how
much was real or fake. In Loki’s mind Helblindi might be a good enough actor to pull this off even if
he loathed children with all of his heart. It certainly didn’t look like it. The smile on his lips was
bright and just as beautiful as the rest of him.

Did he even have to mention that the kids loved him? At least the footage made it seem that way.
What timing. Prince of Jotunheim cheering up sick children while the new policy of the king is
costing people their jobs. Had there ever been any doubt that this man knew what he was doing?
That every event and every move was calculated? Making himself even more popular while the
crown was in free fall.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose Loki tried to get some order into the chaos that he called his thoughts.
So Helblindi had jumped into bed with Romanoff. Metaphorically. Hopefully. Why should it
surprise him? Loki had never had any trust in the Jotun and it was the same thing vice-versa.
Nonetheless it deeply bothered him that Helblindi made a deal with the Russians despite having
already reached an agreement with Loki. Granted, Loki wasn’t making any progress, but bringing in
a foreign nation? Yes, Loki would prefer the Russians to the Americans any day, but they were
getting caught up in something they maybe weren’t able to handle.

Loki could call him, but then he would be giving up that they knew about his affiliation with the
Russians. There had to be some other way to use this to Loki’s advantage. Helblindi was the wrong
person to address. A lawyer, brilliant and without scruple. Nonetheless Loki knew that there was no
way he could pull Helblindi’s loyalty into question. That man would rather die than to anything
against his principles.

No, Romanoff was the person they would have to talk to. That woman could easily be bought, Loki
seriously doubted that she felt very indebted to her home country. They might be able to turn this one
around…
Startled Loki immediately slipped his phone into his pocket before even realising that it was Thor who was talking to him. His brother was leaning against the doorway, his hands in his pockets. Smiling, of course, because Thor knew that he had caught Loki doing something.

“What makes you think that I’m hiding?”

Thor shrugged, but the smile on his face let Loki know that his arrival here was anything but coincidental. “You’ve always been hanging around this part of the gallery when you didn’t want to be found. I mean, it clearly is the most boring place.” Turning around Thor took a look at the portraits in the room. Same old faces of dukes and counts who had been dead centuries before Thor had been born.

“It’s not boring.” Loki wouldn’t even bother to feel offended. These men had their portraits for a reason. They had done Asgard big services and although the average citizen didn’t know their names they deserved to be honoured. Maybe that was just the historian talking.

“It’s mind-numbingly boring. Don’t pretend otherwise.” Thor smirked and then closer inspected one of the paintings. “Hey, do you remember? It’s the dark general.”

For a second Loki was confused, but then the somewhat faded memories from his childhood slowly came back to him. Dark general wasn’t a bad description. Pitch-black hair, a full beard and the darkest stare that Loki had ever seen. “We used to joke about the painter being scared out of his mind… or if it’s even possible to wear such an evil expression for such a long time.”

Thor smiled and cocked his head, still looking at the portrait. “He has that air around himself… like he eats puppies for breakfast and drinks the tears of little children.”

“You stole that from a book, didn’t you?”

“I might have seen it on television.” Smirking Thor turned back and sat down on the bench in the centre of the room next to Loki. “So – who are you hiding from?”

Sighing softly Loki didn’t know how to answer. Until now he hadn’t really been aware that he was indeed trying to hide. Well, he had more than enough reason to, didn’t he? “Everybody?”

Thor reacted with a chuckle. “That’s a lot of people. Who in particular?”

“If I’m trying to hide, why do you think I would be eager to talk about it?”

“Loki, don’t be difficult. You’re moping and I d’ like to know why.” Thor gave him another smile and Loki was willing to surrender. It would definitely feel better to let somebody know what was bothering him. Thor was probably the only person on this planet that could understand. This was going to take some time, so Loki took a little breath first. “I had a conversation with father and to be honest… it took a bit of a toll on me.”

“Let me guess, you have talked about the trade agreement and it ended up in yelling?”

Loki huffed in fake annoyance. “Not every conversation about politics ends up in yelling. Although I want to scream when I think about that policy is doing to us, but father told me to… I didn’t change my opinion, but I guess he made me reconsider a few things. The policy still needs to go through.”

“This is Asgard. Our people don’t get left behind even they lose their jobs. I’ve actually been thinking about talking to father about a reform of the social framework. It’s good, but that doesn’t
mean it can’t be better.”

A sweet thing to say but completely missing the point. Loki was too tired to have an actual conversation about this. “That’s great, Thor, but… kind of sends the wrong message. We’re not going to do anything but the companies that are taking away your jobs, but you’re going to make sure that you get unemployment compensation. That’s not the right way.”

Thor frowned at him. “It’s not just about the American policy. Have you looked at our support system for single parents? Yeah, I know that there aren’t many of them, but that’s not a reason for not properly supporting them. They have to work a lot harder than most people and we’re not really cutting them any slack on the taxes. Nobody even talks about that. I’d like to do something about that.”

Loki felt a little ashamed for being taking aback and for never thinking of that himself. Thor had a point said matter got overlooked most of the time. Also by him. Because Loki liked to jumped at the most controversial topic at the time? Sure, all of it was of major importance, but… His father had told him that. Loki was having trouble seeing the big picture. To be honest, Loki was tempted to close his eyes and take a little nap until Thor was going to leave him alone. Not going to happen.

“That’s a great idea, Thor… I’d like to help you with it someday. When the matters at hand are deal with.”

Maybe Loki was imagining it, he couldn’t tell, but Thor seemed a bit disappointed. It couldn’t be about his idea. Was it still about Loki hiding in the gallery? No, Thor had come here to look for him which meant that he wanted to talk and Loki was an idiot for only realising that now.

“Something else you want to talk about? Since you’re not coming to the most boring part of palace regularly?”

Bullseye. Thor shifted around uncomfortably and Loki elbowed him softly into the ribs. “Spit it out. Or I’ll go back to talking about the policy and nobody wants that.”

“Okay, I guess I am just looking for some encouragement.”

Raising one eyebrow Loki showed that he was a little confused. “What do you need encouragement for?”

His big brother wasn’t looking at him, but the smile on his face was impossible to miss. Although so very far away. “I’m going to take Jane to the country house in Fólkvangr over the weekend. It’s beautiful even at this time of the year and… I’m going to propose to her.”

Not exactly a surprise. This had been coming for long time now, Thor was only adding a date. Still a big deal and Loki hated himself for first thinking about how pissed people would be. Couldn’t he be happy for Thor for five minutes? How many people in his position would ever be so lucky to get to choose who to be with?

Well maybe they shouldn’t…

“Wow, you’re actually getting married… Kind of hard to believe.”

Now it was Thor who elbowed him in a very not gentle way. “Hey, you are supposed to support me. Not to be a smartass.”

“I can’t help it. Also what kind of support do you want? She knows that you’re going to ask. You know that she is going to say yes. So I’m sparing my excitement for the actual wedding, but yeah,
I’m happy for you. Jane is great, she deserves an awesome proposal.”

Thor nodded. “Absolutely she does and despite that part about knowing that she’s going to say yes… I can still be freaking out.”

“Totally.” Loki agreed with a mean grin. “For five seconds. Otherwise it’d be ridiculous. Jane is going to say yes, she’s going to like the ring you picked out and mother… mother is going to be thrilled. Finally a wedding in the family.”

For some reason that comment made Thor’s smile disappear. “Not the wedding she is hoping for though.”

Slightly irritated Loki leaned back, giving Thor’s shoulder a little squeeze. “What are you talking about? Mother loves Jane.”

“I know that. I’m not talking about Jane but about me.”

“Sorry, I don’t get it.”

Thor frowned, to Loki he almost seemed shocked. “You are joking, right? We both know that she would be more excited about you getting married.”

“That’s…” Loki bit his lip when Thor’s eyes still lingered on him. Out of a sudden he knew that Thor would be hurt if Loki tried to deny what they both knew. What they had known since childhood. Not once Loki had tried to figure out why he was their mother’s favourite. Loki liked to think that it was all fake. Just a loving mother trying to make the second son feel as important as the crown prince. Frigga adored Thor, she had never neglected him or treated them unfairly. Not at all. There were other little things. Like the walks in the garden or the sweet words Frigga had whispered to Loki while tugging him in. Not enough to get bitter over, but how could Thor not notice.

Swallowing lightly Loki shook his head. “The person who should be most excited about the wedding is you… Well and Jane. Mother is going to be charmed, you know that. Also you get to marry who you want to marry, that’s not bad either.”

Loki needed to get a knife and cut his tongue out. How could he say such an utterly stupid thing? It had to be impossible to not notice that and Thor was already staring at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing and please don’t get this wrong, but I think it’s actually a pretty good thing to not have your mother involved in your relationship… or not having her choose your boyfriend.”

“Is there something wrong with you and Balder?”

Loki’s heart sank and he didn’t know what he had expected. A moment where he could let it all out and that Thor would agree with him when Thor wished he could have that sort of attention from Frigga? It had nothing to do with Balder who was sweet and lovable and Búri be damned, he couldn’t be blamed for being considered perfect enough for Loki by his mother. The problem lay elsewhere. With Frigga and then in the back of Loki’s mind.
Hello everybody,

That took a little while and we're taking one deep breath before everything goes to hell ;)

The girl was freckles all over. Her cheeks, her back and the back of her thighs. It gave Tony funny ideas like connecting all of them with a marker. Bad idea, there were too many of them. Her cheeks would be entirely covered in black. For now Tony was content tracing his fingertips across her lower back. She uttered an appreciating hum, rolling onto her back. It was a very nice sight to check out. Except for the cheeks there were no freckles on the front. A birthmark next to her navel, that was it. Tony appreciated it when somebody liked to show off their body that they knew about their good looks and didn’t act all shy or self-conscious.

Nothing to worry about with her. She crossed her arms behind her head, smiling cockily at Tony. Leaning against the headboard Tony enjoyed his position with his back against the headboard. A glass of scotch in one hand and his phone in the other one. No news on the stock market, not that he cared, but Pepper was nagging him. Still a billionaire, so the world was alright.

“What’s so interesting?”

“Actually nothing. For some unbelievable reason that I can’t wrap my head around there is no word about me in today’s newspaper. Waste of time.” Tony put the phone away and went back to marvel at the beauty stretched out next to him, her head resting at the other end of the bed. With a lazy smile on her lips she tapped her foot against Tony’s chest. “

“I am listening, but bear in mind that I have three doctorates. My advice is quite expensive.”

She huffed in mild amusement and continued to tap her toes against his skin. “What is it like to be with a guy?”

Tony raised an eyebrow at her. “Shouldn’t you know that better than me?”

A dismissive gesture was a direct response. “Come on, you know what I mean. What is it like for you?”

“I thought you would prefer to be part of my sex life to talking about it.” Tony pointed out and she laughed carefree. “Come on, tell me. I’ve never hooked up with someone bisexual before and I’m curious.”

She was starting to annoy Tony which was the most horrible thing a one night stand could do to you. At least she wanted to talk about sex and not actual private stuff that was none of her business. Given her age and upbeat attitude Tony could see where the question was coming from. “Fine, being with a guy is awesome. Or terrible. Depends on the guy.”

That definitely was less interesting than what she had expected. “So which do you prefer? Guys or girls?”
“Neither. That’s not something I think about. I meet someone and I want to sleep with them or I don’t. As simple as that.” Tony reached for his phone again. Manchester United had had a game yesterday, right?

“I have a friend who believes that bisexual people could never have a monogamous relationship. Since they’re attracted to both genders sooner or later they would be missing sex with one of them and be unfaithful.”

Tony snorted in mild offence. That girl should talk to anyone coming from Asgard. “Now that’s a lot of bullshit. According to that logic no straight or gay person would ever cheat on their partners. Oh and just a word of advice – this conversation is incredibly unsexy.”

The girl continued babbling about something, but Tony couldn’t give a damn. He scanned through some news articles before getting up from the bed and slipping into his bathrobe. Despite being pretty sure that he could hear her calling after him Tony left his bedroom and headed directly downstairs. Such a painful reminder why he had always preferred having his one night stand at someone else’s place. So much easier to leave and not having to maintain a conversation that he didn’t want to have.

Tony sent Jarvis a quick text message. Letting him know that if she was going to be still here in the morning that he should order her a taxi. There were no plans for him to go back to his bedroom for the rest of the night. Instead he went down to his workshop, locking all the doors safely behind him. At the moment he didn’t intend to do any actual work. It was time to admire what had already been accomplished.

The prototype was lying on his desk, small enough to fit into his hand. Give it another couple of years and they would be able to build ones of the size of a car. Bigger. Tony could already see it. If everything went according to plan, Tony would build one to provide enough energy to run the Stark Tower in New York. A good test run, afterwards there should be no problems with going into production.

Sitting down Tony let his fingers run over the small reactor. There were still some issues, Tony hadn’t made it all work yet. With this he wouldn’t settle for anything but perfection.

All branches of Stark Industries were a success, not as profitable as the weapons, but everything Tony touched turned into money. That seemed to be a talent within the family. They were good at making money and ruining people. Two things that were incredibly easy to combine. It sucked to be an expert at something that gave you no pleasure at all. Or at least not anymore. 10 years ago designing weapons had been fun. It had never given him any kind of thrill, but Tony had enjoyed himself. Precision. Hard metal. Or finding new ways to localise your enemies.

God, the American military had loved him back then.

Not everybody though. Tony could vividly remember a dinner he had with one of his former professors of MIT. A man who had also fostered Tony’s talent. A man that Tony had a lot of respect for. Something that wasn’t often the case. The professor wasn’t shy about his displeasure with Tony’s field of work. No outrage about the moral aspect, definitely not. He called it a waste of Tony’s abilities. So many other things he could be doing, fields he could excel in. Why would he be willing to spend his time building something as uncreative and simple as a weapon?

Back then Tony hadn’t cared. He had taken over the company, he was doing an amazing job and things were still exciting. But now, 44 years old, his perspective was changing a little bit. Should Tony call it a conscience? There was no Jiminy Cricket whispering into his ear, telling him to change his evil ways. To be honest Tony still liked the title ‘Merchant Of Death’. It had a nice ring to it.

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Nonetheless Tony couldn’t help thinking about other things. Perhaps it had something to do with getting old. Worrying about his legacy. A word that Tony still dreaded thanks to his old man.

Two decades ago the media had called him the Da Vinci of our times. Why not finally live up to that name? Tony didn’t believe that he was made for altruism, but there were so many things that he could do and that hardly anybody else was capable of. It would be a shame to not do them. Also Tony really liked the idea of his name all over the history books. Being brilliant was one thing, but people should know about it too. All time.

Oh yeah and then there was the end of the whole energy crisis. Whatever…

Until then Tony had to eliminate all the last faults. Shouldn’t be too hard to do as soon as Tony found himself the motivation to do so. A few weeks ago Tony had been a fountain full of inspiration and eagerness to get this done. Now that the first phase of work was done Tony felt a little drained. Unfortunately it would still take months, rather years to go into production and that was the part about reality that Tony hated. Sometimes he wished he could snip his fingers and whatever he had created would duplicate. That would so much easier and more fun.

Fuck and all the patents. That always took up so much time. Also the board was already complaining about things again and Tony absolutely had no intention to attend a meeting any time soon.

Hadn’t Howard said that to him? That nothing could hold Tony’s attention long enough. Which hadn’t been a compliment. His old man had been right and Tony didn’t care. So maybe it was indeed time for a change of scenery. Tony was sick of Los Angeles and he had only left New York about one week ago.

Pepper would kill him, but at this time Tony had definitely other interests than looking after the company. He had other people for the numbers and graphs. Tony was a visionary and the future was lying on this desk in front of him. Future was still a couple of years away, so until then Tony work on one of his rides.

And hopefully find some to excite him. God, he was so bored. Perhaps he should buy a soccer them after all, that would be fun for a couple of hours.

Shrugging softly Tony sat down in front of one of his computers and went online. Being a genius didn’t mean that you couldn’t learn something new. He was going to educate himself a little bit. After all Tony didn’t know everything, no matter how hard to believe that was.

It only took a few clicks and the help of the homepage of the University of Oxford to find the online English version of a certain thesis.

_Spiritual Politics – The effects of the trúa on Asgardian Foreign Relations between 1900 – 2015_

_by Loki Hveðrungr Búrison_

What a show off. Why choose something simple if you could immediately tell everybody how smart you were? Smirking to himself Tony hit the print button. He was in for a little reading.

***

Perspective was such a strange thing. Jewellery had never interested Jane in any kind of way. Diamonds might be a girl’s best friend, but Jane was the exception to the rule. Growing up as a tomboy Jane had favoured books over dolls. Getting older she had more enjoyment in styling her hair or wearing dresses and skirts. Nonetheless jewellery had failed to spark her interest.
With the ring around her finger it was very different. Sure, the diamond was beautiful, but that didn’t endear her to it. Thor had put it on her finger and only that mattered to her. Jane was going to marry. Yes, she had known that for a while now, but now that the question had been asked things looked completely different.

So many labels that were already attached to her. Woman. Scientist. Girlfriend. Hypochondriac (sometimes). American. Democrat. Astrophysicist. Now she was going to add fiancé to the list. In a couple of months Jane was going to be a wife. Thor’s wife. A man she had completely fallen for although he was nothing Jane had ever expected.

Someday Jane had to talk to Thor about his High School days. She imagined him as part of the most popular group. A guy who was always out with friends, because he had so much of them he had lost count. Oh and the football. Of course he was part of the football team. Or not, because football wasn’t a thing in Asgard. That didn’t bother Jane very much, she had never been a fan. But what sport team would her son be part of? Would their kids be home schooled at the palace or attending some private school?

Look at that. Officially engaged for six hours and Jane was already thinking more about her future kids than imagining her wedding. There would be time for all of that.

“I am so glad that you like it.”

Slightly startled Jane looked up from her own hand. Sitting on the other end of the table Thor offered her the sweetest and softest smile. Jane saw him every day, she knew what he looked like and yet in this exact moment his beauty took her aback. A joyful, happy person and definitely beautiful. Right now Thor was vibrating. Jane could feel his utter content, his happiness about the entire situation. It made her feel warm inside. That knowledge that Thor was at ease, that their relationship was the reason for this smile. It made her feel proud to know that she could inspire something like that.

Only now Jane realised what Thor had said and she nodded. “It’s beautiful. You know what I like.”

“I had a little help. I never expected that I would have to buy an engagement ring, so I called for back-up. I was worried I wouldn’t find one you’d like.”

By shaking her head Jane wanted to take all that doubt away. “I love it. You gave it to me, so it’s already wonderful. I like that it’s small. Don’t worry, I like it.”

Thor’s smile widened and Jane had to ask. “Why didn’t you expect to ever buy a ring? Oh, you don’t have rings.”

“No, we don’t, but I figured you’d want one and I wanted to give you one. “ Reaching across the table Thor took a hold of her hand and Jane’s heart just started to beat the slightest bit faster. None of this was like he had thought it to be. The moment Thor had invited her to come to Asgard, to meet his parents had made it all clear. This was serious and Jane shouldn’t question the status of their relationship. The crown prince of an entire nation didn’t bring any girl to introduce her to his parents. From there on Jane had known about his intentions.

The proposal last night hadn’t come as a surprise. There had been plenty of time to prepare herself. Nevertheless Jane was sitting here, having breakfast with her fiancé and she was overwhelmed by sensations. Joy, love and the urge to stay here with Thor for as long as possible to hold on to this. When it was all about them.

“Thank you… I love you. I don’t think I said that enough last night.”
Thor stroked his thumb over the back of her hand. “I know and you did. The fact that you’re here with me makes that quite clear. With any other guy things would be so much easier… so believe me when I say that I will give you anything to keep you here.”

“I’m not planning on going anywhere. Sure, my plans looked different, but you are definitely better than the plans I had. I honestly do believe that Asgard can be a new home to me, so please don’t worry about what you have to do to make me feel comfortable. I am happy. With you and this new life that I’m going to explore.”

In response Thor kissed her knuckles and Jane enjoyed the soft flutter. Her husband. It sounded already good in her head and Jane couldn’t wait to say it out loud. Even now she was aware that Thor was right, that things would be way more difficult than meeting some guy at university and falling for him. One day Thor was going to be king and Jane would be his wife. Yesterday that thought had still scared her and maybe it would worry her again tomorrow, but right now Jane knew with absolute certainty that they could take on everyone and everything. They were able to overcome every obstacle.

“We don’t have to get to Valhalla before Monday, right?”

Thor shook his head, once more brushing his lips over Jane’s fingertips. “No. Just us for the entire weekend.”

Yes, Thor was happy and so was Jane.

***

The scent of winter was in the air and Loki enjoyed the cold air filling his lungs. It helped with his headaches. Staying inside all the time took its toll and his morning runs just weren’t long enough. Why did everything always have to be a matter of time?

As kids Thor and him had often played super heroes. Usually with Fandral or some of their cousins. Thor had had that stupid idea that Loki should be the villain, because the villains in movies always had dark hair, didn’t they? Not once Loki had protested, because he loved the idea of being the bad guy and they were so much cooler anyway. They had never got to play much however, most of the time was spent arguing which super powers everyone was going to get. By the time they had come to an agreement playtime was up.

Loki always chose a different power like teleportation, telepathy, telekinesis and so on. Once he simply chose magic which let him do pretty much anything he wanted. Thor was so angry that he from the next time on magic was no longer an option.

Right now, as an adult, almost 30 years old Loki’s choice would be different. Stopping time, freezing it, that would be an immensely useful power. No necessary rewinding it, but simply stopping time. Then Loki would finally have a moment to sit down and to try figuring things out without feeling that time was slipping through his fingers. It would also allow him to finally come up with a solution for his deal with Helblindi.

The cold bit at his skin, so Loki put spurs to Sleipnir and the stallion sped up, galloping across the moist meadow. His cheeks were burning, the wind seemed to be scraping them and Loki’s insides were burning. The conversation with his father had made clear that Loki was expected to take an influential role in the next government. So technically that was a free pass to not feel guilty about having to manipulate Thor, because of an agreement with Helblindi. It was to abandon the Language Act. A noble thing to do… but that didn’t change that Loki had made this deal behind anyone’s back with a person that he couldn’t trust.
Well, not entirely true. Loki could trust Helblindi to do anything he thought necessary to help Jotunheim. That made him predictable and unpredictable at the same time. Again, things would be so much easier if Loki had more time or if he didn’t understand Helblindi’s motives. Loki understood them all too well and sometimes he thought he would be acting the exact same way.

Loki felt his stomach clenching and his blood seemed to be running through his veins too fast, making him dizzy. Like so often his mind travelled back to that moment at the diplomats’ dinner. Helblindi demonstrating respect for him, accepting him as royalty and whispering in Jǫtnar to him at the same time. Making it clear that there was no common ground, that he would pick and choose which information Loki was going to get from him. Which he was supposed to have.

Every part of Loki protested against being manipulated. Or maybe not quite. The concept was appalling and yet Loki was intrigued by the mere idea of someone being able to actually play him. Now that was just arrogant.

Loki remembered the melodic and yet unfamiliar sound of Jǫtnar before pushing the thought away. Sleipnir slowed down, his gallop turning into a soft trot as Loki tightened the reins. “Good boy…” After patting Sleipnir’s neck Loki stroked his mane and Sleipnir made his way up the small hill that separated them from the main house. By the time they had reached the top Loki felt the first drops of rain on his face and shoulders. Normally he would enough going for another ride in the rain, but winter was always here, it would be too cold. Nonetheless Loki let Sleipnir bring him back to his stables at his own place.

The staff must have been looking out for him, awaiting his return because one of the grooms was already waiting for him, ready to take care of Sleipnir. He wasn’t the only one waiting though. Loki felt some of his general uneasiness turning into surprise.

Balder’s free hand was buried in the pockets of his long, dark blue coat, the other one was holding an umbrella. The wind was playing with his hair and Loki wondered how his boyfriend had got here. Loki had left first thing to the morning and hadn’t told anybody where he was going.

As soon as Sleipnir had stopped in front of them Loki dismounted and affectionately patted Sleipnir’s head. “Take care, buddy. I’ll come back next week.”

The groom quickly led Sleipnir into the stable after Loki had handed him the reins and Balder stepped closer to shield Loki with his umbrella. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” Loki kissed him as a greeting, then gave him a questioning look. “What are you doing here?”

“Offering you a ride home.” Balder smiled gently and took his hand.

“Alright, but how did you know where I was?”

“When I wake up and you aren’t there I first check if there is a political crisis going on. There wasn’t, so I figured you would be either going for a run or fencing. Both wasn’t the case, nobody had seen you in the palace, so this was the logical consequence. I thought I could pick you up and we have brunch?”

Loki couldn’t help but frown slightly. He didn’t get out of the city often enough and as much as he hated to admit it, he was neglecting Sleipnir. So he deemed it indeed a surprise and rather unlikely that Balder had guessed where he would be. Nothing to wreck his brains out about though, Loki should be pleased that Balder had come out all this way.
“Yes, something to eat would be nice. We could stay at the estate though. Enough of the kitchen staff is present to…”

“Right, but I heard about this little place just outside of Asgard. An Arabic restaurant. I forgot the name. I think it’s something like Mitea…” “Mutiea?” Loki simply knew that his eyes were shining brightly at Balder mentioning said restaurant. “I adore it! The food is great and the owners totally pretend that they have no idea who I am. That sounds amazing. We’re totally going there.” Having made that very clear decision Loki pulled Balder along towards the car.

***

It took over an hour to decode the letter, but he wasn’t impatient nor annoyed for even a moment. This was good work and necessary to keep all people involved safe. For as long as possible though. Sooner or later the trail had to be swiped away. No traces left behind. Finally all letters and numbers were in the right order, adding up to a short, cohesive text. Which still wouldn’t contain a lot of meaning for anyone but him.

My prince,

Your most precious gift has been received and we thank you for your graciousness. We vow to honour your generosity support by using it to its fullest extent. To restore justice and glory and to give all our children the life they deserve which their ancestors never knew. You shall not be disappointed. Not a single man among us could dream of a finer destiny than being your hand in this most glorious undertaking. Whenever the moment has come.

May your ancestors protect every single one of your steps and those of your family

Your loyal servants,

Frjáls

Smiling with content he gave the letter to the fire. No traces left behind.
Let's all be happy

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Wow, I know this took ages... so without further ado

The sun was setting, disappearing behind the mountains in the distance. On a normal day there was no chance to see them from here. Today the air was perfectly pure, not a single cloud to be spotted across the horizon. If somebody was to paint this sky, people would later on complain about its lack of realism. Usually the sky wasn’t as blue.

It was a shame that even now Odin wasn’t contemplating the sky, but thinking about how he never took the time to do so. Even now. He was only here for the 10 minutes he had before dinner. A stolen moment between two appointments. Something that Odin was rather used to. It was part of the deal. Be the king, live your life in stolen moments. Way back in the day there had been bitterness attached to this knowledge. But then the lack of time had also consumed the bitterness.

Now so many years later Odin was still torn between different feelings about this. About destiny, duty and his entire life. Sometimes, most of the time, serving his country, fulfilling his duties brought about a kind of satisfaction that had been known to him before. On the bad days, when the minister of finances’ idea of a tax reform was a crime, the Jotuns rebelling, Denmark wanting to renegotiate the laws about the tolls and the new requirements to enter the University of Valhalla were still met with concern and anger. It was those days which sometimes made him loathe the throne he was sitting on. Hours. Days. Months.

But then always something happened. Either in Asgard or somewhere else on this planet. Something horrifying. People dying in a collapsed tunnel, because nobody was looking after it, making sure that it was still safe. Corrupt politicians fleeing with the state’s money. And so many things more. News that were a dire reminder that someone had to look after the country all the time. That person better do it with all of their heart or they weren’t worth their mission.

Something that Odin had sworn himself during his first years as king. As soon as there would be something more important than Asgard, it was time to step down. To lay Asgard in someone else’s hands. Hands that belonged to someone who would dedicate his entire being to this one cause. Thor’s hands.

Which could sometimes be quite clumsy. Unlike Loki’s.

So steady and precise, but so willing and quick to slice a throat.

Once or twice Odin had let his mind wander. Imagining that his two sons were just one. Combining their strengths and balancing out their faults. No more lack of patience and the stubbornness to hold onto a minor grudge for years. Making one person out of them would create a fine man. A fine king.

Five seconds. That was all it took. No longer period of time without feeling guilt for reducing his sons to their positive skills and traits. Thor had been a long awaited gift from his ancestors. The one thing Odin had longed for the most in his life and every day following his birth Thor had filled him
with happiness. Criticizing him this way felt utterly wrong and deeply unfair.

Also there was Loki. All that Odin had ever needed to put his mind at ease. Perfectly simple. Two sons, a secure legacy. Asgard would be protected even after Odin was gone. Thor and Loki had brought him different forms of joy, but it had obviously come along with their very existence. The only thing that Odin achieved by imagining them as one person was a horribly guilty conscience and rightly so.

Thor was going to be king and Odin wouldn’t doubt his kind and passionate heart for even a second. Burning, hot and consuming. Anyone who had ever talked to Loki for only five minutes would know that his younger son had just as much passion inside of him. Perhaps even more. But Loki was cold about it. A sudden burst of anger and then calculating, remaining quiet and pulling strings. Loki could wait and Thor couldn’t.

That had brought them here today. Because for Thor there were some matters that could only be decided by the heart and he couldn’t wait for them. Today the family was going to celebrate Thor’s engagement. To a woman that would be never able to support him like a spouse should. Instead she would be a burden on his shoulders when Thor already had to carry the weight of leadership. This was something only Thor would do, turning a matter of state into a decision that could be only made by his heart. The mere thought of Loki doing anything like that was inconceivable.

“Odin? We’re going to be late?”

He could hear Frigga walking up to the balcony, but Odin didn’t turn around. “I am not in a hurry to get to this dinner.”

“If you wanted to seriously upset your son.”

“You know that’s not my intention. I have refused to give my blessing to this union and I stand by it.”

Frigga smiled, he knew that. Indulgently. Forgiving an old man for being a fool. “I don’t think that Thor would ever expect you to change your mind. Nonetheless this was your statement as his king. Tonight you could choose to be his father and as a father you should be delighted.”

Eventually Odin turned around, reminded once more how slowly his limbs were moving. He had been right, Frigga was smiling. More than usual. She looked like a mother should be when she learned about her son’s engagement. She was glowing.

“You are smitten with the girl.”

Softly shaking her head Frigga shrugged at the same time. “A smart, well-mannered, soft-spoken woman who loves our son for who he is and not for his titles. A most wonderful thing and we should celebrate that. As his parents, as a family.”

“I would agree with you if this family wasn’t royalty. A Midgardian queen will constantly put all his decisions into question, people will be suspicious of everything that…”

Frigga gently put her hand on his lower arm and Odin had seen her doing the very same thing with their sons. “Not tonight. Thor will have the rest of his life to deal with these issues. Tonight it’s just us and his brother to be happy for him. That he found his bride and love at the same time. Just give him that. I am absolutely sure that Jane Foster is a gift to our country. We just have to allow ourselves to see her like that.”

Her attempts were honourable and Odin was willing to give Thor this day. A couple of hours during
which they could pretend that he hadn’t made his first terrible decision as the crown prince of this nation.

And how was that fair? There had always been a clear anti-American sentiment among their people, but it had reached its peak during the last two months. Which wasn’t Thor’s fault. It was nevertheless a testament to Thor’s impatience for not being able to wait a bit longer for this engagement. Now wasn’t a good time.

“We should leave. You’re right, they will already be waiting.”

Evidently content Frigga kissed him on the cheek before they left the room. The engagement still had to remain a secret for a while to keep the damage to a minimum. Therefore the dinner was going to take place in Odin’s salon which was off-limits to the staff unless they specifically asked there. So when Odin and Frigga got there only their sons were waiting for them. Their sons and their significant others.

Thor and Jane were sitting on the couch, holding hands, talking to Balder while Loki was at the bar, pouring two glasses of wine. There was laughter in the air. They were having fun and Frigga was right, they deserved as much. “I fear we are a bit late.”

As usual Loki didn’t miss a beat. “Not really, these are our first ones.” Loki lifted the glasses before walking over and handing Balder one of them. Odin’s attention was on the other couple. Thor’s smile hadn’t wavered, but Odin could see how the nervousness changed everything about Jane Foster’s appearance. Tension crept into her body, the smile stayed, but it wasn’t real anymore and she had no idea what to do with her free hand. Clenching, unclenching, putting it in her lap, then next to her thigh. Every single emotion was right on display, she would definitely have to work on that.

Frigga quickly took over and did her best to chase all awkwardness from the room. As she approached Thor and Jane they both stood up and Frigga embraced their eldest son. “You look so happy, Thor.”

“That’s not really a surprise” Smiling Thor kissed his mother on the fact who then turned to the fiancé. Fiancé. Odin had imagined all of this very differently.

“My dear. You are lovely.”

Jane couldn’t hide her instant blush. “Thank you…”

It was Odin’s turn and he wasn’t looking forward to it, but Thor deserved this and while looking at her Odin could see that this young woman adored his son. So she deserved it too. Thor kept smiling, naturally, full of joy. Why denying something so evident. His son approached him, fingers entwined with his future wife. Not bowing his head, good, eyes on Odin’s face, looking as convinced as any person ever could be. If Thor was going to act the same way as king, not just in personal matters, then there would be nothing to worry about.

“Father, I hereby present you the woman our ancestors have sent to me to cherish and to share my life with. So I’ve come before you today to ask you for your blessing.”

No hesitation, no stammering. Actually a perfect job. Odin remembered how difficult it had been for Thor to remember oaths and formulas. Unlike Loki who knew them by heart after hearing them one single time. There was no denying how important this was to Thor. He had made his choice and Odin couldn’t, wouldn’t take it away from him.
Stepping forward Odin put his hand on Thor’s lower arm. “Seeing my oldest son happy is all I need to give my blessing. I hope your happiness will be permanent and that grief and chagrin will never touch you.”

Turning to Jane Foster Odin smiled, only thinking about how she was bringing out this side of Thor. “As Thor’s father I welcome you to this family. If you see my son as your other half, I see you as my daughter.”

Again she lowered shyly lowered her eyes despite smiling in relief. She would have to instantly learn to stop that, journalists didn’t forgive the small things like these.

“Thank you…”

“Great, now that we’ve got the tradition out of the way, how about we move to the dining room. I am starving.” One always could rely on Loki to say something out of place. Strangely enough he would be the first one to be upset if someone should dishonour the traditions.

Balder right next to him was shaking his head. “I told you that you shouldn’t miss out on breakfast.”

“Had other things to do. Please, I am hungry.” Loki made a face that was half annoyed and half pleading which had his mother laughing. “We cannot let Loki starve, can we?”

No, they couldn’t, although it was terribly obvious that Loki only wanted to cut the proceedings short. For a reason, Odin was very aware.

Since everybody agreed though they quickly made their way for the dining room and Odin had to go through one of those terrible moments again. A reminder of age and mortality in something so simple as sitting down. His tired legs demanded attention, but he wasn’t going to give into that in front of his sons. This was leisure time after all, he had no right to feel tired. Not when everybody else was joking and laughing.

It was a lovely dinner. Odin had to admit that it become a rare occasion to see his entire family at one table without at least one party in a sour mood. Usually Loki, over some political issue. Tonight they were all smiling and Odin was longing for more moments like these. Such a pleasing thought that his family was happy. Both of his sons with partners who genuinely cared about them and there was nothing that could be more important to Frigga. Right now they would all make the beautiful cover to a book or a magazine. A perfect, happy family. Just don’t look behind the curtains.

Jane Foster and Thor were telling the story about the proposal, Frigga and Balder were listening attentively while Loki looked rather bored. Odin knew that there was something on his mind, something that he would voice sooner or later.

“I can’t say that I was surprised, but… still completely overwhelmed. If that makes sense.” Jane’s eyes were big and bright as she smiled lovingly at Thor who pressed a kiss to her temple. “Perfect sense.”

Balder wore an amused expression on his face. “I guess that’s normal and the reaction that everybody should have. Otherwise Thor would have done something wrong.”

“At least somebody in this family has to have a sense for romance.” Loki muttered casually and Balder instantly protested. “You aren’t nearly as bad as you always pretend to be.”

“Stop ruining my reputation.”

After dinner they returned to the salon and settled down on the couch. Odin saw it coming from a
mile away. Loki took advantage of the very first second that Frigga, Thor, Jane and Balder were engaged in the same conversation and sat down next to Odin, turned away from the others. He was talking in a hushed voice, half into his glass of wine.

“You welcomed her as Thor’s father. Not as king. The devil lies in the detail…”

“Do you expect me to lie? As Thor’s father I can appreciate his choice. As his king I can’t. We both know that this marriage is only going to complicated things for him. So please, don’t make it even harder.”

Loki cocked his head before taking a big gulp from his wine. “I can’t make any promises.”

Odin couldn’t fight off the slight amusement. Despite all their differences he had no doubts that Loki would be nothing but supportive. Glancing over Loki’s shoulder Odin watched the rest of their family for a couple of seconds before turning back to Loki. “What about you? As king I highly appreciate your choice, but as your father I am not so sure.”

The way Loki flinched was impossible to miss, but he was back in control only the blink of an eye later. “What do you mean?”

“You tell me. I know your mother has nothing but your very best interest at heart, but she can be a bit overbearing.”

Now it was Loki looking over his shoulder. “This is really not the right place to discuss something like this.”

“You are right, but I want you to know that you could talk about it anytime you want to.”

Loki nodded a bit absentmindedly. “I’m doing great. Personally. There are other things I’d rather talk about. Like Næss or the Jotuns.”

Odin smiled, shaking his head. “This also isn’t the right place or the right time.”

“Guess then we’ll have to go back to the main conversation.”

So they did and an hour later Odin would have loved to call it a night. At times like these he feared age more than the Jotun prince.

As his eyes travelled from one member of his family to the next Odin saw Loki and Balder curled up in the corner of the couch. Balder was whispering something into Loki’s ear which caused Odin’s son to laugh softly. Frigga had her eyes on them and Odin decided that there was only one more thing to do tonight. “May I talk to my son’s future wife for a moment? In private.”

All of them had expected this to happen and Odin had no doubt that Thor had prepared her for this. It wasn’t going to take long, Odin just wanted her to be aware of a couple of things that Thor most probably was sugar-coating all the time or that he wasn’t even aware of.

To her credit Jane didn’t seem very nervous when Odin led her to the study just next door. “I am sure Thor mentioned that I would like to talk to you alone.”

“Yes, he said as much and he also said that I have no reason to worry.”

“Indeed. I meant what I said, I now consider you part of this family. I know you are an honest person and as a father nothing matters to me more than you making Thor happy, but since Thor is going to be king things are not that simple.”
Jane held her head high and Odin inwardly applauded her for that. “I know that people don’t like the fact that I am American, but I will learn and try to win them over. I will do anything necessary to make Thor’s life easier.”

Odin had learned a long time ago that naivety couldn’t be battled with words, only experience could chase it away. “That is not all, I fear. This engagement has to remain a secret for some time. At this time it would merely hurt you and Thor in the eye of the public. Even after that it won’t be easy. The people will be hard on you, there is no doubt about that and I want you to understand what your greatest asset is. Loki. People will draw comparisons, prefer one brother over the other and Thor can’t listen to anything of that. You are person that Thor decided to give his trust, so have his best interest at heart. He is going to need his brother.”

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No matter how old he was ever going to get, Helblindi was never going to be a morning person. He got things done, but life looked so much brighter after a cup of coffee. Or several. Right now it was still the first cup and Helblindi was still yawning. It was still easy to rely on his little brother to make sure that Helblindi was awake.

“You cannot even imagine how badly I want the entire nation to see you before your first coffee. That would be a harsh dose of realism.” Byleistr sat down opposite of him, a sly smile on his lips and Helblindi was tempted to flip him off.

“Actually I can imagine, you say the very same thing every morning.” Muttering under his breath Helblindi lifted the cup to his mouth and took another large sip. The caffeine was working pretty slowly so far, perhaps Helblindi should try to get some more sleep tonight and not hoover over different letters for hours.

Byleistr winked at him. “The dark rings beneath your eyes really work well with your hair.”

“Is there a point to you rubbing your early morning bird-ness into my tired face? If not, I’d like to finish my breakfast in peace.” Helblindi already knew that Byleistr had something up his sleeve, he could tell by the relaxed way he was lounging on his chair. Nobody was in such a good mood for no reason, especially not Byleistr.

“I got an e-mail from one of the guys who are doing the press. They found somebody online. It seems like Thor and the American actually got engaged and the entire family got together to celebrate yesterday.”

That did so much more than any cup of coffee would have. Helblindi’s eyebrows went up and his thoughts were already going in a very certain direction. “The usurper must be thrilled that the idiot is so eager to dig his own grave. Is it legit?”

“I have no indication to believe otherwise.”

“Why did nobody send this to me?”

Byleistr shot him another grin. “Because you’ve been awake for about five minutes, your highness. Anything we should do about it?”

Helblindi let the idea sink in for a moment. “It’s already on the internet? No, give it another day and it will make headlines away. People will be furious. One has to love those people for their timing. Not even king yet and he already presents himself in the worst possible way.”

“Anything we should do about it? Congratulate them?”
At the moment Helblindi didn’t have a better answer than an unsure gesture. “I don’t know yet. That could make us look bad either way…”

“Romanoff could look into the American. Maybe she could find some dirt. She is pretty thorough.”

Helblindi knew that to be right, but he disliked the idea of involving Romanoff even more. “I have a better idea. As soon as the engagement is made official, they’ll have to honour the tradition and invite all the lords. Then I’ll talk to her personally. I am good at finding dirt myself. Obviously secret information gets leaked so easily nowadays.”
Hello everybody,

Yes, I know, that took a while, but it's a long, really long chapter, so I hope that makes up for the wait ;)

Have fun :D

The door swung open and Kelda heard the clicking of heels. “Mam, you can’t just…”

“It seems like I just did.”

Sighing inwardly Kelda looked up and saw exactly what she had expected. A flushed and bewildered secretary and the cold, biting smile of an impeccably dressed woman.

“I am so sorry, I told her that she couldn’t enter, but obviously that didn’t mean anything.”

Damage was already done and Valkyrie merely continued to smile, content with the little turmoil she had caused. Taking off her glasses Kelda addressed her secretary. “I see. Since she is already here I might as well spare three of my precious minutes. Thank you.”

Nodding her secretary left, not without glaring at Valkyrie who was already pulling up a chair. “I would have made an appointment, but I was dismissed. Nothing better to talk in person anyway.”

Kelda had seen this visit coming, it was actually surprising that Valkyrie hadn’t showed up here first thing in the morning. Lunchbreak was just over, perhaps that was supposed to make some kind of impression, but Kelda wasn’t even going to try figuring out what it might be. Kelda was going to do anything, except for sitting here and letting her talk. Journalism 101.

“Three minutes. You better don’t lose a second of them.” Kelda leaned back and crossed her legs. Valkyrie wasn’t going to get a better invitation than that.

Sitting down Valkyrie continued to show off her unsettling smile. “Checking out the concurrence?” Valkyrie pulled one of the newspapers on the table over to take a look at it. Fine, if she wanted to lose time over this, Kelda would gladly go with it. “That’s part of the job. As much as I like to believe that the Morgenrot is the most informative and best edited newspaper around, it would be foolish to assume that other people don’t know what they’re doing.” Since they both knew why Valkyrie was here, Kelda added something else. “Or if they have better sources than yourself.”

Nothing. Not even the hint of a smile or a flinch. Ever so casually Valkyrie scanned over the front page which was the very reason why she was here. “Those are some catchy headlines… Royal engagement celebrated in secrecy. I should probably compliment you on that. The Morgenrot was the first news outlet to run this story. All the others are merely quoting you.”

If Valkyrie wouldn’t get to the point, Kelda could also mess around. “I guess we were the first newspaper who published it online, but it seems to have been floating around the internet hours before we got to it.”
“That’s the point that confuses me a little bit.” Valkyrie finally looked up from the newspaper, still smiling. “Rumours are always floating around, but they are just that. I wouldn’t expect a prestigious newspaper like the Morgenrot to print the words that some troll posted. You didn’t do that. You were quoting a source. A source close to the court. Which is kind of a predicament for me. Since I am responsible for what news leave the court. This story wasn’t supposed to leave the court.”

“Is this an official confirmation of the engagement?” Kelda was definitely going to use Kelda’s name as soon as she was going to put this information online.

Valkyrie continued to smile. “Not necessary, the official statement will be published within the next hour.”

Another thing which didn’t come as a surprise. “Then feel free to deliver my best wishes to the Duke of Bilskirnir.”

“I am sure he will be happy to hear that. Even more so if you could tell me who gave you the information about the engagement.”

Finally. That had taken so much longer than it should have. “I am sorry, but there is no way I am going to give up my source. Sorry for wasting your time.”

Despite Kelda’s clearly dismissive tone Valkyrie didn’t move. “I fear that there is a bit of a misunderstanding going on. I am not asking you to give somebody up who is feeding you gossip. We’re talking about a major security leak in the close circle around the royal family. It needs to get fixed before more information gets leaked that could have one of the family members end up in a dangerous situation.”

“The information that the Duke of Bilskirnir got engaged didn’t actually hit anyone with that much of a surprise. Also it’s definitely not the same thing as publishing the schedules or the car routes. My source doesn’t supply me with any of those. Even if they did, I wouldn’t publish it. Despite what you are trying to insinuate, I am deeply devoted to the crown like every citizen.” Kelda made sure that the look to her watch was impossible to miss. Sure, this little inconvenience had to be dealt with it, price to pay if you were the one who had all the information which nobody should have. Nonetheless she wanted to get it over with rather quickly.

Perhaps she should try to provoke Valkyrie? Then the threats would come sooner and they could bring this to an end. That wasn’t necessary though.

“You see, we aren’t just talking about the engagement. These days information that is only known to members of the court is easily slipping through the cracks. Sometimes even information that has never been true. Like the idea of the threatening embargo.”

Fine, Kelda was going to take the bait. Just to show her that Valkyrie wasn’t going to gain any space here. “That piece of information was published first in a Jotun newspaper although I wish we had been the first ones.”

Valkyrie nodded. “Oh, I understand. Pandering to people’s fears is always a good way to sell more copies. Anyway, it’s good that you mention Jotunheim, because I would have done so anyway. It’s true, they ran the story first and again quoted some unknown source from the court. Could be a lie, of course. I can’t help thinking though that maybe somebody quite clever has been at work here. Can we do a little thought experiment?”

Kelda didn’t bother to give her an answer, so Valkyrie continued. “Let’s say I am a journalist, a very good one and in charge of the major newspaper of this country. Since I am an influential person I
 somehow manage to establish contact with a person at the court who is willing to leak private and 
secret information. Jackpot. Especially at this time when we have new controversial news every 
week. Having exclusive information all the time would very quickly attract attention I would go 
about it a bit smarter. How about I give some piece of information to someone else to publish? 
Something like an embargo that’s never going to happen anyway. Keep the rest to myself to make 
sure it’s going to be me who has the headlines and if somebody comes to ask me about it, I could still 
say ‘The Jotuns published it first.’ Because as soon as the Jotuns get involved the crown loses its 
cool. Does that sound like a good strategy?”

“Listen, Valkyrie, you are right – I am in charge of the most important newspaper of this country and 
that job doesn’t do itself. I am not going to give you any more of my precious time. It is true that 
somebody tipped me off about the engagement, but only about the engagement. That’s all I know 
and that’s all that got published. I am not going to name you my source and legally you have no way 
to force me to tell you. I know that you are here for the king, but that doesn’t change anything. I am 
not going to give up the source.” Kelda put her glasses back on to signal that the conversation was 
indeed over.

“You are a smart woman, Kelda. You do know why the news of the engagement has so much wait 
to it and the royal family had their reasons for wanting to keep it a secret for a while. It’s more than 
just gossip, but not dangerous. As soon as secret information is given to Jotun outlets we’re talking 
about something else entirely.

That was just cheap. “Can I quote you on this?”

Valkyrie still wouldn’t let lower her mask. The smile wouldn’t fade and remained just as threatening. 
“I’ve been reading your articles for years and I can’t help but notice your admiration for the Duke of 
Glæsisvellir…”

For the first time during this conversation Kelda felt a slight unease creeping up on her. One of the 
very few moments when she hated herself for reacting to a very cheap shot. No damage done as long 
as she wasn’t going to let her see how she felt about that remark. “I happen to agree with most of his 
political views.”

“And you know him personally.”

“I was lucky enough to be introduced to him at a reception, yes.”

Valkyrie hummed softly. “Do you believe that Duke of Glæsisvellir would be better suited to 
become king than the crown prince?”

Kelda was going to shut this down, instantly. She couldn’t allow Valkyrie another step down that 
road. “Sorry, could you repeat that, because I’m going to write this down so I won’t miss anything. 
Are you implying that the Duke of Glæsisvellir is leaking me information, so I could manipulate the 
public opinion in his favour – against his brother? And since the king has sent you to come here, is 
that what the king is thinking?”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t interpret my words in the way that seems you most suitable. I 
hope you are aware of the damage you may end up doing. Damage to the crown which equals 
damage to our nation.”

Putting on her best bored look Kelda raised one eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Standing up Valkyrie nodded, judging by the look on her face the conversation had gone down 
exactly the way she had expected. It was all a bluff anyway, both of them were doing the exact same
thing. “I wish you a most pleasant day.”

“Same to you.”

As Valkyrie walked out the door Kelda thought to herself that it was impressive how put together a functioning alcoholic could seem in almost every situation. Another person would have probably pointed that out. After Valkyrie had disappeared it took another 20 seconds before her secretary snuck back into the office. “I still feel like I need to apologize. She just stormed past me and I was too slow to stop her.”

Kelda waved him off. “Don’t worry. Most people who work at the court don’t feel like they have to wait for anything. Especially Valkyrie. We’ve already lost enough time over this. How far are we on the translation of the unofficial Jotun outlets? Oh and I need somebody to constantly check the website of the court, because I have the feeling we’re not going to get a personal statement anytime soon.”

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“Thanks.” Bucky smiled at the bartender as he handed him his cappuccino. The smile came right back to him, revealing white teeth. There was a flirty spark in it which was a very common thing. During his first weeks in Asgard Bucky had had a hard time to figure out that this had nothing to do with his incredible charm and handsome looks. As hard to believe as that seemed.

It was an Asgardian thing, in bars and clubs. A major advantage for the staff if they were able to flirt with male and female customers alike. Certainly good for tips. Nonetheless a hard realisation that he wasn’t anything special.

A shame, the bartender was kind of cute. Taking a sip from his cappuccino Bucky pulled over one of the newspapers on the counter. He had already heard the news on the radio, first thing in the morning, but he was curious to see how the papers were going to present it. Obviously in the most lovely and unbiased way.

*Secret union between Asgard and United States made official*

*Secret engagement celebrated at the court*

*Royal engagement celebrated in secrecy*

*Crown prince Thor proposes to American girlfriend. Royal family tries to do damage control*

Ouch, that was harsh. Bucky took his time scanning through different articles, but they were all whistling the same song. No real surprise about the engagement itself. They were rather asking questions about the attempt of the royal family to keep this significant even within their own walls. Sure, the reason was obvious and most of the articles pointed out that they probably hoped to get the public to warm up to the American fiancé before announcing the happy news. But there was also this underlying tone, the message between the lines that couldn’t be denied and the leitmotiv of all these articles.

What had these actions do to with Jane Foster being an American citizen? Was this merely supposed to be the engagement between two people who were in love with each other or the union of two countries who had moved closer to each other in the last couple of months? Against the will of the Asgardian people. None of the articles was outright hostile towards Jane Foster, but the journalists outright voiced their distrust and doubts that the young woman was a good fit for their future king and their country.
No, Bucky really wouldn’t want to walk in her shoes at the moment. The protests in front of the embassy had died down, but nobody should be as naïve to believe that the public’s rage had died down. Bucky had heard about several petitions online that called out to the king to change the American policy. What was more important to him? The goodwill of a nation that they had done fine without for centuries? Or the job security of his own people?

Everybody knew that Jane Foster had nothing to do with any of that. Yet her passport said that she was an American, so why shouldn’t she in one way or another influence her future husband in favour of her home country? Then the entire issue with the trúa…

Grimacing softly Bucky showed the newspapers away and instead drank up half of his coffee. So now he would have to feel bored for about 15 minutes. His own fault for showing up too early.

“Which one do you like best?”

Looking up Bucky faced that lovely smile for a second time and raised one eyebrow in confusion. The bartender gestured towards the different newspapers. “You’ve read all of them, so which one do you like best?”

“Actually none of them.” Bucky shrugged. Sure, he was interested in what was going on politically, but the royal wedding itself didn’t get him excited.

Unbothered by Bucky’s response the bartender picked up a new paper from the other side of the counter and laid it out in front of Bucky. “I like this one. A bit of mean-spiritedness is over-due.”

Letting his eyes run over the front page Bucky wrinkled his nose.

American invasion reaches the palace

“Well, that’s… definitely mean-spirited.” Bucky didn’t have any other words to offer and the bartender straightened up again, resting his hip against the counter. The posture made clear that he either had no other clients to serve or that he didn’t care about them at the moment. “Sure, that’s refreshing once in a while. Where are you from?”

A simple question asked with curiosity and nothing more. It shouldn’t disappoint Bucky tremendously, but he couldn’t help it. He was still waiting for that very day when he would be able to have a conversation with an Asgardian that lasted longer than one minute without them being able to tell that he wasn’t a native speaker.

“New York.” Bucky put on his own million dollar smile and the reaction was totally worth it. The realisation went through the bartender’s eyes as a spark, then he intently decided to see the humour in this rather embarrassing scene. In a highly exaggerated way he clenched his teeth and scratched the back of his neck. “Oh, this is awkward.”

Instead of answering Bucky put his thumb and index finger together to create a tiny space between them. Just a tiny little bit awkward.

“You are not here to invade the coffee job, aren’t you?”

Not the best joke. Still, at this time Bucky was glad about every attempt to see the American issue in a more light-hearted way. “No and I also don’t plan to marry a member of the royal family. No reason to worry.”

Obviously relieved that Bucky wasn’t angry or feeling offended the bartender picked his attempts of casual conversation back up. “Your Old Norse is pretty good. You’re going to school here?”
The first idea that crossed Bucky’s mind was to lie. Pretend that he was a student and make sure that the conversation would continue in a relaxed and natural way. Why should he lie about himself though? Bucky had nothing to do with the American policy. Just like Jane Foster.

“No, I work for the American Embassy.”

One more opportunity for the bartender to shift around uncomfortably. “Wow, now that must really make you popular at parties at the moment.”

“Still more popular than the executive suite of Næss.”

The bartender laughed and it sounded bright, real. Bucky liked the sound of it and the soft dimples in his cheeks. How often did it happen that you realised somebody was kind of cute only after talking to them for already five minutes?

“That’s not a hard task to achieve. I have a great idea. If somebody asks you where you’re from in the future, you just tell them that you’re British. We could set up a whole new identity for you.”

Perhaps Bucky should ask him if he didn’t have any other customers to take care of. The contained the risk of him actually doing so and Bucky realised that very second, that he didn’t want that to happen. “Yeah? What would you call me?”

Cocking his head the bartender ran his eyes up and down Bucky’s body. “How about William or Harry? That’s very British, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but I am not a Prince. Just an employee of the state with a very bad salary and I still have all of my hair.”

“Okay, how about I call you by your real name then and we put a ‘Sir’ right in front of it. Everything sounds British if you use ‘Sir’ or ‘Dame’. What’s your name?”

Bucky couldn’t stifle his chuckle of amusement. “James.”

“Nice to meet you, Sir James. I am Arnþórr.”

The ‘r’ rolled effortlessly off his tongue and something that Bucky had yet to achieve. It was different than in Russian, otherwise it wouldn’t have been a problem. The Asgardian version pleased him though. “My pleasure… I don’t think that Sir James is going to work out though. I’ve spend a lot of time of my childhood in Russia, could that work out?”

“Totally. Why didn’t you say that before? Trust me, if your TV breaks down and you call somebody to repair it, they’re going to charge you half of the money if you say you’re Russian. Double if you’re American.” Despite his wink Bucky had no doubt whatsoever that every single word was true. “Is there a Russian version of James?”

The mere question brought up pleasant memories from his early teenage years. Not hearing a word from what his geography teacher was saying, because Bucky had been busy staring at Nikita across the class room. It was impossible to forget the lithe freckles on his neck or ring in his ear. “There is more than one version. I prefer Yasha though.”

“I like the sound of that. Suits you…”

The flirty tone was right back and by now Bucky was perfectly sure that Arnþórr wasn’t looking for a good tip. A realisation that was accompanied by a warm sensation of content.
“Hey, you are early.” Slightly startled Bucky turned around. A soft blush was creeping onto his face when he realised that he had almost forgotten that he was actually waiting for Steve to arrive. Worth the wait though when he saw that the bright expression on Steve’s face. Somebody was in a good mood.

“Hello. Yeah, my appointment finished early. Good to see you, sit down.”

Steve was here to impress. As soon as he had sat down Arnþórr asked him in Old Norse what he wanted to have. The answer was also delivered in Old Norse and Bucky hummed appreciatively.

“You’ve been practising.”

“I’m trying my best. Standard situations are okay, but I’ve tried to read the newspaper today and my head was spinning.” Steve shrugged, seemingly a little embarrassed which finally had to cease being adorable, but it simply didn’t.

“I’ve told you before that the newspaper is pretty tough. Especially today. You’ll need to start simpler.”

“What? You want me to read a kid’s book?”

“Why not? I did that. Simple sentence structure. Simple vocabulary and very big runes. It’s perfect. If you want to I can give you a couple recommendations. The little duckling and his sock really changed my life.” Bucky gave it his best serious expression and Steve rewarded him with a laugh. “Is that a real thing?”

“You think I would ever make fun of the little duckling and his sock? Never.”

It was a great start of the night and they only had planned half an hour at the café anyway before they had to leave to get to the cinema. When Arnþórr placed the bill next to Bucky’s empty cup it was hard to miss the small napkin he had also placed there. A couple of numbers were written down onto it. Arnþórr didn’t try to draw any attention to it, merely offered Bucky another smile as he gave him back his change. “Have a nice evening, Yasha.”

“Thanks…” Without giving it another thought Bucky grabbed the napkin and slid it into the pocket of his jacket. Steve was watching him, which meant he had clearly noticed what was going on, but he chose not to acknowledge the situation. “You’re ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

Somehow disappointing.

***

Tell us your opinion:

Do you believe crown prince Thor’s fiancé is a good fit for the monarchy and for the Duke of Bilskirnir?

89% - NO

11% - YES

Lowering his phone Loki closed his eyes for a second. Being constantly right was a pain. Yes, he could understand Thor. Why still wait when you were so absolutely sure and completely in love? Unfortunately Loki could understand their people even more. First the policy, then so many jobs
leaving the country and at any moment another company could decide to do the same. They were worried, scared and angry. Then their future king decided to make the most important and most trusted person in his life an American.

As a commoner Loki would be pissed too.

“Damned hypocrite…” Muttering to himself Loki put his phone away and he lifted his hand to run it through his hair before remembering that the stylist had already taken care of his hair. He was only going to mess it up.

The truth was that a part of him was angry at Thor for even being with Jane in the first place. Yes, she was a sweetheart and Thor adored her, but Thor was going to be king. Romance should never be a priority. The choice of a spouse was a matter of state and Thor had only chosen for himself.

Which was again understandable. The ideal solution would be to find someone who could relate to the people, gain their trust and who knew how the political system of Asgard worked. And if you happened to like that person on a personal level… now that would be perfect.

Thor loved Jane which was even better, but that was all. She couldn’t understand the average Asgardian, because the trúa was an alien concept to her. The political system was just as strange and there was no way the people would start trusting anytime soon since she was an American.

Loki appreciated Jane, she was sweet and nice… but she had no idea how influential her position was. Which meant that people were definitely going to take advantage of her and Loki had to be the first one.

“Your highness. Ready when you are.” The dean had slipped back into the room, completely unnoticed by Loki. Quickly nodding Loki smiled and concentrated at the task at hand. Horrible timing, but his speech had been scheduled months ago. Actually he had been looking forward to it. The university had invited him to hold a lecture about a paper he had written about two years ago. It was such a welcoming change to talk to an audience as a historian and a political scientist. Now the news leak pretty much guaranteed that all the questions that the students were going to ask would be about the engagement.

Thanks Thor, thank you so much.

Putting all that aside Loki let the dean lead him into the auditorium. Applause and bowed heads greeted him and Loki took a seat to listen to the dean’s introduction. Since about 300 mobile cameras were already aimed at him Loki couldn’t afford to pull a bored face. As soon as the dean was done with humbly welcoming him the applause started all over again and Loki took his place behind the speaker’s desk. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you dean Jógvan for the warm welcome. I am here today to speak about Russian and Asgardian relations during the 1990s and the influence of the trúa on said relations.”

Loki was more than content with the flow of his lecture. Not a surprise, he has always been good with words and he could read the faces of his listeners. To his great satisfaction they were with him until the end when the dean asked for further questions hundreds of hands shot right up into the air. Instantly Loki brought the microphone back up to his lips. “I am perfectly willing to answer any question you might have for me, but I would be very happy if we could dedicate the first hour of the Q and A to my lecture. Afterwards everything is free game.”

There was a good chance that Loki was going to regret saying this, but he had his principles. Loki was royalty and therefore his people should be able to ask him anything they wanted, he was obligated to them. To his surprise and relief the students actually seemed more interested in his
lecture than anything else going on. At least that was what Loki liked to believe, but he was fairly sure that they had been thoroughly briefed before this event.

Don’t ask the prince anything about his brother’s engagement or your will be escorted out of the hall

To be honest Loki was having fun. He loved an intellectual debate about his passions and history was one of them. History combined with politics and things couldn’t get better. Lots of the students had come prepared, of course, they wouldn’t miss the chance to try to catch the prince off-guard or to discuss controversial topics with him. Overall things were going great until the first hour was over. Now it was time to get ugly.

The first one of the dirty question was easy to handle though. “I remember hearing you say in an interview that you try to read at least five different Asgardian newspapers every day.”

“I try. That’s true… but lots of times I just can’t fit it in my routine to be honest.”

“I see. Have you read a couple of newspapers today?”

Soft chuckles and murmurs went through the rows and Loki kept it short and simple with a nod.

“Yes, I have.”

Finally the real question hit him. “What do you think about different papers calling your brother’s engagement another step forward in the American invasion?”

Loki didn’t bat an eyelid. “I believe that a lot of journalists love their plays at words and believe that catchy phrases are going to get them more readers.”

Done, easily.

“How long was your family planning to keep the engagement under wraps?”

“There were no plans whatsoever. My brother proposed to the woman he loves and as he shared the news with his family we celebrated. As a family. Now I can’t tell you when the happy news would have been published, because my family never got the chance to discuss that.”

Mental pat on the shoulder, Loki was doing fine.

The next man that approached the microphone was a Jotun, Loki could tell it by looking at him. His skin seemed so white Loki thought he could see his veins right through it. Perhaps he was even paler than Helblindi. That didn’t matter, because at the distance of maybe 10 metres, Loki couldn’t make out the colour of his eyes. If that had been Helblindi Loki would have been able to see that blue shining. Clearing his throat Loki shifted slightly in his chair and then leaned back, unable to find a comfortable position.

“Your highness.”

The Jotun’s tone was mocking, but that didn’t come as a surprise.

“I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on the recently cancelled Jotun plebiscite.”

Hornets’ nest. There was no right answer to it without upsetting a lot of people. Loki would only be able to get out of this if he mentioned the language act. “I think the plebiscite was an unnecessary and dangerous idea. Jotunheim and Asgard are one. We are brothers and sisters that cannot and should not be separated. I assume that you are Jotun?”
The young man nodded.

“Then you are my brother just like everybody else in this room. Many things separate us, that cannot be denied, but I do fiercely believe that we are one people and all of us carry this nation in their hearts. The threat of the plebiscite was the result of misunderstands, bad politics and two parties involved that both refused to take a step back. There is no need for a plebiscite and there is no need for the language act. That is all I have to say about it.”

The Jotun stared at him as if Loki had just conjured lightning and thunder. His lips were slightly parted and he seemed to have forgotten that there were other people around, that he was supposed to let the next one in line have the microphone. Eventually the Jotun did just that and the next person got to speak.

Another hornet’s nest.

“Do you believe that the public is right to critique your brother’s choice of consort?”

Just wonderful. “It is my firm belief that the public has the right to criticize every single aspect of the monarchy.”

“Let me rephrase my question. Do you believe that the public’s worries about your future sister in law’s nationality are justified?”

“If the people are concerned – who am I to tell them that their concern isn’t justified? That would be an incredibly arrogant thing to say. You’ve only had a very short time to get to know Jane Foster, the lovely woman that has conquered my brother’s heart without ever intending to do so. She is smart, sweet and gracious. It will take time, but as you all will get to know her, I am sure your concern will fade and Jane Foster will every day do her best to become the King’s consort that Asgard deserves.”

The second the words left Loki’s mouth he knew that he had fucked up. Now he could only pray to his ancestors that nobody here would pick up on it. Helblindi would have already torn a hole right into him.

“So are you saying that at the moment Jane Foster is not what we deserve?”

Fuck. Loki wouldn’t let his face show a single emotion. Lie or tell the truth. Lie or tell the truth.

“Not at the moment, no. But this is an extremely difficult positon to fill in. For anybody and Jane has the support of the entire court, the love of my brother and I am sure she will surprise us all.”

Thor was going to kill him.

The student thank him, bowed his head and the next one stepped up. At least this one gave him a little room to breathe, because he asked about Næss and that gave Loki an opportunity to rant. Another student stepped up to the microphone and as he asked his question one of the security details slowly walked up to the Loki, leaned in to whisper into his ear. “Your highness, please cut the next question short and tell the audience that you have to rush to your next appointment. The university just received a bomb threat, we have to get you out of here.”
Hello everybody,

So, last time we've had a bomb threat. What's going to happen now?

Answers to your comments will come soon.

Have fun :)

“The second search also came up without any results. No suspicious item found.”

“Thank you. Those are good news.”

As the officer left the room Heimdall watched the dean slumping down in his chair as the constant tension and worry could finally chased out the door. Nobody had been hurt and by now it seemed to be safe to assume that the threat had been a hoax. This was the best outcome possible after an anonymous message that said the lecture hall was going to blow up. Nevertheless they were far from packing up their things and going home.

Threatening to kill hundreds of people by destroying a public building was a heinous, terroristic act. Something that couldn’t get any worse. The phone call hadn’t given them any idea about the motive. Could be a lonely, confused kid with a lot of general and unjustified hatred against the entire world. Or a student or employee who got upset with the university or the education system. Sometimes there was no reason at all which was definitely the most terrifying concept anyone could imagine.

In this particular case the matter was a lot more complicated.

Perhaps one of these scenarios was actually the case, which ultimately didn’t matter since a member of the royal family had been in the lecture hall as the threat had been voiced. The Duke of Glæsisvelli’s presence, the number two in the succession line, made this a crime against the nation of Asgard. An attempt to destabilize the monarchy.

The outcome didn’t even matter at this point. Heimdall thanked his ancestors and all the benevolent spirits that the Duke of Glæsisvelli was already back in the safety of the palace. Now it was up to him to find out what had actually happened today.

“The Duchess of Frensalir called me 15 minutes ago. She is very upset.”

Some of the tension returned to the dean’s body. To Heimdall it almost looked like he had forgotten that this situation was far from over. Straightening back up the dean tried to make himself appear like the put-together and serious guy that he usually was. A bit too late for that, but Heimdall could see where he was coming from.

“That is completely understandable. Any mother would be overwhelmed by worry.”

“The Duchess has never been overwhelmed in her entire life, but I get what you are trying to say. It would be in anybody’s favour to put her mind at ease as quickly as possible. I am sure you are as
eager as everybody else to clear up this ugly incident.”

“Of course. The university will cooperate completely. What do you need?”

Heimdall needed quite a lot and most of it would cause raised eyebrows and snarls of displeasure. Unfortunately these things couldn’t be taken into consideration when a member of the royal family was concerned. “A list of every single student present at the lecture.”

Instantly the dean nodded. “That’s not a problem. Only a certain number of registered students were allowed to attend the lecture. My secretary can give you a printed and a digital version.”

“Excellent. I would appreciate it if all Jotun attendants were highlighted.”

It was hard to miss how the dean visibly winced. As expected and Heimdall didn’t have time for such sensitivities. “Is there a problem?”

Every single thought of the dean was visible on his face, written upon his features. When he opened his mouth to speak up, he wanted to ask Heimdall if that was really necessary or why they were supposed to do that. Perhaps there was also a part of him that wanted to protest. As the dean of the biggest and respected university of the country he had to keep face and try to not step on anybody’s toes. The Jotun issue was hornets’ nest, so every public figure tried to avoid it as much as possible. “No, that should be possible, but we only register the nationality of our students. Every Jotun student will be listed as Asgardian. If the student’s main address is in Valhalla, which is likely since he is attending school here, we have no way of telling if they are Jotun or not.”

Heimdall dismissed that idea. “I am sure you can filter out Jotun names. That’s one thing. I am absolutely convinced that you have called off lecture if there had been any indication of danger beforehand, but I have to ask anyway. Have there been any indices beforehand that something like today would happen? Protests? Anonym messages? Requests to call off the lecture? Protests against the prince’s visit?”

Once more the dean decided against showing or voicing his displeasure. Somebody saw himself as a man of integrity and naturally he would be offended by Heimdall even asking if he had known about the possible danger.

“None of that. The prince is an alumni and immensely popular among the students. I may add that I know the prince personally. I oversaw one of his student projects, I consider him a friend and my sovereign. I would never bring him in any kind of dangerous situation. I am appalled by the mere idea. Besides I am responsible for every single student of this university. This lecture would have never happened if there had been an indication of danger.”

Actually Heimdall didn’t doubt that the dean would tell him if the opposite was the case, because despite his questions, Heimdall agreed – the dean was a man of integrity. “Alright. One more question. How many Jotun associations are there at the university?”

The dean pursed his lips, not hiding his unease, but his answer came quick nonetheless. “Three.”

“Is one of them Frjáls?”

*That had been the last straw. Now the dean was no longer able to play down his discomfort. “Of course not. That would be against the law.”*

“Exactly, but that doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t have meetings under a different name.”

*The answer was dry. “Not to my knowledge. If there was any indication that a group of radicals had*
formed an association, the university would have already closed it down.”

***

Propping his feet up on the couch Loki closed his eyes. Sometimes Loki had trouble figuring out himself. If he imagined himself as someone else, taking a look at Loki Búrison, he thought that he wouldn’t understand this strange prince.

Who remained completely calm and answered a question about the American policy when security had just told him that somebody was threatening to blow up the entire place. Loki hadn’t even felt nervous. That had been the situation and he had deal with it. Got up, thank everybody for coming here, saying goodbye and leaving. Then everything had happened way too fast to actually keep up with it.

They had never put him in a car so quickly before. Loki had been back at the palace and only now his mind was catching up with what had happened today. Heimdall had already sent him the newest updates on the situation. Complete evacuation, still looking for a suspicious item, no further threats. Most likely a hoax and false alarm.

Good news all over. Nothing had happened. Loki hadn’t even been scared. So why was his heart only starting to race now? None of this made sense. It was naïve to assume that the bomb threat had nothing to do with him, the timing was just too perfect. Nevertheless it could have been a dare. Or somebody just was sick of hearing members of the royal family talk. It was alright. Nothing had happened. Sure, the lecture had been cut short, but nobody had been hurt.

Everybody was fine and that was most important.

So why was Loki now feeling jumpy and uncomfortable?

“Hey, there you are…”

Also so distracted that he didn’t hear Balder coming into the room. Opening his eyes Loki was confronted with Balder’s worried face and asked himself he was supposed to feel the same way. Perhaps Loki already did, he had trouble figuring out his emotions at the moment.

“Are you alright? I just heard… Why didn’t you call?” Balder’s fingers were affectionately petting his hair as he pressed a kiss to Loki’s cheek.

“I am fine. It was most definitely a hoax. No reason to worry.” Loki tried to smile, but it was surprisingly difficult and to distract from that he quickly asked a question. “How did you know that fast? I thought they made up some excuse for the students, so it hasn’t gone public yet.”

It astonishing how easily worry could turn into something else. In this case embarrassment mixed with awkwardness. “Your mother…”

Groaning in annoyance Loki let his eyes slide back close. “Of course…”

“What? You don’t want her to call me when you’re in a building that might explode any second?” Hearing Balder even slightly upset with him was something entirely new and definitely good enough to distract Loki from his accelerated heartbeat.

“Nothing exploded and I was probably already out of the building when mother was informed about the bomb threat.”

“You could have called me, Loki. I would have liked you to call me…” The fingers were massaging
his scalp softly and Loki felt the guilt sneaking up on him, tugging on him, forcing him to
acknowledge that Balder had a point. Releasing a long breath Loki put himself together and went
back to looking at the handsome but concerned face of his boyfriend. “I am sorry. I didn’t call
anyone. I just sat in the car and… looked out of the window. I believe I didn’t even think anything. I
wasn’t even scared, but now… maybe a bit shaken.”

“What’s wrong with people who are doing something like that?” Balder was shaking his head and at
the same time sat down on the couch. “I hope they find out who is responsible, but right now I am
just glad that you are okay.”

Loki nodded absently as his thoughts drifted back to the lecture and to the young Jotun student that
had asked him about the plebiscite. The physique that had been so unmistakably Jotun. With that
thought came disgust. Why would he think of that young man now? Why was that his first
association after the bomb threat? Loki would bestow hell on everybody else for implying something
of that kind and in his head he was doing the very same thing. Like his father or Thor.

Upset at himself Loki sat up and he was quite surprised that Balder didn’t miss a beat. Arms loosely
wrapped themselves around Loki’s waist and Balder rested his head on Loki’s shoulder. “Are you
sure that you’re alright? I know you were looking forward to the lecture…”

Loki couldn’t remember talking that much about it, but Balder was right. Apart from the Q&A which
had been mostly about him being a prince Loki had thoroughly enjoyed talking about his field of
expertise. As a scholar of history, nothing else. Something he didn’t get to do often enough.

“Yes, I was… but I can’t be upset about the lecture being cut short after a bomb threat… nobody got
hurt. That’s all that matters… kind of a fucked-up day.”

Not saying anything Balder gently stroked his side and pressed a kiss to his neck. It was supposed to
comfort him or to calm him down, but Loki’s thoughts drifted back to the Jotun anyway and there
was no easier way to start hating himself. Or he something would come to mind that he should be
thinking about even less.

“I said something stupid after the lecture… there will be trouble.”

“National scandal kind of trouble?”

“No, but Thor will be upset. Very much and rightly so. This day sucks.” Loki was dangerously close
to drifting off completely into a sour mood.

“Thor will be too glad that you’re alright to be angry at you.” Balder mumbled and Loki thought he
could hear him smile. If that was even possible.

“Do you think you could ever be angry with me?” Loki didn’t know where that question had come
from, but now it was out and Balder laughed. “I was angry when you didn’t call me.”

In response Loki huffed. “That’s you being angry? You just can’t help yourself…”

Instead of arguing Balder kissed his cheek and Loki was torn between disappointment and
appreciation. Inside of his chest Loki could feel his heartbeat slowing down, evening out. It was
getting easier to relax in Balder’s arms. Putting his hand on Balder’s knee Loki rested his head
against his chest.

“Balder…”

“Hmm?” His boyfriend was absentely nuzzling his hair.
“What do you think about Jane?”

Balder sounded confused as he answered. “What do you mean? I like Jane, she is a sweetheart.”

Loki was tempted to roll his eyes. “Yes, sure. That’s not what I meant. Her as Thor’s wife.

“I think that they love each other and will make each other very happy. That’s all that matters and people are just being nasty. Thor has the right to marry whoever he wants.”

His guts were clenching painfully, because Loki knew that they might actually start fighting over this. It seemed almost impossible – to fight with Balder, but Loki had asked in the first place. “I disagree. I personally like her and probably she is the best thing that could have happened to Thor, to calm him down and even him out, but as King’s consort… I can’t see it and I agree with the people criticize this engagement.”

As expected Loki could feel Balder’s body tensing. “You didn’t say any of that during the celebration.”

“I am not a complete jerk. I can see that they’re happy and I’ll gladly call Jane my sister in law. The problem only comes in when we consider that Thor rather soon than later will be king of this nation… and she has nothing to offer to the Asgardians.”

“Firstly, that’s not true. She has a lot to offer. She is kind and generous, that’s something people highly approve of. She is going to be Thor’s wife, not the wife of the average Asgardian. The expectations are insane and don’t make that much sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. People are afraid that the US is gaining even more influence through her. Which is not completely unfounded. She doesn’t feel connected to the trúa or our traditions which have shaped our politics for hundreds of years. Don’t tell me that wouldn’t be concerned about something like that.”

“Those are all things that can change with time. Do you really believe that Thor should take that into consideration while choosing his spouse?” Balder still sounded sceptical and Loki gritted his teeth. “Yes, he should. Those are the cards and the deal you get. Our lives are full of privileges. Wealth, the palace, the power… and we only get all of that, because we serve the people. They always come first.”

Balder hummed softly before uttering a sigh. “That’s really what you believe? I don’t think it’s fair.”

Loki didn’t say anything else, he felt bad for bringing it up. To soften the blow Loki turned his head and kissed Balder’s cheek. “How about we grab something to eat? Bomb threats always make me hungry.”

Seemingly despite himself Balder chuckled. “Alright… going out wouldn’t be a good idea anymore. Let’s call the kitchen.”

They did just that and by the time that Loki was ready to think about anything else but the lecture and Jane, somebody knocked on the door. “Yes?”

Thor came in and Loki readied himself for the inevitable fight. “Hey, are you alright?”

“Yeah, it seems like the entire thing was a hoax. If they had found anything Heimdall would have already informed me.”

Nodding Thor slowly made his over to them and directly addressed Balder. “Could I please take
alone with Loki for a moment?”

Since they both knew what this was about Balder agreed before quickly kissing Loki. “I’ll be just next door.”

So Balder left the salon and Loki leaned back in his chair, getting ready for the accusations which were unfortunately completely justified. Thor wasn’t exactly looking grim, he was rather difficult to read at the moment which was a rare sight. Perhaps he didn’t know how he felt himself. “I glad you’re okay. The people who did that will get into serious trouble.”

This was all just filler. It’s wasn’t like there had never been threats against their family. Nothing substantial during the last 15 years as far as Loki could remember and this hoax really shouldn’t keep their attention for much longer. Thor was here for something else anyway.

“I happened to watch a clip from your Q&A…”

“Thor, just say your piece. No need to dance around it.”

“Have you any idea how it makes me feel to hear you publicly say that the woman I love is not good enough to be my wife?”

Now it was out and Loki had to swallow softly. His throat was constricting and that wasn’t right. Shouldn’t it be so easy to say the very same thing to two different people? Loki had said it to Balder, he had said it to a hall full of students and now he was in front of his brother and Loki felt like somebody had stolen all the words from him. “I wasn’t talking about her as your wife, but as King’s consort of this nation.”

“How is that any better?” Thor was cold and so obviously hurt and Loki tried to take a step back. “I am sorry that I upset you. There were a lot of questions and I stumbled on this one. I phrased things in a bad way.”

His attempt for damage control made no difference, Loki could clearly see it in Thor’s eyes. Their expression hadn’t changed a bit. “Here’s the thing, Loki… You never stumble over your words. You’re the best speaker I know. You’re quick and sharp and you always say what you mean.”

“Alright. I also said that I am sure that Asgard will come to love her with time.”

Thor huffed, clearly not interested in that part of the story. “What is this about, Loki? Saying something like that in public when you know that the entire country is going to hear it? Jane is really down because of the negative reaction to the engagement. Now you’re adding just fire to the fuel. The headline tomorrow is going to be that even my brother thinks badly of her.”

Having Thor angry with him was nothing new, they were brothers. That sort of disappointment was something else entirely. Talking his way out that seemed hardly possible. “I believe the headline tomorrow is going to be about the bomb threat.”

“Could you please stop trying to distract from the main issue!? I can’t believe you said that. In private it would have been worse enough, but in public! For what are you trying to get back at me?” With some of his composure gone Thor had raised his voice and Loki just kept staring at him. Was that really what Thor believed?

“I am not trying to get back at you for anything.”

Thor couldn’t as if he hadn’t heard Loki. “Are you jealous? Is it that? That I’ve found somebody I am in love with and who I want to be with? Or is it the kingship? The fact that people were asking
questions about me in your Q&A?”

“I am not jealous. I got asked a question and I answered it.” Loki replied simply. “It wasn’t my intention to make you or Jane look bad. I voiced my concerns. That’s all.”

“Next time keep your concerns to yourself.” Thor hissed before turning around and pretty much storming out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Loki felt a headache coming up and instantly downed an entire glass of water. Thor’s loud exit had obviously let Balder know that it was okay to come back. First thing he did was sliding his arms around Loki’s shoulders from behind. “I guess you were right about him being angry…”

Balder pointing out something so obvious had Loki laugh softly despite himself. “Not all that surprising. Guess I’ll give it some time…”

The other one nodded and Loki could feel lips brushing over his cheek before being pressed against his ear. “You wanna go to bed?”

“It’s hardly five o’clock.”

“I wasn’t suggesting going to sleep.”

Loki felt a pleasant shudder running down his back. “Celebrating life?”

“Mostly trying to get you to unwind and to get your mind off a couple of things…” Balder placed one hand on Loki’s chest and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“That might actually work…” Loki sighted appreciatively and turned his head to get another kiss. It was short, sweet, almost innocent. Before getting a chance to complain about that, Loki had Balder grab his hand and pull him out of his chair.

Voluntarily Loki let Balder take the lead, kiss him and push him down on the bed. It was good sex, they took their time and although Balder managed perfectly well to become the most important thing during these moments, Loki soon felt his guilt creeping up again.

“You’re gorgeous like this… when you stop thinking for a second. Now you’re already doing it again…” Balder was stroking his thumb over Loki’s cheek as Loki raised an eyebrow. “Would you rather have me not thinking?”

“At least not so hard… for a couple of minutes.” Balder gave him a suggestive smile and Loki laughed. “That’s what we just did… or weren’t you content with my participation?”

“No, actually, I enjoyed that very much… it just hurts my ego that I can see you thinking about the very same things only three seconds later.”

“Yeah, that’s really a shame.” Loki admitted and went back to kissing him, because that was honestly so much better than pondering about how angry Thor was.

Their kiss got interrupted by Loki’s phone and a message from Valkyrie. Already a bad sign, she usually never contacted him personally.

“What is it?” Balder asked when he heard Loki’s moan. A very different one from the ones a couple of minutes ago.

“She says that she’ll probably need a statement. The internet is pissed because our security decided to
pull a student aside who had asked me a question during the lecture and to interrogate him even before the search for the bomb had been closed.”

Slightly confused Balder quirked an eyebrow. “Okay, a bit fast, but where is the problem?”

“The student is Jotun… So that means at the moment we’re still in the Jotun crisis, the American policy is destroying jobs, my brother’s engagement is controversial and nobody likes Jane, people threaten to blow up the place where I talk in public and now we can probably add new allegations of racism to the list… Do you still think that I am thinking too much?”
Hello everybody,

So you guys pretty much have decided that Balder is evil. Let's see how things continue :D

“No more visitors. Right in front of me is a mountain of incompetence and stupid ideas need to be examined and at least somewhat corrected. Now I remember why I never wanted to teach. They are hopeless.” Although Stephen’s eyes were still fixed on the clumsy phrases of a student who really should know better by now, he could still see that his secretary hadn’t moved. Not at all actually. Frozen to a spot, holding the door open.

“Something I should know?”

“It’s no ordinary visitor, Doctor.”

Still reluctantly Stephen raised his head. Truth to be told, he was eager for any excuse to stop going over his papers, but he disliked the idea that he prince thought he could use Stephen’s precious time as he pleased. Maybe Stephen didn’t have treaties to sign, that didn’t mean the university would run without him. Sometimes he wondered how it had ever worked without him. His standards and his ambition. Anyway, the fact that Stephen was now an employee of the crown didn’t mean that the prince should get a hang of showing up unannounced. Stephen wasn’t a fan of surprises, never been. They always meant trouble, especially in the OR.

“Then you will have to tell the prince that I am knee-deep in…”

“Excuse me, but it’s not the prince. It’s his mother.”

Just wonderful. Was the whole family now eager to be under Stephen’s care? That couldn’t be a good sign for the state of the nation. Alight, the situation wasn’t that difficult to figure out. One day the prince showed up, completely out of the blue and wanted somebody who had nothing to do with the court to become his personal doctor. Also there had been that very clear demand – talk to nobody about me. Now the prince’s mother showed up, also completely unannounced.

“Well, that’s a surprise. Would you please tell her that she’ll have to wait another 10 minutes?” Stephen’s attention was already back on the paper when he realised that his secretary still wouldn’t leave to do as he had asked. Alright, what he had missed now? “Anything else?”

“Doctor Strange, I would feel very uncomfortable telling the Duchess that.”

Wonderful. That unconditional respect was really something that Stephen had to get used to. Or better not, because he thought it was horrendously annoying. Resigning himself to his fate Stephen nodded. “Alright. Let her in.”

The relief was overwhelming and Stephen was tempted to roll his eyes. Admittedly, it would be a
little bit exciting if the king was waiting in front of his door, but the duchess wasn’t involved in any political business. Not very interesting for Stephen.

Granted, the duchess was a woman of class who knew who to present herself. The moment she entered the room she brought with her grace and charisma. So did Stephen, therefore that wasn’t enough to impress him. Stephen took his time to put the papers aside before even trying to get up. He may or may not have done that especially slowly.

“Doctor Strange, thank you so much giving me a bit of your time.”

“It’s not like I have much of a choice, your highness. Please, take a seat.”

Usually people quickly got irritated by him and his severe lack of politeness, but the Duchess gave him a most graceful smile and sat down. To Stephen it didn’t seem unlikely that she had been expecting exactly this kind of behaviour. He wouldn’t disappoint.

“I hope you are doing fine after the unfortunate incident at the university, doctor?”

“Most certainly. Different facilities. I learned about it online after the entire thing had already gone down. Thanks for your concern though.” Stephen thought that question was ridiculous. The bomb threat had been a hoax, so why would she ask him that if she wasn’t setting up a very different conversation? They both knew why she was here and yet the duchess had decided to beat around the bush. Maybe she wanted to show him what it really meant to be polite. Not that Stephen cared that much.

“Very glad to hear that. It was quite a shock, a reminder of the times we live in. Even in such a blessed and peaceful state as Asgard.”

Stephen merely hummed and nodded, because what was there that he could possibly say? Get to the point woman! Now that would get him into trouble, even in Asgard. Nonetheless he would be incredibly thankful if she would finally tell her why she was here. Otherwise he would go back to correcting his papers.

“It also hit on a personal level.”

There you go. Now Stephen could throw her a bone. “Understandable. It’s safe to assume that your son was the reason for the threat. An easy way to get much attention very quickly.”

“You are right and although the situation turned out to be non-violent I still felt a harsh reminder of how fragile all of our lives are and that there is nothing more important than the safety of our loved ones.”

Stephen felt like she was dangling a carrot right in front of his nose. Unfortunately for her Stephen wasn’t interested in the least bit. More silence.

“As you can imagine there is nothing more important to me than my son’s health and safety. Any mother would feel the same way, but things get a little more complicated when your son is second in line for the throne of this nation. His well-being is a matter of state and my son decided to put his well-being into your hands. I came here to assure myself that immense responsibility that you’re carrying.”

How suddenly the tune had changed. Granted, she was still smiling and hadn’t actually taken a glanced at his hands while referring to them. Nonetheless Stephen had heard the allusion. Another thing that he was going to ignore. “I got immensely humbled by the thousand pages I had to sign and the oath I had to take. Yes, I do believe it came across that my new job is considered rather
The Duchess nodded and as she continued. “I was surprised how fast the administrative issues were taken care of. Usually the inauguration is a bigger affair with members of the royal family present and a following reception.”

“The prince and I agreed that bells and whistles weren’t necessary.”

“A pity. I thought you’d rather enjoy spectacle.”

“Why would you think that?”

“My son is not the only one who does his research. I went over your resume, it is indeed quite impressive.”

Stephen answered with the most bored “Thank you” he could possibly come up with.

“It also indicated that you had an affinity for the finer things in life and that you never shied the spotlight.”

“Some things change.”

Finally she was putting that smile to rest and Stephen could see where this conversation was heading. “Did the way you take care of yourself also change? Because how can I, as a mother, and the Asgardian people trust you with looking after one of our most important lives, if you don’t take care of yourself?”

Married to the king or not, Stephen had more than earned his merits and if somebody came out to question them, they should better be prepared. If she wanted to play this game, Stephen was going to be a jerk about it. He was going to make her do it. Address the elephant in the room, say the nasty thing and see how she was going to be about it. “What would make you say that I am a person who doesn’t do that?”

“Jeopardizing you own life and ruining your career as a surgeon by speeding across a dangerous road while looking at your mobile phone. You have to admit that this is not exactly responsible behaviour.”

There was an itch in Stephen’s fingers. Much more annoying than any illiterate paper he would ever have to get through. This was him being affected by such a cheap shot. “And yet my driving style has nothing to do with my performance in the OR or my work as a doctor in general.”

She was disappointed that Stephen didn’t say more, he could see that, but nonetheless she continued the conversation in a friendly, almost caring tone. “Why did you decide to leave England?”

A rather abrupt change of topic, but understandable. The Duchess had realised that she wasn’t going to get far with talking about his accident.

“Is my migration background now the reason for your visit?”

“I am merely curious. You see, over hundreds of years every physician of the royal family has been Asgardian. Most of the times members of noble houses. You on the other hand have changed your nationality two times and now you are in this incredibly important position. It is quite an unusual story and I would like to know how you got here.”

Alright, Stephen could run down the story of his life and keep it short. “I studied at Oxford and then
continued my education in Harvard. I wasn’t planning on staying there, but I made quite an impression during my studies and I got offered a job at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital. The offer was immensely generous, so I stayed. Over the years I realised that life would be so much easier if I had an American citizenship, so I got it. As you know I got into a car accident that messed up my hands. I was looking for a type of therapy that would help me regain perfect control over them and therefore I ended up in Asgard. I don’t think I need to explain why I changed citizenship again, the law pretty much make it a necessity.”

“Did you find the therapy you were looking for?”

“To an extent. I was never a very spiritual person, but the Asgardian approach to medicine was the only one that helped with my condition. At first I laughed at the idea of collaborating with a priest or a spiritual adviser. The mere idea seemed insane. Nonetheless I gave it a try, since I had run out of other options and I gained new respect for it. Now I am part of it. So if you are worried about me not providing the best possible care for your son, I can put you at ease. I have discussed all of this extensively with your son.”

That wasn’t why she was here, but Stephen was willing to grant her this way-out before things would become even more uncomfortable. Obviously the Duchess was not interested in that. “It’s very good to hear this affirmation, Doctor. I know my son, I am sure he was very thorough. This doesn’t mean that his choice has been very unusual. Maybe even controversial. As his mother I was disappointed that he would ignore my advice.”

“Advice against choosing me I assume.”

“Correct. You are an unknown factor and that’s something we don’t appreciate in our position.”

“Like the fact that I was British, then American and now Asgardian?”

“Like I said it’s rather unusual for an immigrant to fill in an occupation this close to the government. It’s worth taking another look, but that’s about it. I came here to get an impression of the man that my son is willing to put so much trust in.”

Stephen gave her a smile that was all teeth and no emotion. “I hope I live up to your standards.”

There was no doubt that she was aware of how little he cared for her opinion. She remained as composed as ever, but now she wasn’t offering him her smile. “I hope so too, Doctor Strange. I guess we will have to wait and see. I am looking forward to talk to you in the future.”

Fine, Stephen would go there if she really wanted to. “I fear there won’t be much to be talking about. Your son had me signing every possible paper that prohibits me from giving any information about him to anyone. That includes you.”

Granted, she was taking the blow very well. Stephen could only make out her displeasure by how the corners of her lips curled. The reaction would have been enough to intrigue him if he hadn’t already studied the prince’s medical file. By the way the Duchess had walked into his office Stephen would have assumed that she either wanted to dig for unpleasant information or make sure that Stephen would indeed remain quiet about it.

Now that assumption didn’t make a lot of sense. Stephen had done his own digging. No embarrassing or delicate condition that needed to be hidden. For a moment Stephen had even expected to find STD, but none of that. The prince was perfectly fit and healthy, absolutely boring. So Stephen could only suspect that this was a power play between mother and son. One that he really didn’t care for.
“As much as I am honoured by being here, I fear I have to get back to work. I have papers to review and a lecture to prepare.”

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“Despite the pleasant weather lots of Valhalla’s habitants have chosen to hang around the airport instead of enjoying a walk in the park or putting their ice skates on. The reason is very simple. Everybody hopes to get a glimpse of Helblindi, firstborn son of the Lord of Jotunheim. The 28 year-old has experienced another extensive boost in popularity after speaking out publicly against Næss outsourcing jobs to the United States. The young Lord and his brother Býleistr are scheduled to arrive in Valhalla today in the early afternoon to attend the traditional dinner to celebrate the engagement of the crown prince.”

Closing the tab Loki couldn’t help but muttering to himself. “You’re going to make this hard for me, aren’t you?”

“Talking to yourself is the first sign of madness.”

Startled Loki lowered his phone and to see his father smiling at him. “I am not talking to myself… I was talking to a person who will show up to tonight and who isn’t even here yet. Does that make me more or less sane?”

Odin laughed softly and shook his head. “Who could ever make you nervous?”

So many words were lying ready on Loki’s tongue and he quickly swallowed them. Shoving them down as deeply as he possibly could. His father would lose his mind if he heard them and rightly so. “There a lot of people actually.”

“I doubt that. Is your brother one of them?” Odin sat down next to him and Loki really didn’t feel like having this conversation, although he knew that his father wouldn’t reproach him of anything. “I see Thor every day, he doesn’t make me nervous. Although there might be a chance of him hitting me in the face tonight.”

“That would be a crime against the state, assaulting a member of the royal family.”

“Are you trying to make a joke? Because it’s weirding me out…” Loki hinted at a smile and his father showed honest amusement. “I’ve been known to have a sense of humour. But in all honesty, you shouldn’t be weary of a confrontation with your brother. You have every right to speak your mind.”

Obviously Odin was on his side and Loki still believed that he was right, but should that really make him feel better? “You say that because we have the same opinion on this topic.”

Raising one eyebrow Odin crossed his arms loosely in front of his chest. “Oh? So I dreamed you criticizing my policies and what you said about the Language Act?”

Rather sheepishly Loki cleared his throat. It wasn’t really like him to feel embarrassed in front of his father. “Alright, so we agreed on one point. That doesn’t mean I should have said what I said in a public place. Thor thinks that I… might have an agenda. Trying to make him look bad to make myself look better. Which isn’t the case and I’m sure he’ll realise that, but he is also mad that I probably hurt Jane with the things I said.”

It was that part that didn’t sit right with Loki, because he genuinely liked his future sister in law. Believing that she was ready for her future position was something completely different.
“If Thor’s fiancé is that easily hurt by legitimate criticism, then she will have a miserable time as his wife. You weren’t trying to be hurtful. You weren’t hurtful at all. Your brother is acting rather childish for hanging on to his anger even after the bomb threat.”

Odin was absolutely serious, it was easy to tell and Loki couldn’t deny that it made him feel a little good. To his father’s support on this, but at the same time he still wanted to defend Thor. “No reason to get upset over a hoax. It was probably a young kid acting on a dare. Why should that stop Thor from being angry?”

“You brother made his own bed and he has to lie in it. It is not your job to make excuses for him or to make him feel better about his choices. Hoax or not, we all were very scared for you and the fact that you’re fine should mean more to Thor than his childish anger.” Reaching out Odin squeezed his shoulder and Loki gave into the smile.

“Come on, it’s time to get ready. We have a long night ahead of us.”

Loki couldn’t agree more. All the noble houses in one place was never a pleasant affair, too many different interests and Loki hated being distracted. Which he definitely would be. “Yes, father.”

The decision which clothes he was going to wear had been made two days ago and Loki wasn’t exactly in the mood to get dolled up. At least until he checked his video feed again and this time he himself got a glimpse of Helblindi at the airport, smiling charmingly at the cameras, sometimes stopping to let people take his picture. Looking annoyingly beautiful. The perfectly shaped cheekbones and jawline made Loki wonder how Býleistr felt most of the time. The Ymirsons were an attractive family and Býleistr had been blessed with the same genes, he was nice to look at, but next to Helblindi even that seemed like an insult. What had private school been like if your older brother was human perfection made flesh?

Loki wanted to retch at his own thought. Well, he had always been a fan of hyperboles. Grumbling Loki sat down went into his walk-in wardrobe and looked at himself in the mirror. He would do a little bit of fine-tuning and that would be it. Tonight wasn’t going to be about him. It was going to be nasty anyway.

While Loki was busy letting his new nail polish dry when Balder joined him. “There you are. Aren’t you ready yet? It’s about time. It would be pretty impolite to show up late.”

Snaking his arms around Loki’s shoulders Balder pressed a kiss to Loki’s cheek.

“Yeah, I’m almost done.” Loki let his eyes run up and down Balder’s reflection. “You look pretty.”

Smiling gently Balder muttered a “Thank you”, and then kissed Loki on the mouth. “Come on. We need to get going.”

They made a good looking couple. No denying that. Loki slipped into his green jacket and adjusted his collar. “I’m good. Let’s go.”

The dinner was held in the crimson salon and tradition demanded it to be a rather relaxed affair. No formal introductions, no speeches. It was supposed to be an opportunity for the future king’s consort to meet all the members of the noble families. Although there were only one or two members of every family present. Otherwise there would be no way to keep it a casual affair.

By now the room was already half filled with guests and as Loki and Balder made their way to the main table they greeted some familiar faces. During all that Loki’s eyes were scanning the salon, trying to immediately make out the most important players. There was Idun Ivaldison only three
tables away. Loki would have to reserve half an hour for her at least. Thor should take part in that
collection too.

Speaking of Thor, he greeted them like everybody else when Balder and Loki sat down at their table.  
The greeting was cold though and Loki wondered how long it would take him to be ready to make up with Loki. Hopefully not too long, because Odin was right and Loki wasn’t going to apologize.  
What concerned him way more was Jane uncomfortable smile. She didn’t seem at ease in his presence. Probably because she didn’t know him well enough to know how she should take his comments. Loki would have to clear this up, it wasn’t anything personal after all.

His brother and his fiancé weren’t the only ones who weren’t in the best mood. Sure, Frigga was playing it off perfectly, but Loki had felt her eyes on him the second he had sat down. When he looked over his mother offered him the same soft smile that she always had in store for him, but Loki knew her face better than anybody else’s and that smile didn’t reach her eyes.

Just wonderful. Three people at this table who had a problem with him. At least his father’s gaze didn’t hold anything different than slight boredom. This was going to be such a pleasant night.

While swallowing a sigh and reaching for his glass of champagne Loki’s eyes of course had to catch sight of the only person how could make this dinner even more unpleasant for him.

Across the room Helblindi offered him a smile that only a person like him could master. Equal parts seductive and hostile. Helblindi lifted his glass in a mocking toast and Loki wanted to down the alcohol in one go to keep his heartbeat calm and even.

He was in for a world of misery.
Hello everybody,

First things first - please no Infinity War Spoilers in the comments, thank you :)

So they're having a celebrations and everything goes wrong :/

WOW; SORRY, 200 WORDS WERE MISSING AT THE BEGINNING

“From that moment on I kind always wanted to reach for the stars. Literally.”

The entire table laughed in soft, honest amusement and Thor felt pleasant warmth spreading in his chest. Despite her nervousness Jane was perfectly able to entertain the table by being herself. Talking about herself and listening to what other people had to say. There was no doubt about her being Midgardian was an advantage in this kind of situation. People were immediately interested in what she had to say, hear her point of view. Because she was exotic and charming. It was sad that the common Asgardian couldn’t see her right now, they would instantly let go of their reservations against her. Midgardian, American, what did it matter? Jane had chosen Asgard as her new home, which meant that Asgard was gaining a treasure. It just took some people longer to see that. Or they refused to see it at all.

Maybe Loki did too. Thor wasn’t sure what to think at the moment. Sure, Loki had his doubts Thor had known that before. Although Loki could be subtle, he almost always decided not to be. That was nothing new. Thor wouldn’t criticize him for that trait since they were very similar in that regard. Nonetheless there was a huge difference between things that Loki said to him and things that he said during a public lecture. The fact that Loki tried to make it sound like a slip-up was almost insulting. If there was one thing that Loki knew how to do it was speaking in public and giving others just one piece of information at a time. Thor wasn’t stupid enough to believe that Loki would accidentally speak out against the future wife of his brother. The only question that needed to be asked was why Loki would do that.

Annoyed at himself Thor discarded these thoughts. At least for now. This was their dinner, a time to have fun and to present themselves. It was about Jane and him, Thor could resolve his issues with Loki any other time.

While taking a sip from his champagne Thor tried again to focus on the conversation. At the moment Jane was asked what she thought about Asgardian food and other non-offensive topics like that. They were all trying to make this as easy as possible on them and Thor was grateful since the public had decided to be so cruel.

Tonight was good, they needed this. So Thor wasn’t surprised when a Jotun tried to ruin it. Granted, Helblindi gave them some time to breathe. About 90 minutes of good food, wine and easy conversation. What Thor felt when Helblindi casually walked up to their table, right between Dag and Ullr who both looked taken aback, uneasy even, but refused to say anything. “I beg your pardon for the interruption, gentlemen, I am sure you have the most wonderful time, but the evening is moving ahead and there are a lot of people who would like to talk to the couple of the night.”
It was so easy to attract everybody’s attention when you behaved like this. Helblindi probably didn’t know how act differently. Which wasn’t surprising. Jotuns were loud people, good at shouting, screaming, protesting. Always quick to rise their voices, but they had nothing to back it up and no suggestions for solutions. Or none that were even remotely realistic.

“Would you mind to give up your seats to someone else?” Helblindi flashed a smile which made it so easy to despise him. False charm and he was relying way too much on his looks.

“Of course not. Make yourself comfortable.”

They had been changing places all even so far, to talk to as many people as possible, but Thor would have preferred if Helblindi had stayed excluded. Unfortunately that wasn’t a road he could go down.

So four people at their table left and other ones sat down, two among them the Ymirson brothers. That meant the pleasant part of the night was definitely over. Loki also wasn’t here for back-up and Thor wasn’t sure how to feel about that at the moment.

Helblindi continued to show off his teeth which were as white as his face. His eyes focused on Jane and he made Thor think of a predator or of the monsters his ancestors had inspired. “We haven’t met before. Helblindi Ymirson, at your service.”

Thor made it not to huff. At your service, sure.

Of course Jane knew who she was dealing with, but she offered him an unsure smile anyway. “A pleasure to meet you, my Lord.”

“So what have you been talking about?” Already trying to lead the conversation. Myrgiol quickly answered Helblindi’s question in a friendly manner. She seemed perfectly comfortable with their presence while Thor couldn’t fight his irritation. “Differences between the American and Asgardian education system.”

“That’s a rather dry topic and horribly sophisticated topic. Aren’t we supposed to celebrate an engagement?” Býleistr showed off a grin that missed the edge which Helblindi had, but that didn’t mean it set Thor off any less.

No, he couldn’t do that. Thor couldn’t let their mere presence worked him up like that. Sure, it was hard to ignore the subtle provocation that they were putting into their words and gestures. Nonetheless Thor was supposed to be the person with the moral high ground. Tonight was about them, him and Jane and as long as the Jotuns weren’t going to show open hostility Thor was going to try and treat them like anybody else. Tonight there was no place for politics.

“Why don’t you tell us how you’ve met? An astrophysicist and Asgardian nobility don’t seem like the most likely match at first glance.”

Býleistr wasn’t going for low blows. The protest was lying on Thor’s tongue, he wasn’t aristocracy, he was a prince. Not in their eyes though. Listening to Jane easily and contently talking about her lecture almost made Thor envy her. To Jane they were just two other guys, nothing special about that. Thor wished he could feel the same way. For now all he could do was trying. Until now he hadn’t even said a single word. They would interpret that as weakness.

“I was fascinated. Not so much by the subject matter but by her. I definitely wanted to get to know her, so I approached her afterwards.” The memory brought a smile to Thor’s lips and Jane looked at him with the very same expression. Right, what else did matter but this?

“How lovely. Do you believe in love at first sight, Miss Foster?” Helblindi made it sound genuinely
interested and Thor needed to know where he was going with this. Loki would already know.

“I guess so. I think it’s a wonderful thing to believe in and I was charmed from the very beginning. A little intimidated by the size of his shoulders though.” Jane smirked sweetly and several people at the table started chuckling.

Thor shook his head and was unable to keep the smile off his face. “It kind of was. I looked at her and I knew that I needed to get to know her. I couldn’t be happier that I did.”

For a second there was only Jane at this table. The way she looked at him with her big brown eyes, full of joy and the knowledge that it was him who had caused all of this made Thor’s heart beat faster. That was called happiness, so why wouldn’t the Frostgiant try to destroy it.

“Neither could we, your highness.”

Thor’s head spun around, eyes locking with those dark blue crystals. Nothing to be found there but wickedness and loathing. That heinous smile tore that perfect face apart and Thor’s hand formed a fist on its own. So this was why they were. To get a rise out of him. It was provocation and it worked wonderfully.

Nobody but an Ymirson could put so much mocking into a phrase of respect and authority. Thor should have them thrown out, but that would be political suicide. His father would never forgive him. Nevertheless he couldn’t let Helblindi walk all over him.

“Is there something you would like to say to me, my lord?” Thor held his head high, attempting to keep his voice even, because he wasn’t going to give Helblindi the satisfaction.

Unfortunately the Frostgiant was unable to be shaken, he didn’t move and continued to smile. “Not tonight, your highness. I am merely enjoying my wine and the company of your lovely fiancé. It’s time to offer my congratulations, isn’t it? I am very happy for the both of you that you found the soul that speaks to your own. For those of us who are still looking for that kind of bond it’s inspiring and hopeful to see you. Why waste precious time when you know? Who would ever dare to call such a union rushed?”

An entire life with Loki and his dagger for a tongue saved Thor from getting up and grabbing Helblindi by the collar. Why did the audacity even shock him? There was nothing else to expect from the Ymirsons than hatred and hostility. That Helblindi dared to voice his insults in the presence of other nobility was just taking it one step further.

“Bitter people who have never been in love and whose favourite way to pass time is to spoil other people’s joy.”

Despite everything Thor couldn’t be more content to see Loki pulling up a chair to their table, lifting his glass in greeting. “My lords.”

Helblindi’s smile changed, but Thor had trouble describing how. The confidence was still there, maybe less bite. Anyway, the Jotun bowed his head. “As sharp as always, your highness. Since we’re already talking about role model relationships – where have you left your boyfriend?”

They needed to stop this, find a way to split up this conversation, because there was no way that Helblindi was going to stop his provocation without obtaining whatever he was trying to achieve. Which was worrying Thor horribly.

“Talking to some friends from Vanaheim. Thanks for asking. Jane, my dear, have you tasted the Riesling? It’s Austrian, simply divine.” Loki was putting on all of his charm, dazzling them with his
smile. It was impossible to deny the gratefulness Thor was feeling, because he knew that Loki was doing this for him. He had come over here to support them, soften the blows, because their ancestors knew Loki was so much better at twisting a conversation than Thor. Loki was a master to not go for the bait, unless the other one knew him as well as Thor did.

But nobody did know Loki as well as Thor.

Therefor Thor could see what his brother was doing here and he was immensely thankful.

“Myrgiol, how lovely to see you. We haven’t spoken in ages. How is your family doing?” Leaning back Loki was instantly shifting his entire attention on Myrgiol, as if she was the only person at the table. Robbing the Ymirsons of the spotlight they were so desperately craving. It was glorious.

Even Myrgiol seemed surprised that suddenly she was back in the conversation. “Oh, everyone is just wonderful. Thank you for asking, your highness. My oldest is five now, she would have loved to come along today. She is eager to visit the palace.”

“We’ll have to invite you over then. I am sure it will be a blast.”

“That would be most wonderful, your highness.”

10 entire seconds before one of the Ymirsons had to hijack the conversation again. At least Býleistr remained on topic. “You have a little girl and boy, right?”

“Exactly. Drafi is three and Valka is five. During the last five months they finally decided that they like each other and that they would now team up against me and their father.” One could see her pride as she was talking about her kids and Thor desperately hoped that it would light up the atmosphere.

“I think you’re lucky to have a boy and a girl. Two boys only mean trouble. Helblindi and I have been at each other’s throats until we’ve reached out twenties. Our father had to stop us from killing other more than once and when we got along, we were only up to no good. Always trying to outdo the other one. Like finding out who could throw a stone further.”

Next to him Helblindi laughed honestly and it sounded incredibly different without any spite. “How many windows did we destroy? Three, I think it was three.”

“Yes. We weren’t allowed to leave our rooms for about two weeks. Looking back it was a rather easy punishment. Anyway, a girl and a boy sounds like a much better alternative to me.”

Myrgiol made a vague gesture while smiling. “I am not so sure about that, my lord.”

Then the time for relaxation was already over as Helblindi turned to Jane. “Since we’re already talking about children, Miss Foster – when can Asgard expect the first royal babies?”

Thor almost choked on his wine and Jane next to him started to squirm, her cheeks flaming red within a second, but she answered quickly nevertheless. “No plans for children at the moment that would really be rushing things. I definitely want kids though. Two or three sounds about right.”

Ignoring the man who had asked the question Thor nodded and offered her a smile. “Absolutely. I’ll agree with the lord here. Definitely girls and boys.”

“I am sure your kids will be lovely.” There was no sarcasm audible in Helblindi’s voice which made Thor terribly suspicious. “And I am sure the entire country will pray for you to promptly have a son.”
Frowning softly Jane hinted at a shrug. “We would be just as happy about a girl.”

Crossing his arms in front of his chest Helblindi gave them the most condescending smile. “I am sure you would.”

Thor couldn’t see where he was going with it, but Loki clearly did. It was easy to tell by how quickly his body language changed. “Jane…”

Either Jane didn’t hear him or she deliberately chose to ignore him. “I don’t understand what you are trying to say here. Sure, I know that only a male child can be an heir, but I wouldn’t value a girl any less and honestly I don’t see why a girl shouldn’t be in line for the crown.”

Loki cleared his throat. “Why don’t we settle on a less political topic on this lovely evening?”

It was too late that Thor realised that Helblindi was now exactly where he wanted to be. Walked right into it and the Jotun wasn’t going to let it go. “I agree with you, Miss Foster. I couldn’t agree more actually. Unfortunately no female Búrison will ever be in the line for the throne and I will gladly explain to you why. Over 500 years ago the family of your fiancé stole the crown by stating that a woman couldn’t rule Asgard although she had the support of several royal families behind her. This was their whole argument, a woman can’t rule. So now even 2017 your father in law can’t change the laws which clarify the line of succession, because including women would be admitting that they were wrong 500 years ago. That they didn’t take control to protect the country from outside enemies who wouldn’t accept a female sovereign. No, they just jumped at an opportunity to steal what was never theirs and we will never see the day that any member of the Búrison family admits to that. Therefore we will never see a female in the line of succession.”

There was a soft ache spreading in Thor’s fingers from clenching his them into a fist. Yes, Thor had known that Helblindi was capable of these words, but not here. Not at this table, among friends, in Jane’s presence when this evening should be about her. A celebration of them being together. Instead the Jotun wanted to turn it into a stage to spread his vile, deformed version of history. Every single fibre of Thor’s being urged him to let loose. To yell at him, take him apart for the insolence and for once let him feel the consequences of what he was saying.

No, it was their evening. Thor wasn’t going to let them get the better of him. He was making an effort to speak slowly and calmly. “My Lord, this is not the place, nor the time for this kind of discussion. I will not tolerate you insulting my ancestors or you trying to ruin everybody’s evening. I demand an apology and then we’ll gladly move past this.”

The look on Helblindi’s face confirmed that he didn’t care about anything that Thor had just said. That patronizing, challenging smile was a constant on his face and he made no effort to say anything. Definitely willing to let this go as far as he had to. As cold as only a Jotun could be.

Thor was actually taken aback when Býleistr spoke up, his face dark as the night and his words were drenched in venom. “You are in no position to give my brother orders.”

With his authority being questioned by an Ymirson Thor was hanging on to a threat. How dared they? “I demand an apology as his sovereign and future king.”

While Helblindi only huffed as if Thor had made a mildly funny joke. For Býleistr none of this was entertaining. One of his hands was flat on the table as he leaned slightly forward, his voice sharp as a knife. “His sovereign? My brother is the rightful the crown prince of this nation, you have no right to demand anything from him. You are nothing but the son of a long line of usurpers, thieves and murderers. You shouldn’t even have the right to address Helblindi by his name.”
Thor was up on his feet in an instant and his hand was shaking as he lifted it in a subconscious, threatening gesture. “How dare you, you insolent…”

“How dare you,” Loki was hissing, Thor could feel a hand on his arm, he didn’t know whose it was. All he could see was the Jotun’s face and still hear how he insulted his family. The holders and keepers of his soul. The ones who gave him life and mind.

Helblindi was whispering something in Jǫtnar so nobody would understand and Býleistr shook his head.

“I will say this just one more time. As your future king I demand that you apologize for insulting my ancestors. Do it now or I will have removed from the palace.”

Again, Helblindi was mumbling words, looking his brother and the unfamiliar sound of the language was driving Thor mad. As if the insults to their family hadn’t been enough, now they even had to disrespect every person at the table by speaking in a language that nobody could understand. About them. “Stop speaking Jǫtnar!”

The entire salon didn’t go silent at once, but they definitely had now the attention of the tables around them and Thor didn’t care. Should they all see what the Ymirsons were trying to do. How they had come here into his home to try and ruin the festivities.

Now Helblindi turned his beautiful head to him and although his anger wasn’t as visible as his brother’s, Thor could feel the coldness of his eyes. “Oh, you would like that, wouldn’t you? Us stopping to speak Jǫtnar.”

“You have no right to talk to him like this!” Býleistr’s voice was cracking as he shouted. “He is the firstborn in a line of kings and queens. My brother is the rightful heir of the throne and if the spirits are merciful we will all live to see the day when he will sit on the throne. As the legitimate king. Not the spawn of murderous thieves.”

“Thor, sit down, we have…”

“I will not be insulted by a Frostgiant in my family’s home!”

Thunder went through the salon and then there was complete silence. The realisation of what he had just done was instantaneous. The air had turned thick and tense, Thor could feel Jane’s confused gaze on him and her was the only one bearable. Even Loki’s eyes were wide as he tried to take in the disaster which had just unfolded in front of all of them. Caused by Thor.

At least Býleistr had eventually fallen silent. It was just so much worse than that. The Jotun was staring at Thor in other shock. The rage had been quickly brushed away to be replaced by trauma. His lips were slightly parted as he was trying to take the blow. The voice which had slammed those vile words only seconds ago was now a shaking whisper. “What did you just call me?”

A second passed without an answer.

The trembling went over to his entire body when jumped up to his feet, screaming the exact same words again with all the hatred and anger that seemed humanely possible. “What did you just call me?!?”

Within a second Helblindi was standing next to him, his hand on Býleistr’s shoulder, talking rapidly to him in Jǫtnar. The younger brother’s eyes were still fixed on Thor, filled that kind of rage that almost brought tears to them. He said something which made Helblindi grab his jaw, forcing Býleistr to look at him instead of Thor. They were talking, heatedly, mostly Helblindi and by the looks of it
Thor thought that somebody might start a physical fight at any second.

“My lords, please, I want to apologize for…”

“þegi þú, son of a thief!” Býleistr was yelling, Loki fell silent again and the tirade in Jötun
continued. Eventually Helblindi locked eyes with Thor’s brother. “There is no apologizing for this. Come on, little brother.”

Helblindi more or less pulled Býleistr out of the salon which didn’t stop the later one from sending murderous glances Thor’s way. With the Ymirsons gone there was only uncomfortable silence in the room. Everybody was feeling the weight of what had just happened and Thor knew that there was no continuing this evening. It was his fault, but there was nothing he could say now. He felt shell-shocked even.

Eventually it was Odin who ended the dinner. As the room was cleared out Jane turned to Thor, her soft face etching with confusion. “What just happened?”

Thor couldn’t possibly tell her. Especially not when he saw his Frigga approaching them with slow steps. A string of guilt threatened to cord up his throat. “Mother, I am…”

The sting of pain came before the realisation that she had slapped him. “I didn’t raise you like this, Thor. You should be so much better than that.” Her disappointment made him feel small and his anger suddenly appeared ridiculous. Jane stared at them speechlessly as Frigga walked away.

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Loki wanted to sob with relief as his call was answered. The words that greeted him were lacking warmth. “Don’t even try. There is no negotiating to be had about this.”

“Please, just let me…”

“There has been enough talking tonight, don’t you think? If you believe that there is only the slightest chance that I am not going to use this against this heinous person you call your brother, then I have seriously overestimated your intelligence.”

“I know what he said was… You provoked him, you wanted something like that to happen.”

“I just wanted to see his true colours. They were even uglier than I expected. Don’t you think it’d be only fair that all of Asgard got to see that?”

“Helblindi, I am begging you, please. He will apologize, I know that. Give him the chance to, that’s all I want.”

The response was a dry laugh. “Really? You expect us to smile and suck it up and give them the opportunity to present himself as the remorseful sinner? No. You heard what he said. Everybody did. Everybody could see how much he loathes us, despises us and not just my family but all of Jotunheim. Everybody is going to hear it, I’ll make sure of that. You can forget our deal, I don’t want you to manipulate him to do anything. I will not going to let this… person sit on the throne of Asgard and make life for all Jotuns even worse. Have a good night, your highness.”

“No, Helblindi, wait, you…”

Loki threw his phone across the room as Helblindi hung up on him.
Hello everybody,

So Thor screwed up and Loki has a mental melt-down.

Have fun :)

“That was brilliant, Thor! Simply brilliant!” Loki was shouting because he could. His heart was racing in a way that he wasn’t even used to. That kind of anger wasn’t unfamiliar to him, so why was it so much worse right now?

Thor was standing next to the couch, holding a glass of whiskey, clearly having already finished with the entire world. “I don’t need your sarcasm, brother.”

“But I haven’t even started yet! Have you any idea how much damage you’ve just done to your position?! You insulted the brother of the most popular person of the entire country. Right in front of the every noble family. I think I am entitled to use a little bit of sarcasm!”

Before answering Thor took a big gulp of his whiskey. “Most popular… come on.”

“He is, Thor! The entire Jotun population would walk over hot coals for him and after the Naess disaster the rest of the country is also completely smitten with him and you called his little brother a… that. In front of everybody. What were you thinking?! Were you thinking at all?!”

“Loki, please.”

Only now Loki more or less noticed Jane sitting on the couch. She seemed pretty small there, intimidated and unfortunately that did nothing to calm Loki down. In that very moment he liked nothing about her, he found her vulnerability pathetic and upsetting even.

“I would say that I am sorry if I were sorry! But your fiancé just caused a political scandal! One that we haven’t seen before and it doesn’t exactly happen at the height of our popularity! It’s…” Running out of words which was about the worst thing that could ever happen to him Loki stalked over to the bar and poured himself his own whiskey. He interpreted Thor’s lack of response as a victory. Perhaps he had finally understood what he had gotten himself into. All of them.

“That word. Frostgiant. What does it mean?”

Loki instantly looked over his own shoulder He half expected Frigga to be there, to tell Jane that nobody ever should use that word. She was right, wasn’t she? They wouldn’t be in this horrible situation if Thor had listened to her.

“It’s propaganda from over 500 years ago. A term made up by the royal troops for Jotun rebels. It stuck around as a prerogative term for all the Jotuns. I… I shouldn’t have said it.” Thor’s usually strong voice had dropped to a whisper. There was some legitimate regret audible, but Loki didn’t have it in him to go easy on him just yet. “It’s a lot more than that. Don’t try to make this into anything else.”
“Could you please just stop for a second with the attitude and explain to me?” In mild surprise Loki watched Jane as she tried to put a little bit of authority on display. Fine, Loki could respect that. He would definitely respect it more if she didn’t look completely helpless while doing so. “Helblindi’s brother looked mortified when Thor called him that and I need to understand why.”

After downing his whiskey Loki started to talk. The burn of the liquid unfortunately wasn’t strong enough to take away the bitterness of the words. “The civil war wasn’t immediately over after Búri took the throne. There were Jotun raids and rebels all over the country. Especially during the period when our family set up other nobles on Jotun territory. One of the leaders of the Jotun rebel armies was Fornjótr. An Ymirson. Cousin of Lopthæna, a bastard. He was a plague on them, made their lives miserable. According to reports he was a very tall man. Estimations are about 2 metres. It’s impossible to tell now how the description got spread, but… it was a tale among the soldiers. Winters in Jotunheim are harsh and Asgardian troops never knew how to deal with them like the Jotuns could. They got ambushed in the mountains and it was easy for the rebels to hide in the endless snow. Stories were made up and told. About Fornjótr being unbothered by the cold, because there was no blood in his veins but ice water. That his skin was blue and his eyes red from the bloodlust he was constantly feeling. They were trying to make a monster out of him. Dehumanizing him and it didn’t take long until someone came up with the term ‘Frostgiant’. It was quickly used for the entire Ymirson family, then for the Jotun population. Lots of stories were tied to it, most of them got forgotten, but the main theme was always the same. That their skin was so cold that their touch would leave frostbite. That they would use the blood of the people they killed to paint the traditional markings on their skin. All kinds of horrific things. It turned into propaganda as our family did nothing to stop these tales from going around. For a couple of decades it was perfectly acceptable to call them monsters. Fortunately it stopped being used as time passed and the new rulers became more established and the fighting coming to an end. Today everybody looks at that term and sees it for what it is. A vile word that attempts to dehumanize somebody. A word that was created to drag their hero through the dirt. It’s as simple as that. Thor called Býleistr a monster. No other way to interpret that.”

Done with his explanation Loki reached for the bottle again while Thor tried to justify himself faced with Jane’s shocked expression. “It’s… 500 years old. It has lost lots of his bite. I didn’t think about it. For me it was just another insult. Like calling him an idiot…”

“They call him an idiot! Damn, Helblindi is never going to let us see the end of this. Every single Jotun is going to lose their mind over this… You clearly overstepped the line.” Loki tried not to think of what they would do. It wasn’t like the Jotun population couldn’t accept a lot of blows before hitting back. They were actually experts at holding back.

But now? The so called fake crown prince insulting a member of their deeply loved sovereign family. They weren’t going to stand for that. Things could only be worse if Thor had talked about Helblindi, not Býleistr.

Instead of trying to get one of them on the phone Thor was still here, trying to make himself look better in front of his fiancé who had no clue what all of this meant and Loki just wanted to punch a hole into the wall. All that work for nothing. Until one hour ago Loki might have been able to work together with Helblindi, to figure it all out. That hope was gone now and Loki felt like ripping someone apart. Why people weren’t already screaming was beyond him? Thor should be on his phone or already out of here. Begging Helblindi on his knees to give him a chance to publicly apologize.

That was the thing to do. Not still trying to convince Jane that the gravest insult in their language was perfectly fine now.
“Nothing is going to change if you yell at me, Loki! I know it’s a lot to ask, but try to stop pointing out all my mistakes for five minutes.”

Thor’s growl was the last straw for Loki. “Fine, then just deal with Helblindi on your own! What do I care?!?”

With his glass still in his hand Loki rushed out of the salon and made sure that he slammed the door shut behind him. How couldn’t Thor see what was important at the moment? Especially when Loki could climb up the walls from all that anger and frustration. All that rage burned inside of him, tearing at his skin from the inside. Perhaps it would be a good idea to go to the gym and kick some of the equipment.

Or maybe tonight Loki would settle for getting drunk.

On his way back to his own rooms Loki met two staff members who were very consciously looking down, avoiding meeting his eyes. He definitely knew what to expect from him. Back in his own salon Loki slammed the door just the same and headed straight for the bar.

Yes, he could see Balder standing up from the couch, probably looking at him with these worried eyes and that was another thing that Loki couldn’t be bothered with at the moment. There was more vodka or whisky to jug.

“Loki?”

After sending a dismissive gesture in Balder’s direction Loki reached for the bottle of whiskey, because it was the first one he could reach. He was generous as he poured his glass and then downed it in one go.

“Are you alright?” A hand touched his shoulder and Loki needed all of his willpower not to snap immediately.

“No, I am not alright! Nobody should be alright! But nobody seems to realise but me!”

“Wait a second, just clam down and we’re going to ta-“

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Loki hissed, spinning around to be faced with Balder’s soft and yet surprised gaze. There was no feeling bad for having snapped at him, because nobody got what was at stake here. Nobody but him and the one guy who was going to make most out of it.

“Okay.” Balder raised his hand as if to show Loki that he meant him no harm. “Just tell me what is going on.”

In the back of his mind Loki knew what Balder was trying to do. It was nice and noble, but that one question had him losing it. “What is going on?! Did you leave the room during dinner?! Thor called Helblindi’s brother a… You know what he called him! In front of all of the noble families! It’s political suicide and depending on how Helblindi spins it… could even be a reason for war. You are not stupid, you know that. Don’t ask me what’s going on.”

Turning back to the bottle Loki filled a new glass and as he drank half of it Loki started to feel the effect of it. The burning was numbed down the slightest bit. So it did help. As he was going for another glass Balder had had enough of it. “You definitely shouldn’t drink so much. That’s not going to change anything.”

“I know, but it helps me not wanting to set something on fire.” Despite his snark Loki took only a sip this time and Balder took the opportunity to continue talking. “Listen, there is no denying that tonight
went down the worst way possible. I am not going to sugar-coat that. But it’s not helping anybody if you’re losing your temper over this. What are you going to do like this?"

Loki was ready to yell at him for that, but realised the very next second that Balder wasn’t wrong. Just standing here and complaining about everybody not seeing what was going on wouldn’t get him any further. There was something else that he could do though.

Putting the glass back down Loki mumbled “I gotta go” and Balder immediately grabbed his wrist. “What? What are you talking about?”

“There is a chance that Helblindi isn’t already sitting on a plane, maybe he’s still at a hotel. I am going to go there, force that stubborn Jotun to listen to me and then make him make Býleistr publicly shake hands with Thor. I’m not going to let tonight fuck up the monarchy….”

Loki wasn’t going to lie, he had no idea how he was going to do that, but it had to be done right now. Before social media beat them to it. As he made another attempt to leave Balder still wouldn’t let go of him and Loki’s anger, which had never disappeared, flamed up again. “Let go of me.”

“No, I want you to take a breath and think about what you are doing. You’ve had too much to drink and you’re way too wound up to talk to anybody at the moment.”

Loki jerked his hand out of his Balder’s grip. “That can’t be taken into consideration since there is no time.”

“Alright, if you want to talk to the Ymirsons, that’s perfectly fine, but give it a couple of minutes at least. Drink a glass of water and try to calm down. Right now you would only end up yelling at somebody.”

Balder was right, Loki did just that. He was losing it over that one single sentence. “Don’t tell me to calm down! I don’t need you to do that! I need you to understand! To go crazy with me! To help me something that might change things! What I don’t need you to do is telling me to calm down! Just tell me that you get what I am trying to do and that you’ll help me!”

Was it the alcohol or the burning rage? Loki had no idea why these words were now suddenly flowing from his lips. It could be that they were overdue and Thor’s stupidity had brought them out.

They had consequences.

For once Loki was able to shake that perfectly collected, always trying be friendly demeanour. Loki had no idea which button he had pushed, but Balder snapped. In the exact way that one would expect such a person to lose their cool. Out of a sudden and only for a second.

“Because I am not supposed to!”

That was it. One sentence directly yelled at him and as the words were out Balder bit his lip and made half a step back. If it hadn’t been for his reaction Loki wouldn’t have put two and two together so quickly. That line should have never met Loki’s ears and then it slowly clicked. “What do you mean you are not supposed to do that? Letting me go crazy for a moment? Why?”

“No, I am not going to let this go! Why are you supposed to calm me down? What does that…” The humiliation came immediately with the realisation. “My mother doesn’t want you to…” Loki whispered and Balder’s expression was confirmation enough. It didn’t need more to redirect the rage he was feeling. Was redirected. Multiplied. Not knowing what to do with himself Loki could feel his
body starting to shake. What had merely been the hint of a suspicion suddenly became knowledge and for once Loki felt no gratification for being right. Instead there was this hot burning inside of him, threatening to tear him apart if he didn’t do that exact thing to someone else. “So you’re talking about me? What else?! What are you supposed to do?! Keep me in check?!”

His voice was shrill, it sounded pathetic, but it was beyond Loki’s control.

Then he saw Balder going through the motions, still trying to calm him down. Why wouldn’t he let him be angry? Loki had every right to and nobody was going to take it away. “Just… let us sit down and talk about this. Please.”

“No, you will tell me right now! What does she tell you? How to take care of me? Do you have these little meetings where she tells you how to deal with me?”

There was this imagine in his mind which came back up. Balder meeting his mother, Frigga constantly trying to push them closer together and Loki letting her. Who was he most angry at?

Balder slightly raised his hands, but Loki shot him a warning glance that he wouldn’t stand being touch by him right now. “Your mother… we have a good relationship…”

Loki realised that he was having trouble reading him, analysing gestures and expressions like he usually would. His anger wouldn’t really allow him to, but Loki couldn’t change that. “Don’t lie to me now. Show me a little respect unlike my mother!”

While Loki was trembling with rage Balder looked torn, still trying to figure out what to say. Was he even able to lie or was he going to dress up the truth in a pretty way in an attempt to make Loki feel better about it?

“Your mother only wants you to be happy and she wants me to do everything to ensure that.”

“Does she tell you what to say to me? Does she?”

Clearly ashamed Balder lowered his eyes and Loki uttered a harsh curse before turning on his heels. The room was getting too small, he needed to get out of here. Balder was calling after him, but Loki couldn’t find the strength to even answer. He needed to hurry if he wanted to still catch the Ymirsons.

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Helblindi watched his little brother pacing up and down the small corridor of the plane. He had been doing this for over ten minutes now, swearing under his breath and although he perfectly got the sentiment Helblindi was starting to feel annoyed.

“Could you please sit down? You’re making me nauseous…”

Shaking his head Býleistr kept doing what he was doing. “No, I’ll go insane if I do that….”

“You don’t look very sane right now.”

Stopping abruptly Býleistr hissed at him. “Of course not! He…”

Helblindi raised his hand and Býleistr fell silent within an instant. “I know. His words shouldn’t mean anything to you. He is a fool. Not worth the dirt beneath your shoes. He’s scum and he’ll get what he deserves. He’ll regret ever thinking that word.”
He meant every word of what he was saying, but there was no need to yell them. Helblindi didn’t like raising his voice in general. It allowed people to know what you were thinking and his thoughts were the most precious thing he had.

Raising his head Helblindi watched Býleistr slowly walking over to him. The expression in his eyes was completely raw, undisguised emotion that Helblindi had seen so many times before. Something untamed, fierce and passionate. Like their entire people. In this moment Helblindi couldn’t put his love for him in words.

“It’s not just about me.” Býleistr shook his head, leaning his hip against Helblindi’s seat. “I could have dealt with things a lot easier if… He gave you orders. That brute fool who is the spawn of liars and thieves shouldn’t even be allowed to sit at your table. Instead he dared to demand that you do his bidding. I wanted to slap him across the face…”

That was an understatement and the proof that Býleistr’s blood had stopped boiling after all. Smiling faintly Helblindi touched Býleistr’s wrist. “I don’t need you to fight my battles.”

“It is your battle. We all are fighting it for you.”

Before Helblindi could answer, his phone went off again. It couldn’t have become public that fast. After pulling it out of his pocket Helblindi took a look at the display. One had to leave it to the young Búrison, he was persistent. Stubborn. Helblindi calling off their agreement and hanging up on him hadn’t been enough to tell him that playing nice was over. Nonetheless Helblindi couldn’t deny the tingle of interest he was feeling. At least Loki seemed to realise what kind of damage his idiot brother had caused.

Helblindi’s thumb was hovering over the display to accept the call when Býleistr spoke up again, peering over his brother’s shoulder. “You are not talking to him again, aren’t you?”

“I am not sure.”

“If you think that he is different from the rest of them, then you are wrong.”

Huffing softly Helblindi shook his head. “You have to admit that there is a lot of difference between these two brothers. The younger one would have never…”

“Did he speak up tonight when it would have mattered? Did he tell Thor to shut his mouth or did he stop him from calling me… what he called me? You remember what he said when he joined our table? He was immediately against us like his brother.”

Listening in silence Helblindi watched as the name on the display disappeared and there was one missed call. “He disapproves of the Language Act…”

Býleistr snorted and quite obviously rolled his eyes. Naturally, for him the mere idea of a Búrison saying anything negative about the Language Act was unthinkable. “Because he said so during a lecture? Or because he told you so? Fine, but he didn’t do anything. He led you on and what he said in public, he said because it sounded good. The public likes to hear it. Little Loki is in such a perfect spot. Second in line, he can promise anything, but he doesn’t have to do anything. Same with you, he told you what you wanted to hear, because despite your wicked mind… You’re just too eager to believe that there might be a single person with a heart in this cursed family.”

I missed call – Loki Búrison

Helblindi’s eyes followed the letters that formed the name on the display. A voice in the back of his mind told him that Býleistr was right. A sign of weakness that wasn’t acceptable. Perhaps it was just
his wish for fast and peaceful solution. Disgusting nativity. A 500 yearlong conflict couldn’t be solved like that. And why should Loki be any different?

“There has been at least one member of that family who had a heart.”

Once more Býleistr showed his disdain. “I don’t understand how you can appreciate it so much that somebody merely gave back what they had previously stolen. That was 200 years ago. Look where we are now. With Odin and Thor… the younger one is the very same. Same blood, same liars and murderers as ancestors that are the creators and keepers of his soul. What else could this soul be than a black hole if it was created by those people? Do you think that when he sits down and writes his letters to his ancestors that he begs to be strong enough to not repeat their mistakes? I doubt it.”

Helblindi remained silent and put his phone away which announced a new message from Loki Búrison.

“You don’t need an ally in that family or in Valhalla.”

Taken aback Helblindi stared at his little brother who had gone down on his knees next to him, taking a hold of his hand.

“You have all of us. Your own people. Every single Jotun knows about your birth right and they want you to take it, because you are the one who will finally change things. I know that and I don’t have this trust in you, because it’s your right or because you are my brother, but because I know you. I have seen your strength and your limitless love for our people. They deserve a king like this… and you deserve to be the one that ends the reign of the usurpers. Tonight we’ve seen again that all we can expect from them is contempt and hatred. Tomorrow all of the country will have seen it too. It’s your time…” Helblindi’s stomach sank as Býleistr brought the back of Helblindi’s hand to his forehead. “My king.”

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“A work of art, isn’t it?”

Bucky tilted his head to maybe spot something that he hadn’t been able to see until now. In vain.

“Actually I think we suck at this.”

Arnþórr put both hands on his hips, looking perfectly offended. “Well, you just proved that Americans have no idea how a real snowman is supposed to look like. He is splendid.”

“The head is way bigger than the stomach.”

“Not everybody has to have a perfect figure. Also you are not allowed to point out other people’s imperfection. You are wearing a thick winter jacket and I can still see that you have the figure of a model. So shut up and stop judging Olaf.”

Unable to stifle a laugh Bucky shook his head. “You didn’t just name the snowman after a Disney movie?”

“Hell yes, I did.” Arnþórr sat down in the snow, which was definitely a bad idea and put an arm around their poor creation. The sight was downright adorable. “I am proud of him.”

“Rightfully so.” Still chuckling Bucky pulled out his phone and took a picture of Arnþórr posing with the snowman. “Great picture. Still the weirdest date I’ve ever been on.”

Getting back up to his feet Arnþórr brushed off the snow and stalked towards Bucky. “It’s a shame
that nobody took you out to build a snowman. It needed to be changed.”

“Yeah, we definitely did that.”

A few snowflakes were caught in Arnþórr’s black hair, a hard contrast and Bucky thought about brushing them away. Eventually he decided against it and settled for a smile. “Should we get some coffee to warm up? It’s getting quite cold.”

“Sure, I know a nice café just down the road.”

Before they left the park Bucky glanced one more time at Olaf and he had to admit that it definitely had been a different idea, but nonetheless rather sweet.

The café was indeed just a couple of steps away but rather busy. With a bit of luck they still found an empty table and took off their gloves and scarfs. “Pretty loud here. We’ll have to scream to understand each other’s words.”

Arnþórr pulled a face and nodded. “Yeah, it’s weird. Normally it’s a quiet place…”

They didn’t necessarily have to stay long, so Bucky decided that he didn’t care. During the wait for their waiter Bucky put his phone on the table to show Arnþórr the picture he had taken. “You and Olaf make a nice couple.”

“Because his physical flaws don’t matter to me. I don’t care about his ridiculously big head.”

With a smile on his lips Bucky was about to put the phone away when he noticed one of his apps popping up. Asgardian news. That could definitely wait.

“What the…”

Out of a sudden Arnþórr took the phone right out of Bucky’s hand, staring at the display in disbelief.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

When it became clear that Bucky wasn’t going to get an answer Bucky tried to get a glimpse what Arnþórr was staring at.

*Crown Prince Thor called member of the Ymirson family a racial slur*
“You damned son of a… Just pick up your phone.”

Once more Loki was redirected to the mailbox and Loki groaned in overwhelming frustration. His headache was acting up again. “For fuck’s sake, Helblindi. Answer my calls. We are adults, this is a matter of state. You can’t just ignore my calls like a pissed off school girl. I’ll get you what you want. The Language Act. Thor getting on his knees to ask you for forgiveness. Just give us the opportunity to do that… Please, call me back. Or no, don’t call me back, because I will continue ringing your phone until you pick it up.”

With gritted teeth Loki hang up and stared out of the window. Valhalla was beautiful at night and wasn’t it weird that this thought crossed his mind just now? Sure, his heart rate had slowed down a little bit, but that didn’t mean he felt any calmer. His chest was tight and the constant throbbing in his head was making him nauseous. A part of him longed for his bed, but Loki knew exactly that he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He was way too tensed and what right did he have to sleep when everything was falling apart.

It would be hard to fix, but there was a nice to do it. Loki needed Helblindi for that. An apology from Thor would mean nothing to the Jotun population if Helblindi wasn’t going to accept it. No matter if his little brother had been the victim of the insult. In such cases you always had to go with the most influential person and that was clearly Helblindi. Loki needed him in his boat, just like he needed Thor. They could turn this around. Odin and Laufey would hate each other till the day of their death, so let the next generation deal with it.

Unfortunately Loki was also perfectly aware of the wonderful hand Helblindi had been dealt. If he wanted he could spin this insult into the start of a proper rebellion. Fortunately enough Helblindi wasn’t willing to risk Jotun lives. At least Loki thought so. Desperately hoped so.

Only one way to be sure.

Loki raised his phone again and dialled Helblindi’s number. There was no way he was going to give up before he had talked to him and found a solution.

After the second ringing the call was answered and Loki went off immediately. “Finally! Listen, I mean it. What he said was…”

“I am sorry, but you’re not talking to Lord Helblindi.”

The voice was way too deep and Loki could hear the hostility right away. They obviously knew who they were talking to, but Loki would pretend that he wasn’t aware of that. “This is the Duke of Glæsisvellir. Who am I talking to?”
“My name is Tyr, I am responsible for the security of the young Lord. I hereby have to tell you that the young Lord isn’t going to accept your calls anymore. They are going to be redirected to his secretary. He will only accept them if he is willing to do that.”

Loki wanted to snap, tear things apart and tell Tyr that Loki was his and Helblindi’s prince and that they had to pick up their fucking phone if he called. Then again, that would be the same mistake that Thor had just made.

So Loki inwardly counted to five before he opened his mouth again. “I seriously lament that decision. Would you please tell the young Lord of Jotunheim that I want to offer my apologies the outrageous things that were said tonight and I wish to talk to him to find a way to make up for it.”

“I will let the young Lord know.”

The call was ended and Loki swallowed down his anger. That had just been the ultimate ‘Fuck you’. Helblindi was now treating him like a commoner. Stand in line and wait, only for me to never call you back.

What now? Helblindi was the essential piece of the puzzle, without him it wasn’t going to work. No way to minimize the damage. Okay, time to think. What other ways were there to save Thor’s reputation? They couldn’t go against Býleistr, try to blame him, make up some story how he provoked Thor in such a horrendous way that he hadn’t been able to help himself. Calling him a Frostgiant was basically self-defence.

No, that would only make matters worse. No bad word could be uttered about an Ymirson. So what other way to save face? Nothing came to mind. Thor would have to get down on his knees and publicly beg for forgiveness. That would help him with most of the Asgardian population. Except for the Jotuns. The apologies of a usurper wouldn’t mean anything to them.

And Loki was back to Helblindi… how was this going to work without him? It all came down to the Language Act once again. An apology and the Language Act. That just might be enough to stop a potential rebellion. Helblindi had made clear before that he was willing to negotiate many things as long as this dreadful law was going to be abolished. That just might be it. Loki had to make this case in front of Odin and Thor, then they could have a shot at holding Asgard together.

Picking his phone back up Loki called his father, but his secretary told him that Odin was having a conversation with one of his ministers. Just fantastic. Loki had to try to get a hold of him back at the palace. Perhaps he should get a cup of coffee first. The whiskey didn’t work well with his headache.

After 5 more minutes the car arrived back at the palace and that entire trip had been for nothing. The Ymirson plane had been long gone and Helblindi ignored his calls. What a success story.

With slow steps Loki returned to his rooms, knowing what and who was waiting for him there. This was a conversation that needed to be had and although Loki still felt that it was so unimportant in comparison to everything else going on, but he needed to be fair. To himself and to Balder.

Exhaling softly Loki waited a moment, his hand on the door handle. This was the right thing to do, talk to Balder first. Trying not to think of all the things that his mother might have told him. To manage him? To seduce him? Loki had severe doubts that she knew what that would entail. As his fingers were tightening around the handle Loki pushed the thought away. Balder first. There would be plenty of time to fight with his mother about this.

Opening the door Loki slipped inside. Balder’s eyes were immediately on him. He was sitting on the couch and for once he didn’t offer Loki a smile as soon as he saw him. “Hey…”
“Hey…” Loki closed the door and took a step forward. He felt uneasy in his own rooms and that definitely shouldn’t be the case. “We should talk.”

“I agree.”

Silence. Before heading to the couch Loki got himself a glass of soda from the bar. Instead of sitting down next to Balder Loki chose the place opposite of him. It was strange to get this vibe from Balder. Something else than his constantly bright and joyful person. Sure, he had never been jumping up and down, he wasn’t a ‘in your face’ person, but this was almost melancholic. So easy to feel bad about yelling at him before and yet Loki knew that it had been absolutely justified.

“I am sorry. I guess I wasn’t fair to you.”

Loki had expected that it would be him who was going to start this conversation, but Balder beat him to it. “How so? I want to hear your version of it.”

Balder let out a sigh and took a sip from the glass he was holding. “You weren’t unclear about what you thought about your mother’s influence on our relationship and I ignored that. Which was unfair and I am sorry, but I didn’t know how to address it. Also… I didn’t know if I wanted to address it. Things were easier like that.”

There it was. Just one word that made Loki remember that he was still far away from being calm. “Easier? It made what easier? Easier to manage me?”

Instantly Balder shook his head, almost looking a bit shocked. “No, this has nothing to do with… manipulating you or any of that. It was only about… making you happy.”

Loki wanted to huff or make any kind of dismissive sound, but something inside him didn’t allow him to. “Let me guess… my mother considers herself an expert in what makes me happy, right?”

Balder didn’t answer, but his expression was one of agreement.

It was humiliation. Knowing that his mother and his boyfriend had met behind his back, talking about him, sharing information. Part of Loki wanted to know everything they had discussed and the other part would prefer to stay in the blessed state of ignorance. “So tell me? What does make me happy?” No attempt to hide the spite and Balder had the decency to wince.

“Loki, it wasn’t like that. Okay? Your mother didn’t tell me what to do or how to act around you and I didn’t report to her and I know that you think that.”

“Why shouldn’t I think that? She was the one who set us up and I instantly knew that she wanted us to be together. She wasn’t subtle about it. What did you say an hour ago? You aren’t supposed to do that. That does sound a lot like you having instructions.”

“Loki…” His name was spoken so softly and it made Loki wonder if that was fake too. Now he was starting to see ghosts. “It’s not about controlling you. Do you really believe that your mother would want that? She adores you… She wanted me to be best possible version for you.”

Actually that sounded a lot more like Frigga.

“Okay, but what if I don’t want that? If I want my boyfriend to be how he actually is? Not some clean-cut version that my mother approves of. I don’t need you to always have the right answer for me or… whatever she has in mind. I want to know. What did she tell you?”

“It was more like…” Balder shrugged helplessly. “Setting us up. Instead of me figuring out things
that you like and that you don’t like… she was telling me. Just little things. That Arabian restaurant you liked. The fact that you hate Harry Potter. I am sorry I went with it, but please don’t believe that there was any malice involved. Your mother really wanted things between us to work you…”

Inside of him Loki felt the anger rising again, burning hot and destructive. It wasn’t directed at Balder though. Loki knew his mother and how she was going after things that she wanted. How stubborn she could be. Traits that Loki had definitely inherited, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t despise them.

“And what about you?” Loki couldn’t help it, he suddenly sounded timid. The idea that somebody might have been talked into a relationship with him against their will was upsetting and deeply humiliating. “What do you want? Any of this? Or are you just a pawn that gets moved around on the board? Did you even want to date me?”

That had Balder reacting very quickly. “No. Listen, I didn’t come forward how much influence your mother has… that is true, but I didn’t lie to you. I adore you. You are smart, beautiful, caring and so driven. I’ve had a crush on you since I was 12 years old, I told you that. That wasn’t a lie. For me it was like… Hey, the mother of my crush wanted me to date him and was extremely supportive. It sounded like a dream come true, but I realise that it wasn’t fair to you. I never told her anything private or details… it was mostly like… ‘You know Loki loves this restaurant, you should take him there’. It didn’t feel like manipulating you, but more like… having somebody in my team. I am sorry.”

Despite himself Loki could indeed understand. Loki knew his mother and how she only ever wanted his best. There was no doubt that she could make Balder believe that she was merely being supportive, not interfering. He couldn’t hold this against Balder, but if they were honest, there wasn’t any place where they could still go from here.

“Be honest with me now, okay? Let’s for a moment not make this about me. Because with my mother it’s all about me. Do you believe that being with me could make you happy? Long-term. Would I make you happy or miserable? Think about it and be honest with me. I deserve that much… and you too.”

Granted, it was a difficult question. Hardly possible to answer without hurting somebody. Balder took his time, then closely watched Loki’s face. Maybe looking for the answer there. “Sometimes yes and sometimes no. I don’t think that I’ll be enough for you and that’s something that I want… be enough. What about you?”

Loki swallowed softly, but the honesty made him feel good despite the rather harsh reality it conveyed. “I don’t know. I want something different, but I don’t know if what I want would make me happy…”

“So I guess we both want different things.” Balder summed up softly and Loki felt like there wasn’t anything left for him to say which never happened to him. It wasn’t an uneasy feeling though. When there were still 1000 things on his mind, he could at least be at peace with this. That they ended this relationship in the most dignified and adult way possible. Also it was the two of them, no interference of anybody else.

“I just… I never wanted to upset you and I want you to know that. I am really sorry.”

He was, Loki could tell by his eyes. “I am not angry anymore… at least not at you. I understand that this wasn’t your idea and I am sorry too. I could have said something about… I just wanted to try.”

After nodding softly Balder got up and walked over to kiss Loki on the cheek. “Try not to be too
hard on your mother, right?”

Loki wasn’t going to make any promises, because the mere thought of confronting his mother about trying to shape Balder into the perfect version for him had this blood boiling. Not even the perfect version of what Loki wanted, but what she thought would be best for him. Her ideal version.

“Not going to happen.”

The smile on Balder’s face was half sad, reminding Loki once again that he couldn’t be without harmony. Something that Loki hardly ever seemed part of.

After Balder left Loki exhaled loudly and then listened to the silence that filled the room. Was it going to be weird now to not have another person around? The prospect didn’t make him feel good nor bad. Also there were other things to think about.

First his father, then Helblindi and finally his mother.

Loki wasn’t forward to any of it.

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“What were you thinking?! I need to know what went through your head to understand what you did!”

Why was he feeling as if he was again 12 years old? How could his father screaming at him still have the exact same effect as over 15 years ago? It was just wrong. Thor was a big guy, he had always been and it frustrated him beyond words that it needed so little to make him feel small. Like he had to look up to his father although he was towering over him.

At his age you shouldn’t be yelled at anymore and most importantly – it shouldn’t have this effect on him. The urge to yell back was already kicking in, but Thor knew that he had to keep his composure or he would fall into the same trap as a few hours ago and his father would be right.

“He was being insolent. You can ask anyone who sat at our table. You know how they Ymirsons get. It was their intention to get a reaction out of me.” Thor wanted to use his hands to support his story, but instead he tried to keep them at his sides, to appear as calm as possible.

“Well, they definitely succeeded, didn’t they?” Odin spat and Thor winced, because sarcasm was something that he wasn’t used to from his father.

“I am not proud of what I said, but when I said it, it was merely a word. To me it doesn’t mean what it means to them. I wasn’t trying to be…”

“Trying to be what?” Odin was scrutinising him. “Stupid? Dishonourable? Undignified? Vile? Because it was all that.”

Thor wasn’t going to be made into a fool for one single word. One that didn’t bear much meaning to him. “Father, I’ve heard you using the term before.”

“In public? In front of a Jotun? Using it as the insult that they consider it?”

Scowling Thor lowered his eyes. “No… I am just not willing to accept that one word is supposed to have so much more impact than any action. They used a lot of words themselves. Usurpers. Murderers. Thieves. Those were intended to hurt and humiliate me.”
Finally Odin’s hard posture eased up a little bit, but his face remained unforgiving. “Words that the Ymirsons have liked to use for hundreds of years. Words that shouldn’t matter to you, because they’re only meant to get a rise out of you. You are going to be king. You are supposed to be the better person. If they insult you, swallow it and remain silent. If things escalate, you have them removed. You are going to be there king. You cannot make them believe that you detest them! When it is your calling to protect and nurture them. Even if you detest them, even they make your skin crawl, you have no right to act on that. The Ymirsons can do anything they want. You are not their responsibility, they are yours. They can hate you, insult you and call for your deposition and you still have to protect and serve them. There is a reason why lèse-majesty has never been a crime in Asgard. They are yours to care for. Not the other way round.”

His father was lecturing him in a passionate way that Thor hadn’t seen in a long time. While most of it made sense and had Thor even more feeling like an imbecile. Nevertheless there was one main theme that Thor couldn’t wrap his head around. Something that wouldn’t add up. “Why are you now defending the Ymirsons when all they do is causing uproar and rebellion? When it’s them who are eager to split this nation?”

“Because it doesn’t matter if you insult a member of the Ymirson family or a commoner on the streets. They are all your subjects. They are all your responsibility. Only after that they are critiques, rivals. You cannot forget that. You insulted him in front of other people. You showed personal disregard for him. They heard it out of your mouth. That’s something different than an unpopular law or a new policy. I need you to understand that, Thor. That’s what the people are going to think. It doesn’t matter that he is the son of Lord. He is your subject and you showed your disrespect. It’s not just about the Jotuns, but everyone else.” Odin took a long breath as he finished talking and a part of Thor had to agree in embarrassment. Yet another part of him was screaming. Trembling with humiliation.

So was he just supposed to take it? Having Helblindi and his little brother sitting at his table, badmouthing his entire family when he was celebrating his engagement to the woman he loved? Did they expect him to keep his mouth shut, because he was going to be their king and it would look bad if he scolded them?

“You know them, father. They didn’t come here to celebrate or to be peaceful.” No matter how big his mistake had been, they couldn’t overlook who they were dealing with.

Seemingly tired Odin shook his head. “Then why did you allow yourself to be provoked when you knew about their intentions? There is no excuse, Thor. This was an engagement dinner. Do you think that diplomates and ambassadors are going to be perfectly fair or polite to you during negotiations? No, they won’t. They are after their own interests. It is your responsibility to keep a cool head. A single word can cost lives if it is uttered at the wrong place and the wrong time. You saw me during the negotiations with Laufey. I know that he would love to see a knife in my back and I can say in front of my son, just between us, that I despise this man. Nonetheless we treat each other with a bare minimum of respect.”

There was only so much biting his tongue that Thor could do. “Respect? Helblindi and Býleistr were talking about my unborn children! How we would consider girls worthless, right in front of Jane and Loki. Where is the respect there??”

Yes, Thor had raised his voice, but not much. Nonetheless it had been a mistake. Somewhere he had crossed a line with his father. Odin’s eyes were narrowing and Thor saw the shadow covering his face. In front of him was his father, an old man one head smaller than Thor and almost frail in comparison to him. Appearances didn’t matter though. In that moment when his father opened his mouth to shout at him with outrage and distress, he was imposing. His father who he had
disappointed and at the same time his king who wasn’t going to tolerate his behaviour. Thor felt the urge to take a step back, to lower his head. Like a kicked dog, but then his father would lose even more respect for him.

“Is this all that you care about?! Is this all you can see?!”

Flinching Thor tried to keep looking at his father’s distorted face. “A personal attack in front of your Midgardian fiancé? That was a door you opened, Thor. I advised you against it. Loki spoke out against it. You made yourself vulnerable by choosing her and you knew that the attacks were going to come. Is this how you are going to react to them?! By giving the entire Jotun people a reason for rebellion? Your future wife is not as important as them! You are not as important as them! Nothing in your life will ever more important than the people! They always have to be first thing on your mind! They cannot… not…”

Intimidation and unrest were chased away and they didn’t leave a trace. Replaced a sudden appearance of fear. Odin stopped talking mid-word, seemingly having trouble breathing. Thor saw his father swaying and stepped forward to steady him as Odin reached for the table.

“Pabbi.”

One arm around his father’s upper body Thor reached for one of the chairs and pulled it closer. “Sit down, pabbi. Careful.”

Odin let Thor help him, his hand on his right arm. Even after being seated and taking a few deep breaths Odin’s fingers remained tight around Thor’s wrist. The sudden shift was terrifying. Just a few seconds ago his father had been larger than life, definitely a king who demanded respect. Now he was just an old man who had trouble staying on his feet. Thor could deny that it scared him, seeing his father like that. In this fragile state which had nothing to do with his father or his king.

“Are you feeling alright? Should I get one of the doctors?” Thor knelt down next to the chair, studying his father’s face. A bit pale and the lines around his eyes were more prominent than ever.

“I am not sick.” Odin tried to smile and it seemed small and weak. “Just old. It’s another thing that you will have to learn. That all enemies can be dealt with or negotiated with. All but old age.”

Thor nodded, feeling rather helpless. “I never wanted to upset you.”

“It’s not about that. I need you to be smart and so careful. Not just for the monarchy’s sake, but for yours. You have a big heart, you are kind and compassionate. Much more so than me or your brother. It is okay to show that. Don’t mistake it for weakness. Then you’ll do better than me. Asgard needs you at your best and I know that you can do it.” His father let go of his wrist and his fingers brushed affectionately over Thor’s hair.

Thor felt his throat constricting and he had to clear it before being able to answer. “I am going to apologize… My stupidity is not going to make things worse. I promise. I’ll take care of it.”

Odin put his hand on the back of Thor’s neck and pulled him forward to kiss his forehead. It was a strange sensation somewhere between happiness and fear.

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Tony took a sip from his coffee, almost burning his lips. At least it would keep him awake. By now he had reached this marvellous state when he had no idea what time it was and when he didn’t give a fuck. He planned on taking his new bike out for a ride on the weekend, so Tony had to get it finished soon. And decide on a paintjob. Gold and red were his favourites at the moment. It needed to be
fla$h$y, Tony wouldn’t want to see the day when his ride wouldn’t make a couple of heads turn.

The music was beginning to annoy him, but since Tony couldn’t work in silence, he turned on the TV. He had no actual intention to listen to it, background noise was all he needed.

This time it turned out to be quite a lot more. That might have had a lot to do with Tony adding a few new channels to his repertoire. It was a necessity to keep up with certain things. For private and professional reason.

It was the word ‘Asgard’ that caught his attention. The scenes on the screen reminded Tony of student protests gone wrong. Lots of young people in front of some kind of building. Throwing stuff, smearing the walls with red paint. Runes that Tony couldn’t decipher but the subtitles were in English.

‘Usurpers’ ‘Thieves’ ‘Oppression’

And more. Quite a theme.

Rebellion still going on which meant that the princeling was probably once again stressed out as hell. Tony should give him a call sometime. After all Tony needed to point out all the stupid points he had made in his paper about foreign relations. This was going to be so much fun.

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Heill skaltu for-eldra,

To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,

Please make me stop wanting

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Heill skaltu for-eldra,

To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,

I beg you to watch over me, to give me strength and guidance as I am going to fight for freedom and honour that we all crave. Which is our right. So that all of us are going to know its taste like our ancestors have.

For a Jotun King
Hello everybody,

So... people are fighting in this chapter... :D

Have fun

Bróðir,

Today I went to the tower. Its position and height are marvellous. Easy to take in all the surroundings, you see everybody arriving and leaving. Impossible to tell yet how much luggage one would be allowed to carry. Perhaps it would be worth considering getting it there beforehand to avoid annoyance and interruptions.

Can I get confirmation on the date of the meeting?

I want everyone to be ready for the trip and early confirmation would help us

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“May I be honest, your highness?” Valkyrie tapped her pen against her notes as usual, she had that look of annoyance on her face which reminded Loki once more of why he couldn’t stand her. There was a minimum of respect for everyone who was good at their job, but that was about it. The feeling was mutual, so why bother. Also, Valkyrie wasn’t working for him.

Odin made an inviting gesture and Valkyrie continued. “It’s every PR person’s nightmare. I will do my best to prepare a statement, but time is of the essence, I know. I’ll get all my people on it. May I ask for something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Prince Thor should try to write down a statement in his own words and we’ll work together to smoothen it out. It will make a better and bigger impression if people feel that the words come from the prince directly. I am convinced that this is going to be the best strategy”

Loki needed in agreement as he preferred to stay silent.

“I can do that.” Thor nodded and Odin seemed content. “Thank you, Valkyrie. We need a first draft before midday. Thor, you stay here and start working on it. Loki, you come with me.”

Obediently Loki got up and left the conference room with his father, while Thor and Valkyrie stayed behind. They had barely closed the door behind them when Odin was already asking questions.

“You are off to no good, Loki. What are you planning on doing?”

Pursing his lips put on one of his many oblivious faces, hoping it would be enough to confuse his father. “I am sorry, but I don’t think I know what you mean.”
Odin was shaking his head. Either in disappointment or impatience, Loki couldn’t tell. “Today is not the day I can be considerate of your many moods. Not the ones you let me see and not the ones you are really being in. Have you seen your own eyes in the mirror? You’re wound up, only waiting to snap. What is wrong?”

So much about Loki’s poker face. It was worth nothing as it turned out. “Aren’t we all wound up? Just a couple of hours ago I snapped at Thor, because he got us into a horrible situation. That’s it.”

“Loki, I am not going to ask again. I can only handle so many bad news in one day, so please, whatever you are hiding, tell me now, because I don’t want to hear from anyone else but you.”

Although very tempted to bite his lip Loki didn’t do it and instead owned up to the thoughts running through his head. They weren’t pleasant, but his father had been a person to shy away from bad news. “Balder and me broke up and I fear that the next time I talk to mother we will have a nasty fight.”

That was an understatement, but Loki didn’t want to make this about him, they still had to deal with Jotun crisis and they should consider themselves bloody lucky that the first reaction to the insult had only been vandalism and protests in front of one of the administration buildings.

To be honest Loki had expected a bit more surprise, but his father merely offered him a slight nod as a reaction. “I am sorry to hear that. Balder is a fine young man.”

That wasn’t something Loki could disagree with. “Yes, he is. But he is not for me and I am definitely not for him.”

Loki turned out to be the one surprised when he felt his father’s hand on his back in a comforting gesture. They weren’t that kind of family. Everything was handled and addressed with words, not with gestures. The touch was supposed to make him feel better, to show support and care. Which it did. Nonetheless it was alienating, because these were the things Loki expected from his mother. At the moment though Loki wouldn’t want any of that from her.

“I believe you are right about that. I won’t lie, I would have felt good about the two of you together, because he would have done everything to make you happy. Though I had my doubts that he would succeed in doing so and the other way around.”

Not knowing what to say Loki merely nodded. Him and his father had by no means a bad relationship, but they didn’t share the same closeness Loki had with his mother. So logically it should be the other way around. Frigga should have seen that Balder and him maybe could have stayed together for years, but none of them would have been really happy in the end. Which wasn’t fair. Loki could have dealt with his parents sitting him down and telling him that he should marry a certain person, because it made politically sense and because Asgard needed a certain liaison. That wasn’t the case. Balder had confirmed that for his mother it was all about making Loki happy. Whatever that meant.

“It’s better for everyone involved.”

“And what causes the anger at your mother?”

“I will discuss that with her personally.”

Once more Odin gave him a dark look, but Loki wasn’t going to make himself small now. “She interfered with my relationship although I made clear that I did not want that. I will talk to her about it and after what Balder told me… I don’t think that conversation is going to go over without a fight.
I am not going to apologize for that, I have never been this angry at her my entire life.”

Why was his father smiling now? There shouldn’t be any smiles. “Have you ever been angry at your mother before?”

Loki opened his mouth to say ‘Yes of course’, but to be honest, he couldn’t come up with one single instance where he hadn’t completely adored his mother. Until now she had never given him any reason to.

“Like I said… private affairs, it’s not important right now. Especially not something the King should worry about.”

Odin was scrutinising him and Loki thought that he was going to continue talking about this nonetheless. That didn’t happen. Instead Odin nodded. “Alright. Let’s focus on the issue at hand. After your brother’s act of stupidity tonight you left the palace. What did you do?”

That had to come up sometime and Loki felt way more comfortable talking about his failed attempts of fixing things than about his ended relationship. “I was trying to catch up to the Ymirsons. To talk to them. To get Helblindi to make Býleistr accept Thor’s apology. Obviously I wasn’t very successful.”

“You should have talked with me beforehand. Also I am surprised that you didn’t go to Laufey directly. He is their father. They’re likely to do as he tells them.”

Loki thought about Helblindi and him meeting up in secret, Helblindi meeting with the Russians and all the people all over the country using his names in adoration. “Actually I am inclined to believe that his acceptance of this apology is going to be most important for the Jotun population.”

There was no need of further explanation, his father was already pondering what Loki had said, that much was obvious. “I will keep that in mind, but you shouldn’t forget that the Lord of Jotunheim is still called Laufey and not Helblindi.”

That was true, however the father didn’t make Loki’s head spin like the son.

“We’ll see each other in two hours? Checking out the first draft.”

Odin agreed and Loki was free to go. Nice the day was already ruined Loki could already make it a bit worse. With a bit of luck Loki could keep it short and simple while still making sure that his mother understood how upset he was. In the bigger picture none of this mattered, but it still had to be deal with, Loki deserved as much and he simply didn’t want these scenes to ever repeat themselves.

Loki put his phone in silent mode and then headed for his mother’s rooms. They were clothes to his own and until now Loki had never thought about that. It had never bothered him until now. On his way Loki kept thinking about his day in the countryside, when he had wanted to get out, go on ride and then Balder had shown up completely unexpected to take him out to one of his favourite places. He had considered it sweet at the time, now it only felt strange and invasive. Since his mother had obviously sent him. That thought alone was almost enough to put Loki in the same state he had been in last night. A fury that all but screamed into his ear to destroy something. What a great way to start a conversation.

Not wasting any time Loki knocked at the door as soon as he stood in front of it. “Mother, it’s me. Loki.”

“Come in.” The answer was instant and Loki entered the salon. His mother sat behind her desk, a newspaper laid out in front of her. As she raised her head she offered her lovable smile and it made
him grit his teeth today. “What is wrong, my dear?”

Sure, she would also see that he was worked up and she could sense that it had nothing to do with Thor’s idiocy. If Balder had already told her, Frigga wouldn’t be smiling. Oh no, she would have come talking to him instantly.

Loki kept standing right in front of the door, he felt no desire whatsoever to get closer to her at the moment. Imagine it as a press conference. Get to the point, no fancy words, but let her know that you are furious. Stay on topic, only main points to make clear what was the problem.

“Me and Balder ended our relationship last night. We agreed that it was unlikely that we would make each other happy and therefore decided to call it quits. We had an intense talk and I want to make something very clear. While I respect your opinion and appreciate your care, I don’t ever want you to interfere with one my relationships again. If you happen to like the person I am with, fine. That’s great, but don’t try to manipulate the circumstances so I feel better around them. I don’t want you to tell them about my likes and dislikes to influence the relationship in any kind of way. That’s my personal business and mine alone.”

There. Done. Loki was ready to leave.

“Loki, slow down. What are you…”

“Please, don’t ask me what I am talking about. I just told you. I just realised that my entire relationship has been set up and influenced by you and it makes me…” No, Loki was not going to lose it. Not in front of his mother. He wasn’t going to yell or scream. “I feel so humiliated and it makes it so much worse that it was you.”

The expression on her face would have made him feel sorry any other day, but now Loki was too careful. It looked like regret, but what was she regretting? Her actions or getting caught.

“Dear, I am so sorry that you feel this way, but…”

“That’s not the right way to start an apology, mother.”

Falling silent again Frigga slowly stood up and walked around her desk. Loki was still tempted to leave, but his legs wouldn’t move, because he actually wanted an explanation. Wanted to find out that it wasn’t as horrible as he thought.

“Alright, you are upset. Why don’t you sit down and we…”

“I am not going to sit down.”

Closing her mouth Frigga now actually studied him, finally realising that this was different than any other time they had disagreed over something. A fight. When had they ever had a fight? Eventually Frigga nodded. “Sure, you don’t have to. I just want you to tell me exactly what I did that made you feel like this, because you must know that this could never be my intention.”

It had to be some manipulation technique that Loki wasn’t aware of, since she had to know exactly what she had been doing. They weren’t going to have this conversation. “How about the fact that you were trying to shape Balder into the perfect version of a boyfriend who would please me and at the same time take care of me the way you want from me. This is not up to you. My relationships are none of your business. It’s so demeaning that you met up with him behind my back to talk about me… What did you discuss… No, I don’t want to know. I don’t want any of this.”

Loki knew that he would never see his mother lose her composure or her grace. She wasn’t that kind
of woman which was something Loki deeply admired about her. Nonetheless Loki could see her features softening and there was sadness to be found which helped Loki to cool down just a little bit. “I see, but it was never my intention to make Balder anything that he wasn’t. He already is a wonderful young man. I will have to admit though that I did give him advice on things that would please you, because that was something he wanted to do. No bad intentions were involved. I am absolutely devastated that it had this effect on you. I promise I will never do anything of that sort again. There is nothing I want less than upsetting you in any kind of way.”

Well, it was too late for that, but Loki knew that she was sincere. They had never fought and Loki had never doubted her affection for him. Balder had said it himself, her intentions had definitely been pure. Today, right now, these pure motives didn’t matter to Loki. It didn’t make it hurt any less. “Alright. Thank you, mother.”

He sounded cold and maybe in a couple of days it would be different. Not today.

“Well, it was too late for that, but Loki knew that she was sincere. They had never fought and Loki had never doubted her affection for him. Balder had said it himself, her intentions had definitely been pure. Today, right now, these pure motives didn’t matter to Loki. It didn’t make it hurt any less. “Alright. Thank you, mother.”

He sounded cold and maybe in a couple of days it would be different. Not today.

“Now that we spoke frankly about this and I admit that I have made a severe mistake… Is there a chance you will rethink your decision about Balder?”

Of course

“No, this was a mutual decision. It wasn’t just me.”

Done with this conversation Loki turned around, his hand was on the door handle when his mother spoke up again. “Does this have something to do with Tony Stark?”

Loki stopped mid-motion, his body freezing. Just when he thought that they were done with this. That they could move on. Now she bringing up Stark to twist what had happened around to make it look like Loki had just waited for an opportunity to end this relationship?

“Mother, I hope that you aren’t serious.”

“I am merely asking you a question, Loki. You’ve been in contact with him and you turned to him when you were in need.”

Turning around Loki had to choose between yelling and laughing. He went for the latter one, but it definitely wasn’t happy. “Are you serious about this? After what we’ve just talked about you insinuate that none of this matters and that I use it as an excuse, so I can run off with the American arms dealer that I’ve slept with one single time?”

“I insinuated nothing, dear. All I am asking is if said man played a role in your decision. No matter how small.” Frigga seemed serious enough and in her eyes Loki could make out the honest concern which brought a sudden realisation. Only thinking about it made his hands shake with anger.

“No, he didn’t. Did he play a part in your decision? Is that why you needed to get me the perfect Asgardian boyfriend so quickly? Because at least somebody has to look like a traditionalist while Thor shows up his American fiancé? Were you worried that I might develop a taste for Americans too? Can’t have that. Only Thor gets to pick his own partners.”

“Loki, you know this is not true.”

“Actually, no, I don’t! I have no idea anymore! The only person who seems to care about what I want is father!”

That was it. Everything else that he had said until now hadn’t even scratched at the surface and suddenly his mother looked at him as if she had just witness the ultimate horror. Something too
horrible to even name. Something that made her blood run cold. The blow had come with such force that Frigga needed a few seconds to adjust. Loki could see how she was trying to straighten up, to hide the impact of his words. Her voice was nonetheless clear and steady as she talked to him. “You don’t mean that.”

A part of him wanted to instantly reassure her that her affection for him was one of the few things in his life that Loki would never put into question. Yet Loki couldn’t do that. He was too angry and too disappointed by her suspicion. “Well, it’s how I feel at the moment. You try to manipulate me and the person who I am with and when I call you out on it and explain it to you… You ask me if it’s all because of an American I spent one night with and who I am definitely not losing any sleep over.”

“Then who are you losing sleep over?”

Now Loki had to turn around and run or she would look right inside of him. See the little things that Loki was trying to hide from himself. “That is none of your business.”

Turning around Loki left and soundly closed the door behind him.

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“It’s kind of cute, isn’t it? Reeking of desperation.” Býleistr put down the letter while Helblindi was still studying his own copy. “Actually I think the press guy who wrote it did a very decent job. It sounds sincere enough and it’s not making excuses.”

Snorting softly Býleistr shrugged. “That’s the least they could do. You said it yourself, what he said cannot be excused.”

Helblindi nodded and readied himself for his little brother lashing out at him. “I know, but I believe nonetheless that you should accept the apology.”

“What?! After what he… How can you say that? It wasn’t just against me, it was against all of us! All of the people that we know and love. He is going to rule this country and I should just bow my head and comply?!”

“No, we will demand compensation. Words are not going to be enough.” Helblindi put the sheet down on the table. “He will need to prove that he is not merely saying pretty things to make us shut up.”

Býleistr was still fuming and he would remain in this state for quite some time. Helblindi could perfectly understand him, he felt like retching himself when he thought back to that moment when the son of the usurper had proven once more that he was a worthy member of this family. A long line of despicable people. “What could we possible ask of him that he is willing to give us? He will say no.”

“Just a little thing. Like the Language Act.”

Raising one pitch-black eyebrow Býleistr cocked his head and Helblindi wasn’t used to see suspicion on his face. “He is never going to agree to that.”

“He just might.”

“Do you know something?” When Helblindi didn’t answer immediately Býleistr came to his own conclusions. “Did you talk to the younger one again? Did he make promises that he can’t keep? You said that you wouldn’t do that anymore.”
“I didn’t. He left a message on my mailbox.”

“He promised you the Language Act before.”

What was Helblindi supposed to reply when this was definitely the truth?

“You talked father out of the plebiscite and nothing happened. Why is it so hard for you to admit that they are all the same and none of them are going to change anything? It has to be us who do that.”

“And what are we going to achieve by not accepting the apology? Look out of the window. The city is a tinderbox ready to go off. Something could happen anytime and what for? An insult? You know what’s going to happen? The usurper is going to put it down by force. Nobody is going to speak up if all this happens over an insult. Please. We have to think of the people. They are furious and we have to calm them down. Things can’t escalate over this. Not over a single word. Because nobody who isn’t Jotun is going to understand. There isn’t going to be any support and we’re going to need it.”

Býleistr was scowling, but Helblindi knew that he had reached him. “Fine, I’ll think about it.”

“You are not going to accept this apology.”

Both of them winced and turned around to see their father. Eyes cold and unforgiving.

***

“Sir, you are vandalizing public property. I will have to ask you to put down the spray can.”

“Ask me again in my own language and I just might.”

“I am sure you understand me perfectly.”

“This is Jotunheim. If the police wants something from me, they’ll have to ask in Jotun.”

“Sir, I am not going to ask again. Put down the spray can.”

“Talk to me in Jǫtnar or leave me alone!”

“Step away from the building or you will be removed.”

“On whose authority?”

“The King’s.”

“What’s the name of your king?”

“Sir, you have to…”

“What’s the king’s name on whose authority you want to arrest me?!”

“King Odin IV of Asgard.”

“That’s not the King’s name! I’ll write it on the fucking wall for everyone to read!”

“This is the last time. Step away!”

“Don’t touch me! You have no authority here! This is not Valhalla and you are not serving a king!”
It was the worst time for Loki to feel helpless. Not when he was already burning with anger and feeling humiliated at the same time. The official apology had been sent to the Ymirsons and now all they could do was wait for an answer.

Which in Loki’s case meant lying on his couch and staring at his phone. Playing the thought of calling Helbindi after all. Then he would be redirected to his bodyguard and suffer a new humiliation. That was the last thing he needed.

Closing his eyes Loki tried to think of anything else for a few moments. Anything but his mother, the Jotuns, Thor, Balder or anything that had to do with politics.

His phone went off when Loki was still searching for pleasant thoughts. Embarrassingly quickly Loki checked the display and laughed out loud when he read the name ‘Tony Stark’. Now this was just crazy. Answering the call Loki sighed softly. “Really? Now?”

“I am putting my perfect timing on display as usual. How amazed are you to hear from me? On a scale from one to ten. Twelve or merely eleven?”

It was strange that Loki didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or slap him through the phone. “How about you just get to the point?”

“Is there ever a real point to me calling you?”

“I doubt it…”

Stark clicked his tongue and once more he sounded so pleased that Loki wondered if that man was ever in a bad mood. Jealousy was a horrible thing. “Actually I wanted to talk with you about your thesis that I happened to read by accident. Somebody let a copy of it lying around in the restrooms of my company. I was planning on telling you that I hope you’re not as stubbornly religious like you come across in your writing… but since you’re constantly sighing into the phone and seem to have had a bad day, I’ll instead ask you if I can help you out. Can I help you out?”

Loki had about three snarky remarks sitting ready on the tip of his tongue when the fight with Frigga caught up with him. So his mother thought that all of Loki’s issues with her were just an excuse, because he was still thinking about Stark? Fine, Loki might for once do what people expected of him. Only the spirits knew how badly he needed to unwind. “Actually you might.”

“Oh… that’s actually not how I thought this conversation would go.” Stark sounded indeed surprised, but then quickly went back to his usual stick. “Alright, what do you need? I just have the best message technique. After five minutes of me working your shoulders you’ll be so relaxed, you’ll let me work on anything else that I want…”

Loki might indeed just let him if only out of spite. He had done worse and way more unpleasant things because of worse reasons. “Alright. You don’t happen to be in Europe at the moment?”

“What are the odds? I’m in Madrid. One boring presentation after the other. Meet you half way in Copenhagen?”

“Paris.”

“Even better. Get your ass on a plane, your highness. You don’t wanna miss the things that I’m going to do to you.”
Distracted

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

It is in the middle of the night, but I couldn't finish writing and the chapter goes up immediately ;)

Also, I guess I have to rating of the story - this got a little more detailed than before.

Loki and Tony meet again and time doesn't stand still ;)

Have fun

Paris was just a grey city. Tony had never understood the charm. To be completely honest, he only owned a penthouse there, because you had failed in life as a billionaire if you didn’t have a place in Paris. Granted, there were tons of things to do and there were beautiful sights and little streets, but who had ever come up with the term ‘City of Love’ couldn’t be trusted.

Perhaps Tony had seen too many other places. Personally he considered London and Madrid much more romantic than Paris, whatever he was a heartless bastard. What did he know? Most women were ridiculously easy to impress though if you told them you were taking them on a trip to Paris. It was all in the name.

Not that Tony cared. Today it hadn’t been him who had chosen this location and their entire motivation was merely practical. Shortest distance between two points.

Sure, Tony would have suggested meeting up eventually, being in Europe and all that jazz, but he definitely hadn’t expected the prince to instantly go for his little teasing. No way in hell that Tony was going to complain about that, God, he couldn’t wait to get his hands on the princeling again. Tony was a sucker for people who snarled at him and were slightly harder to get, but when you got them… they turned into a purring kitten. Nobody to better fit that description. Not going to mention those long, white legs that Tony just wanted to get in between.

Oh, and the bonus of being a prince. The royal blowjob had already been ticked off Tony’s bucket list, but he wasn’t so arrogant to pass on the opportunity to repeat an amazing experience. Being snarky and teasing each other was ridiculously fun, but now sitting in his penthouse Tony couldn’t deny that he couldn’t wait to get his hands on the price.

During his waiting time and the flight from Madrid Tony had done a little research. As much as he wanted to flatter himself and believe that the prince simply could no longer resist him, it was more likely that Loki’s situation had changed. All that talk about commitment and how cheating crushed your soul didn’t sound so hypocritical. Either Loki had decided to turn to the dark side or the boyfriend was history. Tony couldn’t find anything online that would indicate that his relationship was over. It had to be.

Also Asgard was a mess all over. Crown prince talking shit, Jotuns getting into fights with the police over it and the unions threatening with strike if the crown wasn’t going to do anything about the
people who had lost their jobs. What a mess. No wonder that the prince wanted to unwind. Hopefully he had finally come to appreciate his sweet spot. Second in line, all the glory without all the stress. Somebody was in desperate need for a good time. Tony too by the way.

After checking his phone Tony went back to entertain himself with the help of his play station. A few minutes later a text of his driver informed him that they had picked up the prince at the airport and that he had pulled a face. Well, Tony wasn’t going to risk that he got lost somewhere on the way. You could never trust royalty to not end up in one of Paris’ high fashion boutiques. There were other places he had to end up – in Tony’s bed, on his back with his legs spread. Then in a few other positions. Tony was taking care of his investments.

20 stretched out minutes later Tony got another message and turned off the TV. The elevator doors opened and the prince was finally stepping into Tony’s little French realm. No, Tony wasn’t disappointment, but he had hoped for the typical Asgardian attire. He had hoped for the gorgeous green frock coat or at least a waist coat. Obviously Loki had gone for something a little less peculiar. Dark jeans and a blue sweater. Cut nicely, showing off that small waist. The black hair pulled back in a rather messy bun, but he looked good. Hard to fuck that up when you had those legs or cheekbones.

“Somebody definitely took the very first flight. You must have missed me so much…”

Loki glanced around the apartment before he let his eyes settle on Tony. “I was promised a massage and I need one. I am your guest, shouldn’t you offer me something to drink?”

Tony liked the change in attitude. “Honestly, I was hoping to we’d get straight to the massage part. You look terribly stressed out.”

“I do, I guess. That means it’s rather rude to not offer me an alcoholic beverage to have me relax.”

Loki casually leaned his hip against the antique fauteuil and expectantly raised an eyebrow at Tony. Damn, that patronizing stare was sexy. Five seconds here and Loki was already showing off that he was a prince. Marvellous.

“Do I get a nice ‘Hello’ first? Then I might be able to open the bar for you.” Tony got up to slowly walk up to Loki who cocked his head.

“Bonjour, monsieur Stark. C’est un plaisir de vous revoir. Auriez-vous la gentillesse de m’offrir un verre de vin ? C’était un trajet très long et je meurs de soif.” The prince sounded actually bored while showing off his language skills.

“Hmm, hello to you to. I know that the average person gets all hot and bothered when they hear somebody speaking French, but I’m more a… English with a British accent person. I know you said vine, but I have the most wonderful cognac. It will blow your socks off and all the other clothes that you don’t need. All of them.” Tony winked at him before turning to the fully stocked bar. He was generous when he poured the glasses, because it could never hurt to get your one night stand tipsy.

When Tony got back Loki was still standing in the exact same spot, not bothering to sit down. He thanked Tony as he handed him his glass and then took a little sip. “Pretty good…”

“Told you so… By the way, I’m not taking back that you look stressed out, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t look amazing…”

The prince lazily quirked an eyebrow while he was lowering his glass. “I flew to Paris, didn’t I? No need to butter me up with compliments that really are not that creative.”
“I used all my material while we were talking on the phone… give me a couple of minutes.”

Loki shrugged. “Did you buy your assistant a Ferrari?”

“I tried, but she claimed it wasn’t appropriate and that her fiancé would go crazy.”

“A pity. Your secret project is going along well?”

“Perfectly. Like clockwork. You might actually be talking to the most important person of the century right now. Why are we only talking about me? How is your revolution going?”

Wrong thing to say, the prince’s face darkened. Obviously, since he was here to get away from all the stuff going on at home. Well, Tony liked to wind people up before helping them unwind. So much more fun.

“Did you forget that I don’t discuss state matters with you, Mr. Stark?”

“Right, except for the time when you wanted to involve me into state matters and then suddenly backed out. What happened to that?”

Nonchalantly Loki took another sip from his cognac. “Not my best moment, I suppose. At the moment I’d like to involve you in entirely different matters.”

Now they were talking.

With a big grin on his face Tony took a step closer. “Yes? I’m listening.”

“You promised me a massage. I’d like you to fulfil that promise. Now.”

Snarling and snark was perfectly okay and Tony liked it when people would at least try to order him around, that didn’t mean that he was going to comply. Except that he had indeed promised the massage and he couldn’t wait to get his hands on the body beneath all that annoying garment. “Take off your clothes and we’re good to go. There’s a huge and comfortable couch right over there.”

Being a genius who always had a plan Tony had slipped condoms and lube between the cushions as soon as he had got here.

After eyeing the couch Loki eventually nodded, probably deeming it good enough. “Alright.” Walking over Loki put down his glass on the couch table and then stripped off his pullover. Tony marvelled at the creamy white skin. Once again he had to think about how somebody might have created Loki following Tony’s instructions for his perfect little plaything. He hummed contently when Loki took off his jeans and let them lie on the floor when he stepped out of them. Those legs were perfection.

To Tony’s endless disappointment Loki stopped right there and lay down on his front, resting his head on his folded arms. “It’s a very comfortable couch…”

“Sure, definitely more comfortable than the nasty carpet in that hotel in Valhalla. It must have ruined your knees.”

“You’ve told that joke too many times…”

Definitely true. “Guess I need some new material then…” And Tony was going to get it, no doubt about that. Joining Loki on the couch Tony straddled his thighs and took a moment to appreciate the sight right in front of him. Gorgeous. Kind of a shame that it had taken so long to repeat the fun, but
maybe that made it all the more interesting.

Running his fingers down Loki’s smooth back Tony was thinking about some marks that he could leave on this spotless white skin. Finally Tony put his hands on Loki’s shoulder and started kneading his obviously tensed muscles. It only took a few seconds before he could hear a soft sigh escaping Loki’s lips.

“So what made you so tense…” To prove a point Tony dug his fingers a little deeper into a rather hard muscle.

Loki’s answer sounded a bit pained. “Matters of state… that I don’t discuss with you.”

“How boring… you still don’t know how to abuse your privilege.” Tony scolded him while dragging his hands down Loki’s sides. Enjoying the warmth and the smoothness.

“I just took a private jet for a trip that I definitely can’t call official. How about that?”

“A good start… did you have hookers and blackjack on the plane?”

The answer was a dismissive grunt and Tony grinned. “I take it as a compliment that I am part of the little debauchery that you allow yourself. We’ll work on it.”

When Loki replied his voice already sounded bit softer. “You were the first one that offered…”

“Charming… It doesn’t have something to do with the fact that I made you scream my name the last time?”

“I didn’t scream. I never scream.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“No. No challenges.”

Tony frowned lightly, because that sounded way too real. Like a prince who had tried to take on too much, had got burned and now just wanted to lie down for a while and ignore everything going on around him. Perhaps it was better to treat lightly on a few subjects if Tony wanted get laid within the next 20 minutes. For a couple of moments Tony only focused on what his hands were doing, searching out the tension, there was a fucking lot of it and trying to work it out. Loki repaid him with sweet, pleasant moans that were definitely starting to make Tony’s sweat pants a little tighter. It wasn’t a good sign that he was still wearing his clothes.

Stopping the massage for a second Tony took off his own t-shirt and dropped it to the floor. “Did you know that I read your thesis?”

“You mentioned something like that…” More mumbles than words. Sounding sleepy. Tony couldn’t have that.

“I made a list of complaints. We need to talk about them.”

“No, we don’t, because I don’t fucking care…” A content hum that turned into a yawn at the end and Tony would make him care. Preferably not about the thesis and Tony’s opinion. While working his shoulder blades Tony leaned down and brushed his mouth over Loki’s exposed neck. The taste was familiar, the skin slightly salty and Tony wanted to bite down. Instead he kissed the top of Loki’s spine and trailed his fingers over his upper arms. “Cannot take criticism, can we?”
“Only from qualified sources…”

Tony heard a smile and was content that he had made most of the tension disappear. Time to think of himself then. Scooting a bit down Tony pressed little kisses on Loki’s lower back, one hand was on the prince’s hip, sliding towards his backside. Without hesitation Tony cupped Loki’s ass, giving it a little squeeze. Those briefs were really annoying. To prove a point Tony let his fingers dip into the cleft between Loki’s cheeks, rubbing gently over the fabric.

No shudder or moan. More like something that resembled the sigh of a sleeping person. No, not going to happen. “You know if you fall asleep now, I will fuck you anyway.”

“A alright with me…”

A way too pleasant shudder was running down Tony’s spine when he heard that. It wasn’t like he needed anymore foreplay. With both hands Tony quickly pulled down the briefs and then instantly got the lube out from under one of the cushions. By now he was too needy to thoroughly check out Loki’s ass and immediately went to prepare the prince. He got the reaction he wanted when he pushed one finger inside – a sweet moan and Loki slightly lifting his hips. So much about falling asleep, Tony smirked to himself.

Despite usually liking to take his time to get his partner all worked up Tony more or less rushed through preparation, because he had no illusions about him being the one who was further gone. Pretty much a role reversal. Loki from tensed to absolutely pliant beneath his hands and Tony was going crazy from wanting to fuck him.

Shoving his own pants down just far enough as necessary Tony put on a condom and covered it with lube. Grabbing Loki’s hips with both hands Tony pulled them up slightly to make it easier to position himself just right. Tony could feel the prince trembling beneath him as he slid inside and it was glorious. Just as tight and hot. Loki made a needy, throaty sound that went directly beneath Tony’s skin. Oh yes, he was going to make the little prince fall apart.

Tony fucked him at his own pace, only directed by his own lust and the heat around him that urged him to get deeper inside. Loki, limited by Tony’s weight on him, tried to buck back against every thrust. The muscles of his back were flexing, standing out and Tony licked them, he bit down once for twice, his fingers digging into Loki’s skin. He knew that he was talking, most of the stuff he said he didn’t even register himself. How good Loki felt, something about Prince Charming and how much Loki must have missed him if he let him take him face-down on the couch and all that jazz. Tony wasn’t a liar, especially not during sex.

As he was getting close Tony suddenly heard something different than the breathless moans. No screams, but there was still time. Loki paused at every thrust what made him pretty hard to understand. “Can you… turn me… around?”

A question, out of breath and Loki still sounded like he was giving orders while being fucked.

Tony felt no need to change positions, the angle worked greatly for him, he enjoyed the sight of Loki’s lean back and the muscles moving. Also he was close and he’d like to finish like this. Then again, those wide green eyes would be a sight to behold.

“A mixture between pleasure and annoyance that had Tony stopping which was a dreadful thing to do. For both of them.

“Fine, I’ll fuck you however your highness desires…” Tony pulled out which made Loki hiss. A sound that Tony completely ignored, he gracelessly flipped Loki onto his back and thrust back inside
before even really looking at him. Which was a shame, because this might be better after all. Several loose strands of hair were framing Loki’s flushed face, his lips were parted, green eyes indeed wide and hazy. Debauched and gorgeous. As soon as Tony started moving again Loki wrapped his legs around him, pressing his heels against Tony’s lower back. “Harder, come on…”

Sometimes it was so easy to happily comply. After things turned a little rough neither of them lasted much longer. Tony savoured his breath taking climax and allowed himself to collapse on Loki and rest a couple of seconds before bringing him off too. They were a sticky mess, but Tony felt like a million bucks. Which was an embarrassingly low number, but hey, figure of speech.

Humming with content Tony sat up and finally got completely rid off his pants which had until now pooled around his ankles. Loki remained where he was, lying there with his legs spread, taking deep breaths, eyes now closed. Quite the sight, but Tony could do better. He would make him beg and scream by the end of the day.

“I don’t know about you, but giving a prince the time of his life always makes me hungry. Shower first, then dinner. My treat.”

Loki laughed softly and Tony felt strangely content about that. “Shouldn’t it be the other way round? You invite me to dinner before you get to fuck me?”

“Not my fault that you give it up so easily.”

The prince of a sovereign nation actually kicked him for that and Tony grabbed his leg. “Alright! If it makes you feel better, I plan on fucking you again after dinner… and to put you back down on your knees. The Ritz is ten minutes away. Get in the shower.”

Another laugh. This time patronizing. “You don’t seriously believe that I would risk going outside and be seen with you?”

“You’re hurting my feelings, Loki.”

“It’s your highness.”

Rolling his eyes Tony shrugged. “You said on national television that we’ve had sex. People wouldn’t be shocked.”

“Paris is not Copenhagen. I am not as likely to get recognized here, but you get recognized anywhere. You are American, so if I get seen with you, that would be PR suicide at the moment. Moreover the public doesn’t know yet that my relationship has ended. This is not how I want them to find out.”

“So your brother can marry an American, but you can’t have sex with one? I call bullshit on this one.”

“You are not particularly popular when you try to ruin our economy.”

“Hey, I didn’t sign that treaty, that was your dad and he probably did that because of the Russians, so why don’t we blame them? Let’s smash a Matryoshka Doll for good fortune and head out to eat some frog legs or whatever crazy shit the French chef is going to come up with.” Tony thought that was the perfect solution, but Loki looked at him seriously unimpressed. “No. If you are hungry, I am sure you have a full fridge. Delivery service also exists in France.”

Fine, Tony could live with pizza, but that was going to cost the spoiled princeling. “So what’s your plan for Paris then?”
Loki’s face and voice were all business. “12 hour stay that I’ll spend in this penthouse with you fucking me. Preferably so hard that I’ll feel it for a week. Is that answer to your satisfaction, Mr. Stark?”

Tony simply knew that the arc reactor was going to save the world and this was god’s way thanking him ahead of time. “Absolutely, your highness.”

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Nails were being driven into his head. From all different sides. Constant throbbing pain, which went deeper and deeper. Odin took a big gulp from his glass of water and struggled to keep his hand from shaking as he put it back down. He could feel Frigga’s eyes on him and he wasn’t going to let his wife see him having trouble following the conversation. Things were falling apart, it was his duty to make them stay together. Untied.

Speaking hurt, Odin could feel the ache right between his eyes as he addressed the minister. “How bad are his injuries?”

“Broken collarbone, strained wrist, two broken rips. One pierced his lung. The doctors were able to stabilize him, but they confirmed that he could have died.”

Bright spots were dancing in front of his eyes, so Odin leaned back in his chair. “The police officers?”

“Bruises, a broken noise. Nothing more.”

Control was slipping away and Laufey wasn’t going to miss out on this opportunity. Odin should already know how to handle it, but the throbbing made it so hard to focus. It was an immense relief that Thor moved in to ask his own questions. “Are the reports agreeing on what happened?”

“Mostly. Officer Jákupsson was dealing with a young man who was vandalizing a building of the fiscal authority. He was spraying nationalist paroles. He refused to talk to Officer Jákupsson, because he wasn’t speaking Jōtnar. After several attempts to talk him down the man got more aggressive and the conflict attracted a lot of attention of bystanders. Given the current atmosphere Útgarðar and the aggression towards the police Officer Jákupsson requested back-up before trying to arrest the man. The bystanders began showing support for the vandalizer, insulting and threatening the officer. Eventually somebody threw a stone at Officer Jákupsson and the situation turned violent. Luckily only his shoulder was hit and back-up arrived promptly. Five men were arrested. Among them Iarngerðsson who was later identified as the man who threw the stone. Unfortunately all of the civilians showed a high level of aggression. Several officers were needed to put Iarngerðsson down and which resulted in his injuries.”

Odin couldn’t distinguish the names, but he understood what had happened and that it could be the last drop. Jotunheim had always been a wild animal. Beautiful, unable to tame. As soon as it could reach you, it would tear you apart. Until now they had managed to keep their hands on the leash, but they were slipping. Laufey would devour them.

“Those are the reports of Asgardian policemen. I am sure that the bystanders and the men in custody will tell another version.” Frigga made a good point and although Odin’s headache was drowning out the words, he could hear Thor’s scepticism. “Why should we doubt the word of the officers?”

“I don’t say we should, but we will have to listen to each side. The Jotun population is outraged, there has to be a thorough investigation to stop things from escalate further.”
“Mother, how can they escalate further? Police officers are being attacked for not being Jotun or not speaking Jǫtnar. Things got so violent that somebody ended up in the hospital.”

“You are right, Thor, but that person wasn’t a police officer. It was a civilian. A Jotun and it happened in Jotunheim. Not even one day after your…” She hesitated. “The incident at your engagement dinner. Then a week ago a young Jotun got singled out after the bomb threat at the university. It’s time to talk to them. Personally.”

The minister cleared his throat. “There is one more thing, your highness.”

Odin couldn’t bring himself to nod nor speak. Both would hurt, so he merely made a gesture with his hand.

“There are reports that Iarngerðsson and other men were shouting slogans that Frjáls likes to use.”

Thor grunted. “So now we have Jotun radicals attacking Asgardian police forces in the streets…”

“And you are not going to publicly comment on that. At the moment we can’t have you make a statement concerning anything that has to do with Jotunheim.”

When Thor didn’t argue with his mother Odin knew that he had understood. He was supposed to feel a certain way about that, but there was only his headache. Frigga took a reassuring hold of his hand. “I am afraid that at the moment you are in no state to address the public, my dear. The statement should nonetheless be made by a member of the royal family. Have you been able to contact the Duke of Glæsisvellir yet?”

The minister shook his head. “His personal assistant confirmed that the prince told her that he wanted nobody to know where he was going. The plane went to Paris, but the prince ignored the security protocol and left the airport alone. He also switched off his phone.”

“That’s not like Loki at all…” Thor muttered absently and despite the ache Odin thought of the burning eyes and the overwhelming frustration Loki had inside of him. Something that couldn’t be bottled up forever. “It kind of is…”

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They hurt one of our brothers. Kicked him when he way lying on the ground and called it justice. When this is his home and they are outsiders, slaves of the usurper. Trying to force their language and values on him. This is what they do to control us. How can any Jotun hope for fairness and equality when the police is filled with mercenaries from Valhalla?

At least their use of violence finally shows their true colours. After the end of the fight, when we will have brought back Jotunheim to its former glory and with the real king on the throne, our brother will be remembered as one of the first ones to stand up during the revolution

We are not going to disappoint you

Frjáls

***

“Just like that…” Tony was in heaven. Or at least what should be the depiction of heaven. Fuck those clouds with angels on them and stupid halos. No, this was it. Lying on your back in huge French bed, your head on a comfy pillow while a Scandinavian prince was on top of you, rolling his hips in the most languid and sensual way.
Tony wasn’t doing anything but enjoying the ride. His hands were merely resting on Loki’s hips while the other one was working them and every now and then Tony kissed and licked the white chest right in front of his face. Somebody should put that as the new definition in the dictionary.

“God, whatever pissed you off so much that you decided you needed this… make sure it happens again…”

“Shut up.” Loki moaned softly, speeding up his rhythm a little bit.

Tony would if he hadn’t promised himself to make the prince go crazy. Also, he had never looked better. Hair a mess, eyes squeezed shut, cheeks red, his entire face showing off the pleasure.

“Fuck, it’ll be a marvel to see you on television the next time. All business, in a nice suit, playing the cold, untouchable prince… and I’ll be thinking about this. How I’ve seen you like this… Gorgeous…”

“Damn it, Stark, stop talking.” Loki missed a beat and Tony smirked to himself.

“It’s a shame though that the excitement of fucking a prince is already fading… Comes in handy that you want to be King so bad anyway. A king on his knees is even better than a prince, don’t you think? Fuck, I would have you in whatever you guys have to wear during the coronation.”

“Shut up!”

“I will love to call you King Loki…”

The movement came to a halt and Tony wanted to whine, but he couldn’t because a hand was covering his mouth. Loki stared down at him while he straightened his back, changing the position enough for Tony’s cock to slip out of him. Now that was just cruel. Tony tried to redirect the prince by pushing his hips back down, but Loki wouldn’t let him. “Say something like that again and I’ll instantly walk out of here and you can get off on your own. Do you understand?”

Since Loki refused to take his hand away Tony answered by nodding. Alright, he had had his fun being a jerk, now he wanted to go back having great sex.

Finally removing his hand Loki was still staring him down. “You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Obviously content with the answer Loki moved back into position and slid down onto Tony’s cock. Much better. While moaning shamelessly in delight Tony took advantage of the moment that Loki needed to adjust and rolled them over. With a few expert touches Tony rearranged Loki’s legs, so they were resting on his shoulders which provided the perfect angle to bottom out.

The prince’s fingernails were digging into Tony’s arms as the groaned from the feeling of the penetration. “Since the massage clearly wasn’t enough, maybe this will help you to unwind, your highness. You desperately need it.”

Tony made sure that the prince didn’t have the opportunity to respond. Like promised Tony took him relentlessly, delivering hard thrust after thrust and loving every second of it. Only in the back of his mind he was wondering what they were doing to this guy in Asgard. Whatever it was, the prince tried to use Tony to get away from it for half a day and Tony thoroughly enjoyed being used.
There was a familiar soreness in Loki’s muscles as he woke up. Something he had missed and it still wasn’t quite enough. Nonetheless it served its purpose, a very welcome distraction. Loki glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand, the red letters glowing in the darkness. 1:34. Still a couple of hours left of his short holiday. Since he wasn’t going to get another one anytime soon Loki wasn’t going to waste any more of it.

Rolling over Loki took a look next to him and it shouldn’t be surprise that Stark wasn’t there. Of course, he had to make it as difficult as possible. Pushing the blanket off himself Loki got out of bed. For a moment he played the thought of walking into the living room naked, but it would feel a little weird. His clothes weren’t in the bedroom, so Loki wrapped one of the silk sheets around himself. It wasn’t like he was going to cover himself with it for longer than three minutes.

It wasn’t like Loki had any kind of expectations, but seeing Stark sitting the at dinner table and feverishly writing something was definitely a surprise. Well, the man was insane, what should Loki expect?

“Stark, what are you doing?”

“Can’t answer. I am in the zone.”

Was he kidding him? After months of teasing and flirting on the phone Stark was rather scribbling down words instead of doing whatever he wanted to Loki? Did he know that he had a good chance that Loki was going to let him do pretty much anything? Okay, Loki had already let him do a couple of things, but he didn’t picture Stark as a man who didn’t take all that he could get.

“Stark, I am awake and naked.”

“Good for you… Well and definitely good for me. Give me five minutes…”

That simply had to be a joke. What was he doing? Walking over Loki glanced over Stark’s shoulder and nothing made sense. Not scribbling words. Letters, numbers and every mathematical sign Loki had ever seen. Loki hadn’t been bad at maths, but his real gifts were with languages, rhetoric and other fields that had nothing to do with natural sciences. Anyway, whatever Stark was writing down could either be complete gibberish or the formula for cold fusion. It was all the same to Loki.

“Seriously, what are you doing?”

“I was struck by inspiration and need another five minutes. Sit tight, I’ll be with you in a second.”

That insolent, insane...
“Here, something to keep you busy.”

A sheet over paper was pressed into Loki’s hands and his first instinct was to hit Stark with it. For some reason though Loki glanced at it and almost couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “You actually wrote a list about what is wrong with my thesis?!”

“Shhh!”

Loki was going to strangle him and get Heimdall here to get rid of the body. What else could he do but stare at Stark in disbelief and then at the paper in his hand. This couldn’t… “What do you mean with I use my religion as an excuse to snoop in people’s private lives and use that information to discredit them as politicians?”

Stark made another “Shhh!” noise and Loki groaned in annoyance. Sitting down on the couch Loki scanned over the questions and his outrage faded a little bit, when it became clear that Stark had actually read his thesis. Sure, most of his points were provocation and showed a complete misunderstanding of the trúa, but Loki was still shocked by the fact that Stark had sat down and read his work. It wasn’t short and a subject matter that was utterly Asgardian.

“Medieval practices? Oh, come on… Of course, it’s different! How can you even compare these two things…”

Seriously, how could Stark write that it was a bit hypocritical that Loki insisted on respecting the trúa when it came to diplomatic relations while he would probably be less tolerant if another country brought their religion into the negotiations? “It’s not the same when we say that we won’t negotiate with a politician who cheated on his wife and when an ultra-conservative religious nut won’t walk to a politician because she’s a woman.”

Stark actually gave him an absent response. “It’s absolutely the same…”

“No, it’s not! We consider a cheater untrustworthy, because they have proven that they would betray the person who should be the most important thing in their life. Which means that they will betray anybody and anything. Yes, we judge them, but for something they have done. An act they have committed and not because we think lesser of them because they have a certain gender.”

“Yeah, but it’s your religion that decides that this makes them untrustworthy and the other guy’s religion decides that a woman is less worthy in general. Both are completely arbitrary, one just less extreme than the other…”

Loki’s mouth dropped open and he felt a lever being pulled in his head. He was getting into debate mode and there shouldn’t be a worse time for that than now. On the other hand, how was Loki supposed to react when somebody compared his personal beliefs, morals and values to discrimination and bigotry?

“Not so arbitrary after all. Betrayal is a concept that is known in very culture. The violation of trust, confidence, loyalty. There is no positive connotation to it. Can you say the same about your example? How many cultures would consider it alright if I didn’t want to talk to a woman because I think she is beneath me?”

When Stark didn’t answer Loki immediately considered this as a win.

“So that means the majority is right? What does the majority of cultures say about homosexuality? Because your country is definitely a minority in that case.”

Loki had nothing but a weak grunt for that. “I don’t believe in the concept of homosexuality…”
“Lots of people would agree with you, but not the way you mean it.”

“Alright, yes, I do believe that usually the majority of people believe into something that may not always be right, but definitely something that makes sense. Most Asgardian couples are composed of a woman and a man. Why? Because our species would die out if that wasn’t the case. Not every place can be like Asgard and not even Asgard is what the international media makes believe it is. We don’t care who someone is in a relationship with. There is no agenda, no fight for equality, we just don’t fucking care.”

“So what if you happen to speak at the UN and some dictator asshole or some right-wing president refuses to shake your hand, because you publicly admitted to fucking guys?”

Loki laughed in honest amusement. “You seriously believe that hasn’t happened before? You know what I, my father or my brother do in that kind of situation? We turn around and talk to the next person who isn’t a complete idiot. And I don’t say idiot because of his morals or prejudices. No, idiot because Asgard is one of the richest countries in the world. You don’t want to do business with us because of who we sleep with? Fine. We won’t do business with you if you cheat on your wife.”

“And what about Mormons?”

“The idea of being married to several people disgusts me.”

“Even if they’re all okay with it?”

“You want to have an orgy go for it. Marriage is a bond between two people who love each other and love is not a triangle.”

Only now Stark’s hand stopped moving and he turned around in his chair to look at Loki. “Wow, you really are as fucking religious as you come across in your papers. Holy shit…”

Shrugging lightly Loki put the paper away. He cared very little what Stark thought about him and he wasn’t ashamed for his opinions. “The academic debate if the trúa is rather a philosophical concept than a religion is still going on and I am leaning towards the philosophical side. Nonetheless I identify strongly with all of the trúa’s principles.”

The expression on Stark’s face was pensive, in a way that Loki had never seen before and strangely enough, it intrigued him. Despite Stark’s eccentric and silly behaviour Loki knew better than to put his intelligence into question and the prospect of having an actual, intellectual debate with him was exciting. Right now though Loki had no idea what Stark might be thinking, he might even end up calling him crazy.

Eventually Stark offered him his trademark smirk. “Religion or philosophy – It says it’s okay to fuck around if you aren’t committed and orgies are cool too?”

“It definitely says nothing against either of it.”

Standing up Stark made an appreciative sound and walked over to the bar. “Fine, there might be other crazy stuff in it, but since we’ve established that orgies are okay, I don’t care about anything else. Where can I convert? Okay, no, better idea, let’s get immediately go back to the fucking around.”

Although Loki was anything but opposed to that, he still got up and slipped past Stark. He wanted to see what the guy had been doing before this awkward but somewhat stimulating discussion.

The sheet of paper on the table was covered in formulas that still didn’t make any sense to Loki. No
clear pattern visible. “What is this?”

“Another thing I’ve been working on. Had an idea, had to write it down.”

“So what is it? The plan for a new atomic bomb?”

The voice behind him came closer. “Nope. My company produces other stuff than just weapons, don’t you know that?”

A hand slid around his hip, tugging softly at the sheet which Loki was still holding onto.

“Right, the name ‘Merchant of Death’ got me all confused, I guess.”

Stark’s mouth brushed over Loki’s neck and without thinking Loki tilted his head further to the side to grant him better access. Unfortunately though Stark went back to talking instead. His hand tugged once more on the sheet and this time Loki let go of it. As it fell down it left Loki standing there completely naked and Stark let his hand run down his side, causing the most pleasant goose bumps.

“Kind of sounds like an amazing fairy tale… the Prince and the Merchant of Death. Sounds completely awesome.”

Loki had his nasty comment ready when Stark moved in again and pressed an open mouthed kiss on the exact spot where his jaw and his neck met. That was doing something and Loki’s breath hitched. The warm, dizzying mouth moved downwards while the hand on his hip pulled him back against Stark’s chest. Letting him feel the firm body behind him. Loki’s eyes fell closed as he enjoyed the sensation. “More like the development title of a rejected B-movie script…”

Stark hummed between two kisses, his fingers now tracing the muscles of Loki’s stomach. “A cult classic, lots of cheesy dialogue and one-liners. Definitely NC-17…”

An eager moan made it past Loki’s lips as Stark pressed his erection against Loki’s backside. There was no denying that he wanted this, rather sooner than later. With Stark there was the clear advantage of him being dominant and exciting in the right way that would take Loki to a place where he could ignore all the other things on his mind. At least for a short time. That was all Loki wanted right now. Another good fuck that would make him care only about the physical pleasure.

The real world outside could go to hell, Loki would pick up the pieces tomorrow.

After biting down on his shoulder and licking over the mark, Stark quickly spun him around and went straight for a messy and intense kiss. While instantly responding to it and wrapping his arms around Stark’s shoulders Loki realised that this was the first time they kissed tonight. How odd that he hadn’t thought of it yet when Stark’s mouth felt wonderful. Kissing him in that unforgiving way that said ‘too bad if you can’t keep up’.

Without breaking the kiss Stark seemingly effortlessly lifted him up onto the edge of the table, right next to whatever Stark had written down some minutes ago. A shudder of anticipation was running through Loki’s body as Stark moved between his splayed out legs. It was ultimately him who pulled away from the kiss, brushing his lips over Stark’s jawline while he was sliding his hands down Stark’s abs which were impressive for a person who was either behind a desk or in a lab all day. Supposedly. Loki should take the time to look at his body in detail. For now Loki needed to feel it, he could marvel another time. Moreover Stark didn’t need any more self-confidence.

Stark was squeezing his hips when Loki pulled down his shorts. Tilting his head up Loki moved in for another heated kiss that almost distracted from Stark letting go of him. He instantly missed the possessive grip on his hips, but he could tell from the movements of Stark’s arms that he was slipping
a condom on. That man seemed to have ready near any surface that he decided to fuck Loki on. Maybe that should have bothered him, but right now Loki appreciated him being highly organised.

A second later Stark’s hands were back on his hips, pulling Loki slightly forward and Stark entered him easily. As Stark pushed steadily inside both moaned into the kiss, Loki eventually breaking it to gasp for air. That was it, Stark didn’t hesitate, stop or slow down. Instead he hooked his hands under Loki’s knees, grabbing them firmly, changing the angle so he could get deeper inside. When he started his thrusts they were hard, unforgiving and Loki had to grab Stark’s shoulders to keep his balance. Loki would have liked to wrap his legs around the other one, but Stark’s grip was so tight and unrelenting. He held Loki’s legs open the way he wanted them, to thrust into him at his own pace and Loki wouldn’t want it any different. Right now Loki gladly yielded to someone’s power over him and to burning, smouldering pleasure that was running through his veins. Stark reduced him to writhing mess that only craved more of the sensations and that was all Loki wanted.

Once more Stark turned out to be ridiculously vocal during sex and Loki didn’t mind. It was actually a good thing to hear him talk, it kept Loki here, stopped his thoughts from drifting someplace else…

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous… Kinda should of have known that you need it like that… somebody holding you down…”

Yes, kind of…

Stark’s tongue trailed over his ear, sending something similar to an electric shock through Loki’s body. He was shivering from the words that were whispered directly into it. “Should I tie you up? I think you’d let me do that… Tie your wrists together and attached them to the head of the bed… or right here to the leg of the table and I fuck on the floor, your highness…”

The next hard thrust pulled a sob from Loki’s lips and his fingers were digging into Stark’s shoulders. All thoughts finally drained from his head as Stark took him, still rambling on about the things he was still going to do to him. His eventual climax had Loki feeling every single fibre of his body vibrating with pleasure. The intensity had him shivering as Stark was still thrusting into him, by now only panting. Loki rested his forehead against the other’s chest, concentrating on the sensation of having him move inside of him which slowly but surely became overwhelming. Stark’s tight grip on him began to hurt and it was almost a relief when Stark finally came.

Breathing hard they remained in this position, both still holding on to each other, Stark not even bothering to pull out. “Shit… I shouldn’t flatter myself that much, but that was 11 out of 10…”

Loki could do nothing but hum in agreement, although he would rather settle for an 8 or 9. At least it had worked, his body pliant, loose and he felt good. Almost great.

Lazily Stark trailed little kisses from Loki’s neck to his shoulder. “We’re totally doing that by the way… I got a deep green tie that will look lovely around your wrists…”

The only answer Loki could give was an honest laugh. “Not going to happen.”

Stark let out a disappointed grunt before he kissed Loki’s cheek. “Alright, then I get at least to take you out to dinner.”

Loki hissed at the unpleasant sensation. Either Stark didn’t notice or he didn’t deem it worthy of a reaction. “Well, sweetheart, this is France and it’s
a shame not to visit some snobby brasserie that you would enjoy the fuck out of. Also maybe it’s not just about the food, could be that I want to talk to you over a fancy dinner and some great wine.”

Everybody always had to complicate things for Loki.

“I came here for you to fuck me, not because I enjoy talking to you.”

Stark huffed, but it seemed more amused than anything. “Yeah, bullshit. Darling, you are the kind of person that would never let a person fuck you that you didn’t have fun talking to you.”

Loki was in too much of a good mood to argue. “Fine, alright. Perhaps you are sometimes fun to talk to, but that’s still not the reason why I came here.”

“Urgh, I just should be proud of me for literally fucking your brains out.” Stark showed off an almost insultingly arrogant smirk, but Loki kind of liked it on him. “Let’s try again, your highness. I want to take you out for dinner.”

Yeah, life had definitely decided that it wanted to make Loki miserable. “Seriously? I thought now that we had sex again, you stop annoying me with your calls.”

“Oh come on, my calls aren’t annoying you.”

“Yes, they are. Granted not all of them, but most of the time.”

That grin wouldn’t disappear. “You love being riled up, you enjoy a little fight and if you deny that, you do it only to cause another fight which you enjoy.”

Now that Stark had brought him into a lose-lose situation Loki pushed him away and slid off the table, feeling a distinctive ache in his lower back. “I need a shower.”

Behind him Stark was laughing, definitely content with himself and Loki didn’t care much, it needed a lot more to ruin his mood right now.

Since Stark’s shower was huge and luxurious as those in the palace Loki took his time, let the hot water massage his muscles like Stark had done before. There were bruises forming around his knees and Loki found a bite mark on his shoulder. All places that he wouldn’t need to hide, so no worries.

Half an hour later Loki returned to the living room, feeling relaxed in a way that he hadn’t in a very long time. He was clean, he smelled good, he was clad in a silk bathrobe and he still felt no need to switch on his cell phone.

Stark was lounging on the couch, eating something. Loki could tell that his hair was slightly wet and he was wearing different boxers than before. So there definitely was a second bathroom. Coming closer Loki spotted a plate full of different cheese, olives and baguette right next to it. Yes, this was definitely France. Since cheese didn’t count as dinner Loki sat down and reached for a slice of the baguette.

“Still not going to tell me what put you in such a funk that you had to fly across Europe to get the best distraction possible?”

“If I was going to talk about it, what would be the point of looking for distraction in the first place?” Loki pointed out and shoved a piece of cheese into his mouth which was delicious.

“Fine, if you aren’t going to tell me anything, I am just going to assume that you were overcome with longing for me. Don’t say anything, I know I am right.”
“Whatever makes you happy.” Loki shrugged and Stark got up, only to return a minute later with two glasses of red wine. It turned out to be delicious, but instantly made Loki sleepy.

Resting his head against one of the couch pillows Loki took another sip. “So what were you doing in Madrid?”

Stark raised an eyebrow but with a smile on his lips. “I thought you didn’t want to talk?”

“Not about anything substantial, important or personal. So? Madrid?” Loki hadn’t been there in a long time, which was a shame. He actually preferred it to most other European capitals.

“More or less of a summit Except for politicians it were all the leading scientists in the field of clean and renewable energy. They presented new ideas, concepts and most of them were begging for funding. The usual.”

It didn’t sound like the usual. Loki kept sipping on his wine which had to be really strong if it made him want to roll himself into a ball and fall asleep. “What does renewable energy have to do with Stark Industries? Trying to produce clean bombs?”

“Hey, weapon manufacturing is just one part of my company.”

“The part you make most of your money with.”

Stark shrugged. “Okay, right, but you gotta think outside the box. It’s not just clean energy, but self-sustaining energy. The possibilities you could do with that are endless and I am not just talking about the military.”

Loki smiled in mild amusement. “Mr. Stark, are you trying to solve the energy crisis and save the environment at the same time?”

“That doesn’t sound like I could make money with it.”

“A good business man can make money with anything. Even with something morally decent. Did you find something in Madrid that you might be interested in?”

“Sure, fascinating stuff, but nothing that I couldn’t do better.”

That smirk again and it had Loki laugh, although he wasn’t sure if Stark was merely joking. Hard to tell with him. “Right, I forgot… certified genius.”

“You hurt me. Don’t you google your one-night-stands?”

“No, actually not… and I don’t have a lot of them.”

“I feel so honoured.”

Loki drank up his glass, enjoying the little buzz he was feeling. “So what now? Instead of designing a new rocket launcher, you want to put your money into energy… Guess everybody needs some change sometime…”

To Loki’s surprise the smirk on Stark’s face disappeared and he looked somewhat serious. “I can’t keep the company exactly the same way my father wanted it to be.”

“Didn’t work too bad, did it? Made him and consequently you one of the richest man alive.”

Stark shifted likely as if he suddenly wasn’t in a comfortable position anymore. “Sure, my old man
was a genius in his own right, but that doesn’t mean I see things the way he did. Which is good, because he was an absolute jerk and… We joke a lot about how fucking old I am and it’s kind of a shame that it took me so long to make the changes that I’ve wanted to make for such a long time. It’s my company and maybe it has to do with getting old, because it’s kind of time now to think about legacy. So I am going to change everything until I feel like this is me. This is right and I don’t fucking care what others think of it or if they can’t see the obvious.”

That wasn’t Stark’s usual tone which all the more made Loki believe that he was sincere. It wasn’t hard to understand where he was coming from. Loki wanted to tell him that it was difficult to change something that had been created by someone who was close to you. Sometimes it might feel like disrespecting them, but could you really be considerate of that when you knew what was right?

The words died in Loki’s mouth at the same time he wanted to voice them. What was he doing? This was his hideaway and now Stark wasn’t charming or teasing and made Loki think of home and his father. No, that wasn’t going to happen. Putting his glass on the table Loki straightened up. “This is way too substantial, important and too personal at once. I’m going to sleep.”

By the time Loki had walked around the couch he could hear Stark behind him. “Right, you didn’t come here to talk, I forgot.”

Loki yelped in the most undignified way when he was grabbed from behind, spun around and found himself bent over the back of the couch. “What are you doing?!”

The wine had done his job, Loki felt a little dizzy from the sudden movement and by the time he had caught up with what was happening, Stark had roughly torn off his bathrobe, leaving Loki completely naked.

“You were very clear on what you wanted, your highness. 12 hours, no talking but sex and I’ve wanted to bend you over a piece of furniture the moment I’ve met you…” One of Stark’s hands was on the back of his neck pushing him down, the other one was running down his chest and Loki was trembling, not quite able to keep up with the sudden change of events.

Anyway Stark’s intentions couldn’t become any clearer when he leaned forward, lining his body up with Loki’s, letting him feel that he was half-hard. Loki’s breath got caught when Stark began rocking against him, still pinning him down. He could feel him getting more exciting and the thought crossed Loki’s mind that Stark would just enter him like that. Push inside without a condom, take him like, bent over, from behind.

The idea made him feel hot and cold at once. “You can’t… I am sore…”

Stark took his earlobe between his teeth and Loki felt a new wave of dizziness. The deep, smooth voice wasn’t helping. “Isn’t that exactly the point, your highness? To make it hurt a little bit? Because any other way it’s not enough…”

Loki couldn’t breathe and he felt his cheeks heating up with every other part of his body. A distinct feeling of want running through him, making his heart race. It would be so easy to fall into it and surrender if he could ignore that Stark could see inside of his head. That this man he hardly knew could see this side of him within an instant. That he understood so well why Loki was here although he had refused to say a single word.

It was a bad idea though, because Loki hadn’t lied. He was sore, they had been rough, greedy and it would hurt. Should he let Stark do that when Loki had places to be, things to do of so much greater importance? When this was the last place he should be?
His chest tightened, there was a spark of anger and for the faintest second Loki remembered yesterday and what his mother had said to him. How she tried to put strings on him, because of this man. The humiliation tasted bitter and Loki gladly let it turn into spite.

Yes, he wanted this and he would let Stark do to him anything that he wanted. Almost anything.

Loki moaned, pushing back against Stark who was still rocking against him. His erection brushing over Loki’s most sensitive area. “Do you want it, your highness?”

“Yes…” Loki answered breathlessly, then shook his head when Stark’s hand moved to his ass. “…not like this though…”

By now his heart was beating so loudly Loki almost couldn’t hear Stark’s impatient grumbling. Then the hand on the back of his neck was gone and Loki almost missed it. “Get on the couch. On your back. Spread your legs.”

Another rush of heat and Loki complied immediately. As he lay there Stark sat down on his knees between his legs, erection already covered with a lubed condom. With strong hands he grabbed Loki’s legs, pulled them over his own thighs before his hands settled on Loki’s hips.

Stark entering him for the fourth time had Loki gritting his teeth. Him pushing inside hurt, Loki was sore, oversensitive and Stark wouldn’t stop until he had buried himself as deeply as the position allowed. Even then the thrusts started instantly.

The whole act was riding a thin line between pleasure and pain. Loki was writhing, trembling, moaning the other’s name to get more and less at the same time. Each push was perfectly placed to drive him crazy, but the grind was also setting his nerves on fire in a bad way. When it almost got too much Loki stared at Stark above him, still gripping him firmly, chest glistening with sweat, eyes black from lust and pleasure. He was gorgeous and completely different.

When it was over Loki felt wrecked, completely taken apart. He remained motionless when Stark collapsed next to him. There was a dull ache between his legs, but the rest of him felt wonderful. Like he had made a point. There were still at least a couple of things that Loki could control himself.

The silence was pleasant and Loki would have maybe fallen asleep if it hadn’t been for that whisper right next to him. “Just say yes or no. Your country is falling apart and you can do nothing about it although you feel like you could fix things?”

Loki thought of his father, Thor, Frigga, the Jotuns and then Helblindi. “Yes…”

“That sucks.” Stark sighed, folding his arms behind his head. “Perhaps you should just do it. Regardless if you are in the right position or not.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Because you don’t have the authority? There are always ways around these things and you know… once you got the ball rolling, there is no stopping it.”

Loki wouldn’t even dare to imagine it. “I don’t think this ball should get rolling.”

Stark turned his head to him, looking at him deep brown eyes. Openly curious. “Why?”

Unable to stand his gaze Loki turned his own eyes to the ceiling. “Because I can’t stop wanting what I am not supposed to want. Because I cannot have it.”
Until now Loki had never said that out loud. Only his ancestors knew from his letters and now Stark. Gladly all the details were safe with Loki. Buried deep inside where light couldn’t fall upon them. That didn’t mean that Loki felt them any less.

After a couple of minutes of heavy silence Stark surprisingly gently took a hold of Loki’s chin and turned his head to look at him. He was smiling. “I have a very distinctive feeling that you will let me take you out for dinner sometime.”

“Not a chance.”

Still smiling Stark shrugged. “Oh yes, you’ll see and until then… I’ll gladly come over and fuck your brains out anytime you call me.”

Loki laughed and Stark kissed him.

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Most of the flight home Loki spent sleeping and he only switched his phone back on when the plane had crossed Asgard’s borders. It resembled an explosion. Message from his secretary, his entire family, some ministers, ambassadors. The news were a nightmare and of course these things had to happen after Loki had cracked and run away.

No, it would have happened anyway.

What did they have at their hands now? The Næss disaster which still concerned all of Asgard. The Jotuns still in favour of the called off plebiscite. Thor publicly insulting a son of the Lord of Jotunheim. Now alleged police brutality and Jotuns demanding that all policemen who weren’t Jotun should leave the region. No reaction from the Ymirsons to Thor’s apology which was a loud ‘Fuck you’ and even worse, they supported the ridiculous demand, claiming that it was their people’s right to feel safe within Jotunheim.

What had things come to?

When Loki was back at the palace it took his mother less than five minutes to find him. “Where have you been? You just disappeared! You ignored the security protocol, we were worried sick! Anything could have happened to you.”

The legitimate worry and relief couldn’t be overlooked and Loki knew that he would ultimately forgive her, because he loved her dearly. Not right now though. At the moment he felt a mad satisfaction knowing that beneath his clothes were bruises left by the man she had wanted to keep him away from. Even the fact that he felt slightly uneasy walking was a sweet triumph. “I did something reckless and stupid, mother. I also enjoyed every second of it.”

That was all he could say right now. After returning to his rooms Loki went through his schedule, now that real life had him back. Nothing new for now…

His phone beeped and Loki raised an eyebrow when he realised that Stark had sent him a text.

You feeling okay?

Like not smugly asking if you’re okay because I fucked you so well, but really asking if you’re feeling okay

Loki took his time thinking about it before he wrote back.
Yes. Thank you
Hello everybody,

You've been spoiled with Frostiron, gotta change that :P Don't be too disappointed though, this chapter is actually quite important ;)

There was something in the air. Nothing new, as far as Helblindi could remember it had always been there. Strangely enough it seemed almost like part of his home. That tensed atmosphere, a buzz in the background that made you nervous. Like could happen anytime. Complete escalation within a few ridiculous seconds. Helblindi had witnessed an obvious intensification of that buzz during that last few years.

In the last couple of days it had turned into screaming. Something so loud and permanent should be impossible to ignore, but those disgusting self-absorbed traitors in Valhalla had mastered the art of ignoring those they considered unimportant.

Drawing deep breaths Helblindi tried not to dwell on these thoughts for too long. He had a tight schedule and that demanded all of his attention. Quite the challenge when Helblindi constantly saw little gatherings on the streets, all of them in short distance to administrative buildings that were somehow tied to the government. A couple of signs. Voicing their frustration with the false king, lamenting their language, calling out police brutality, calling them foreigners and lapdogs of the usurpers.

Helblindi liked looking at their faces, but he couldn’t deny that the observation brought upon an uneasy feeling. The anger was real, their patience worn out and although all of them were good people, they just needed a little more, another injustice that would push them over the edge. One little thing more and they would switch their signs for weapons and before they could change anything, they would get hurt. Perhaps eve killed.

They should be their last resort.

Then again, who was Helblindi to refuse them the fight when they wanted it. When they preferred it to constant humiliation and degradation. To be frank, Helblindi shared the sentiment, but he would prefer to go about it in a different way. Something more subtle. Perhaps that meant that he hadn’t reached his breaking point yet. Of course not. Growing up with overwhelming privilege kept him from making the same experiences and feeling the same hardship.

Helblindi sighed at a realisation that he had had several times before and he could immediately feel Tyr's drilling eyes on him. Since Helblindi definitely wasn’t in the mood to talk he kept looking out of the window. Any conversation with Tyr would only consist of a few sentences. That was the problem when you had the most efficient and professional body guard in the whole world. Tyr wouldn’t allow himself the slightest distraction, not when he was on duty.

Another gathering as they turned into a street that was named after one of the usurpers. People were covering the street signs and numbers. One could only hope that the next policeman who was going to walk around the corner would be Jotun. Otherwise Helblindi didn’t want to imagine the
consequences.

The car eventually pulled up in front of the hospital and Tyr opened the door for Helblindi. Snowflakes were immediately covering his black coat and Helblindi pulled it tighter around himself. His little visit hadn’t been announced, not officially. They had called the hospital management ten minutes ago to warn them that the oldest son of the Lord of Jotunheim was going to be on the premises. He didn’t wish a welcome or attention of any kind. Hopefully this was going to be respected. All Helblindi needed were the right directions and as always Tyr had already taken care of that.

With slow steps they made their way inside Tyr directed him directly to the elevator. Of course he had been here before to check out the surroundings, to make sure he knew very corner that Helblindi had to walk around.

Efficiently Tyr led him down a long corridor and it became instantly very obvious that they had reached their destination. Two policemen were standing next to a door and Helblindi had to grit his teeth. He was definitely curious what excuse they were going to offer him. Something about Iarngerðsson needing protection? What from? It was ridiculous. To make matters worse Helblindi could tell that they weren’t Jotun. One of them was blonde and the other one looked way too tanned to have spent most of his life in Jotunheim. Could have come back from a vacation though, it was possible.

Their posture changed as soon as they saw Tyr and Helblindi walking towards them. Helblindi stopped right in front of them. “I would like to talk to Mr. Iarngerðsson.”

The two policemen looked at each other, seemingly confused and Helblindi was already assuming the worst when he got an answer. “I am sorry, but Mr. Iarngerðsson isn’t allowed to see any visitors at the moment.”

So at least one of them was speaking Jōtnar. Not very good, but Helblindi was happy over the little things. Tyr was already upset. Not that he would ever show it, his voice always had this menacing tone, one that wouldn’t accept the other one talking back.

“This is the heir of Jotunheim. Your future Lord. You will address him as such.”

Once more they shared a look before the blonde one spoke up again. “I am sorry. We meant no disrespect, my lord. We are merely following orders.”

“Whose orders?”

“Our superiors, from Valhalla.”

Helblindi merely snorted. “This is not Valhalla. Why are you here in the first place? What is the reasoning that doesn’t allow Iarngerðsson to see visitors?”

“He is still under arrest and…”

The officer hesitated and Helblindi felt his little patience fading away. “And what?”

When there was no immediate response Tyr next to him all but growled. “If the Lord asks you a question, you are supposed to answer it. Instantly.”

The policeman cleared his throat, uncomfortably shifting around. “Since Iarngerðsson is under the suspicion of being associated with Frjáls he is not allowed to have any outside contacts without supervision. This is normal procedure when we’re dealing with groups and associations that are
considered a threat to the constitution.”

It was quite liberating to not hide a physical reaction to somebody else’s words. Helblindi huffed in offence. Threat to the constitution, of course. Asgardian administration never worked as quickly and smoothly as in such cases. Instead of getting into this right now, Helblindi came to the point. “I am going to talk with Iarngerðsson now.”

“I am very sorry, my Lord, but as I’ve said – we can’t let anybody inside.”

Tyr was making half a step forward, but Helblindi gave him a little sign. He was going to handle this himself. “Do you know where you are, gentlemen? My family built this hospital, the property it is standing still belongs to my family. You are only a guest in my house and you will not stop me from entering this room.”

Clearly flustered the blonde was looking for something to say. “My Lord, if… if you insist… I still cannot let you go in there alone. It’s protocol when…”

“Are you implying that the Lord isn’t trustworthy? That he might be entangled with organisations that threaten the structure and essence of this nation?” Tyr’s voice made this a threat and both officers paled within seconds. Sure, Helblindi was going to get what he wanted, but it was still a shame how easily influenced these men were.

“Will… will 10 minutes suffice?”

Almost graciously Helblindi nodded. “I am here to check on one of my countrymen, make sure he has been treated right.” Done with talking Helblindi simply opened the door to the room and stepped through it. Not bothering to look behind himself Helblindi shoved it shut with his foot and walked further into the room. A rather nice one at least.

Iarngerðsson was lying in bed, a book in his left hand, right shoulder bandaged. Helblindi was sure that there were other dressings which he couldn’t see. “Mr. Iarngerðsson…”

Only slowly he lowered his book, clearly annoyed to be interrupted. “Yes?”

The expression on his face instantly changed when he actually looked at Helblindi. The second he recognized him Iarngerðsson’s eyes widened in shock and disbelief. Almost as if he couldn’t grasp the idea of them being in the very same room.

“Your highness.” The whisper was faint and filled with so much awe that it almost made Helblindi forget about the confidence that he had put on display only seconds before. There was a certain awkwardness to being addressed like that. It wasn’t enough though to make Helblindi actually uncomfortable. Why should it? This was his rightful title.

Before Helblindi had the chance to say anything, the man in the hospital bed made obvious intention to sit up or even worse to get up to his feet.

“Please, don’t do that. You are hurt.”

“Not enough to keep me from appropriately greeting my prince.”

Swallowing lightly Helblindi watched for another second before he decided that he needed to put an end to this. He wasn’t going to let an injured man possibly hurt himself even more just to salute him. “Then I order you as your prince to stay where you are. I can do without the greeting.”

There was clear relief visible on the Iarngerðsson’s face, but Helblindi knew that he would have got
up if he had wanted him to. “To what do I owe the honour to have you here, my prince?”

Taking his time Helblindi pulled up a chair and sat down. “I’ve come here to hear from you personally how you are doing. If you are being treated alright.”

“Battered. Bruised. But I am healing. Not important enough for you to change your schedule to come here. It is most gracious of you to have done so.”

“I am sorry for what happened to you and I promise that me and my family are going to do everything to make sure the people who did this are going to be held accountable.”

A smile ghosted over Iarngerðsson’s face. “There was no need to tell me that, your highness. I have no doubts.”

Helblindi nodded, trying to not to let show that this unhidden and fierce devotion was making him feel awkward. Adoration was nothing new, even love was offered to him whenever he spoke to his people, but there was something else about this. With most people there was still the soft undertone, that sadness that he wasn’t really a prince. To them he was, by his birth he was a prince, but not officially.

With Iarngerðsson there was none of that. No doubts.

“I hear you are not allowed to have visitors…”

“No, they took my phone too. According to them I am a threat to the constitution of this great nation.” Iarngerðsson spat these words, almost as if he needed to get them out, otherwise he would choke on spite and venom.

Ever so calmly Helblindi crossed his legs, putting his hands on his knee, like he would in a more laid-back conversation. “Are you?”

This was supposed to provoke him, to let Helblindi see his natural reaction, but Iarngerðsson didn’t seem to see it that way. “Not to the constitution, but the parts in it that were written to rob you off your heritage. Or to keep Jotunheim small and a slave. These parts were added by the usurpers and have no meaning to me. That doesn’t mean though that I will rest before they are gone.”

It was dangerous talk, one that Helblindi couldn’t be associated with. At least it was clear now that the police report hadn’t been wrong, the man in front of him was a member of Frjáls. Openly so. Otherwise there would be no policemen in front of his door.

“I fear I cannot make the arrest go away, but I will talk to a good friend of mine. We went to university together. He is specialised in these kind of cases. I will ask him to take care of you.”

“My prince, your kindness honours you…”

“I am merely trying to right a wrong. No Jotun should ever have to pay a price for speaking out against injustice.”

Now Iarngerðsson smiled at him for the very first time and Helblindi returned it. He wasn’t going to make another hospital visit. Nothing like this would ever happen again.

“I fear I have to go, but I promise I will do what’s necessary to lift the restrictions placed upon you.”

As Helblindi stood up Iarngerðsson held out his hand, his eyes sparkling with fondness. “May I?”
Nodding slowly Helblindi let Iarngerðsson take his hand and like expected he touched Helblindi’s
knuckles with his forehead. “May your ancestors and all the spirits protect you, because we need
your strength, your highness. We all crave the day to see your father become king. Then you. I swear
we will not fail you.”

They would not fail him. Helblindi knew who he was talking about and that was all the men outside
the door would want to hear. Just that phrase might be enough to ensure a prison sentence.

Helblindi couldn’t stop thinking about that until they were back in the car. He was biting his lip,
actually chewing on it. A nasty habit that Tyr was perfectly aware of. “What did you find out?”

Leaning his head against the window Helblindi watched the houses passing by. “He definitely is
Frjáls. No doubt about it. I promised to get him a lawyer and I will do that, but I fear I can’t make
this as big a case as I had hoped for.”

“His injuries are real as the restrictions they posed on him. People are already listening to this story.
A young Jotun father ends up in hospital after a confrontation with the police. Unarmed. Trying to
help another man who was writing a slogan critical of the usurpers. It’s a good story and even better,
it’s true.” Tyr pointed out and Helblindi nodded.

He would have loved to step in front of a microphone and tell the story at his own accord. It was all
he needed to make the rest of the country fall over to their side. Perfection wasn’t far off. As it turned
out Helblindi could use none of it.

“I know and what happened is another revolting example of everything that is going wrong. We
have way too many policemen who aren’t Jotun who are just stationed here to support a Valhallan
agenda. It would have been a fine opportunity to point out these problems, but I can’t. Iarngerðsson’s
connection to Frjáls will become public sooner or later and then I cannot be associated with him.”

“A lot of the Jotun population is going to sympathize with him nonetheless.”

“True, but there is a difference between sympathy and active support of a radical group who has
used violence before. No, I am not going to be associated with that.” Helblindi shook his head,
feeling determined. “That’s not all by the way… I had a bad feeling with him. Not with him
personally… More like… I can’t tell. It was strange.”

“I am afraid I can’t follow.”

Helblindi made a helpless gesture. “I can’t put a finger on it. Maybe the way… Whenever I talk to
people publicly, they often… I am used to people telling me that I have their support, that they
believe in me, that they will do whatever they can to help me. I know that they are serious, but it
never felt this real. Concrete. Like he knows that something is going to happen. I’ve never had that
feeling before.”

Tyr smiled encouragingly at him. “Times are changing. Everybody knows that, your highness.”

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“Yes, I know, it’s not good news, but it’s news. We have to use anything in our power to distract
from anything connected to Jotunheim. So please, issue an official statement.” Loki insisted, handing
Valkyrie the paper he had written. Short and simple but respectful enough.

“As you wish, your highness, but may I remind you once more that the end of a popular couple is
never met with positive sentiment among the population.”
“I am aware, but it will become public knowledge anyway and then people will ask why we tried to keep it a secret. Balder is okay with the statement. I want it out today.”

When Valkyrie nodded Loki thanked her and got up. Thor, who hadn’t said a single word until now, followed him quietly out of the room. “You didn’t say anything. I am sorry.”

Loki appreciated it, but there was no use for this conversation right now. “Thanks, but there is no need. It was a mutual decision.”

“Alright, but I would have liked to hear it from you.”

“Thor, don’t get this wrong. My break-up with Balder is the least important thing going on right now. It was the right thing to do for both of us and you shouldn’t spend even a minute thinking about it. You have other and bigger things on your plate.”

It was understandable though that Thor wanted to talk about anything else if even for a moment. “You are right. I am still sorry. I liked him at your side.”

“You were not the only one.” Loki muttered bitterly and Thor was raising his eyebrows. “Mother?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You want to talk about what you did in Paris?”

“Something that would upset mother, but in the big scheme of things… nothing important.” Loki shrugged, eager to get to what they should really be talking about. “When are you going to speak publicly? It’s about time.”

He took hear the rhythm of Thor’s breathing changing, as if Loki had put a weight on his chest. “We’ve talked about it quite intensely while you were gone. We agreed on the opening of the 500 years festivities. Father wanted me to hold the speech anyway and it seems like a good setting. Looking back on the last 500 years, reflecting on what we did right and mistakes that we’ve made. I’ll take the opportunity to apologize. To him directly and all of Jotunheim. It’s going to be a very humiliating beginning.”

That was actually a good idea. For the Jotuns the festivities were a display of dominance and forcing them into submission. If Thor began the celebrations by asking them for forgiveness that might make an impression. “You’ll need a good speech. A very good speech.”

Nodding lightly Thor let out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, five people are already writing on it and I’ve come up with a few notes myself… Will you help me with them?”

“Gladly.” Loki offered him a smile. Maybe things were going to get better now. They had to take one obstacle at a time.
The door remained closed for so long that Steve thought that nobody was home. He was about to turn on his heels when he could hear steps approaching the door. So James was at home after all, Steve had tried his luck by coming here without calling first. He had run a few errands just around the corner and had decided to drop by.

James smiled at him, though clearly surprised when he opened the door. “Steve, hey. I didn’t forget about us wanting to meet up?”

“No, I just thought I could drop by. I hope you don’t mind.”

Steve could immediately tell that something was up or not quite right. Normally James was always glad to see him and showed that very clearly. Right now he looked like Steve had come at the worst possible time. “No, I don’t. It’s just… I have a visitor.”

“Okay, no sweat. We’ll meet up another time?”

“That would be great. How about I call…”

“No need to send anybody away.”

Steve raised an eyebrow when another man appeared behind James. Looking slightly familiar. He seemed nice when he immediately offered Steve his hand in greeting. Which wasn’t an Asgardian gesture, also he was talking English. By his accent Steve could tell that he wasn’t a native speaker, so he was doing it for Steve which was really nice. “Hey, I am Arnþórr.”

Shaking his hand Steve smiled at him. “I’m Steve. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Yasha is trying to explain football to me. We’re not getting anywhere. You’re able to help out?”

Sure, Steve could explain football to anybody. “Somebody else is here too?”

“Uhm, no… Yasha is me.” James smiled sheepishly and Steve raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Long story. Come in.”

It took Steve an hour to remember where he had seen Arnþórr before. He was the bartender that had given James his number when…

Oh. The realisation was rather sudden and perfectly explained why James hadn’t been talking very much and seemed slightly uneasy around the two of them. Something that Steve had never seen him do before. A light feeling of guilt was creeping up on him. He couldn’t immediately say though what was going through his head. Only when Arnþórr excused himself to go to the bathroom Steve had an
opportunity to voice his suspicions. “James, uhm… I am not interrupting your date, am I?”

Pursing his lips James nodded softly. “Yes, at least it was supposed to be a date.”

At first Steve had no idea how to react. Sure, they had talked about it, but being suddenly confronted with a guy that James seemed to be interested felt a little awkward. Even more so given the fact that Steve was being a third wheel. “Shit, I am sorry. You should have said something, I wouldn’t have…”

James made a dismissive gesture. “He invited you in, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but probably because he wanted to be nice. He seems nice.”

“He is…” James nodded, smiling ever so slightly. There was no denying that he looked beautiful like this, although maybe a little bit uncomfortable. “But this is still weird. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not your fault, but… I’m asking myself if this is his way of telling me that he is not interested. Which would also be strange since he is a very straight-forward guy. God, you don’t want to hear any of this, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I did ask, didn’t I?” It was pretty easy to know what would be the right thing to do. Offer to go home right now, so James could figure out what was going on. This was exactly what Steve should do right now. Yet he didn’t really want to and Steve knew that this was a shitty thing to feel. Would it be easier to figure all of this out if Steve could tell why he was feeling about this a certain way that might already be completely different in an hour after thinking a bit about it? The two of them had talked about it and Steve believed that he was perfectly fine with James fitting perfectly into Asgardian romantic ideas. It wasn’t like Steve couldn’t see it.

Arnþórr was attractive by all means and not being able to tell that because Steve was a guy himself, well, that would be just plain stupid and ignorant. Moreover he seemed like a decent guy. So what was the problem? There was none.

Except that it was as strange as Steve had thought it would be to see James with a guy. Although he technically hadn’t seen them having any romantic interaction whatsoever.

“Should I leave? You could talk about it then?”

Yes, that was the right thing to do and Steve was astounded when James shook his head. “No. I’ll talk to him another time. It’s a nice evening after all, I just expected it to be different. You can’t leave by the way, he still has no idea how football works and I’m getting tired to trying to explain.” A smirk made its way on his lips and Steve laughed. “I have the feeling that’s hopeless.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“What’s hopeless?” Arnþórr came back and sat back down next to James. Close. Steve wondered if he had been that close before and if he merely hadn’t noticed.

“You are never going to understand the virtues and principals of the national American sport.” James was still smirking and Arnþórr huffed. “To me it just looks like an excuse to beat each other up. I don’t get what all the fuss is about.”

“You have no sense for strategy.”

“No, I can appreciate football… uhm I mean soccer. That’s what you call it, right? The sport where people actually use their feet.”
James pulled a face. “What’s strategic about having to put a ball into a large rectangle?”

“Everything.”

Groaning exaggeratedly Steve raised both hands to stop them from going back and forth. “Can’t we just all agree that baseball is the best sport?”

Rather casually James shrugged. “Sure, I can live with that.”

Arnþórr disagreed. “I have no idea how baseball works either. You have to hit the ball with the bat and then run in a circle, right?”

Now that was just hurtful.

“You are terribly ignorant.” James’ tone was playful and Steve thought it even sounded endearing. Now it was Arnþórr’s turn to shrug. “I am an Asgardian bartender who has all of his life lived in the same city and who has left the country maybe four times all together. Who would be more qualified to be ignorant than me?”

“You know what we’re going to do?” James said while grabbing the remote control for the TV. “There has to be some soccer game on. This is Europe, there always is a soccer game. You’ll explain us what is so strategic and smart about it.”

“Alright, I’ll gladly…” Arnþórr didn’t finish his phrase when the first image popped up on the TV. “Shit.”

It was that kind of news broadcast which immediately made you feel uneasy. When it didn’t tell you about things that had already happened and which couldn’t be changed anymore. No, the events were unfolding right now.

A burning building. Flames blazing fiercely in the windows. Countless firemen were already doing their best to fight the fire. A reporter was talking over the images, telling them that they didn’t know if there were still people trapped in the building.

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“It looks exactly like London. That apartment building which went up into flames…” Jane muttered these words absently as her eyes were still glued to the TV which offered them that hardly bearable sight.

“Guess that’s the only thing we can be thankful for. That it’s not an apartment building.” Thor was fighting against the lump in his throat, his gaze wandering from the TV to his phone.

The Chief of Police was constantly keeping them updated about the newest developments in Útgarðar. It was still hard to wrap his head around the things which had happened during the last couple of hours. By now all it needed to plunge their nation into a chaos was another company announcing that it would relocate their production. In the morning it had only been a rumour, the confirmation had followed only hours later and just a little after 6 o’clock the headquarters of Hérou had been set on fire.

Thor was firmly convinced that he should not feel this worked up about this event. Sure, it was horrible and it was going to make the average citizen question if they were really safe in their own country. The sudden escalation and the willingness to use violence were deeply unsettling. Had events taken such a horrifying turn, because this time it had directly affected the Jotuns? After Naess had done the exact same thing people had been furious, naturally, jobs were vanishing. Only today
Hérou had made their own plans public and the consequences had been immediate. At least 20 individuals, some of them with masked faces, had stormed into the Hérou headquarters and had attacked the people inside, then chased them outside before setting fire to the building.

The result was now on international TV.

Why had every burden and chore to always come out of Jotunheim?

“Anything new?” Jane looked at him with worried eyes and Thor shook his head. “They arrested about 10 men. There is no way to tell yet if they really got all people out of the building before setting the fire. We can only hope for the best. It was late, most people working there had already gone home…”

Sighing Jane leaned back, one hand partly covering her mouth. “It’s horrific. Okay, I can see that people are angry, but… to just go out and to instantly get violent.”

Feeling a bit helpless Thor sat down next to her. He wasn’t sure what to do. What would he do if he already were king? The same thing he was doing now? Sitting around and wait for the firemen to do their job? Even as a king you couldn’t just demand the flames to stop burning.

The realisation was bitter that there were some things that you could never control. Even as king. What else was in their power than to react to what these dangerous radicals were doing? Hand out severe prison sentences to hope that nobody would ever dare to do a similar thing.

Naturally Thor wouldn’t dare to believe that this could be a long-term solution. Their deal with the United States had been made for geopolitical reasons and Thor had been supportive of the idea of backing a little bit away from Russia. Sure, their nations had a long history together, Thor wasn’t naïve enough to believe that the Russian ties with Jotunheim weren’t way tighter. Therefore Thor had welcomed the idea of ending the ice age which had reigned so long between Asgard and the Americans.

Today it became clearer than ever that this new relationship came with a price. But this one he was unwilling to pay. The people who had got hurt today were their own citizens, the building which they had set on fire was on Asgardian territory.

They had no idea yet if somebody had died. From what little information they had it at least seemed like the radicals had not wanted to actually hurt anybody. That’s why they had more or less cleared the building before setting it on fire. It was their countrymen who were working there, not the people in charge who had made the decision to relocate the production. The employees who had had to flee from their offices were also Jotun. Thor simply didn’t get it. Why would anyone do that?

Jane had just grabbed his hand when Thor’s phone beeped. A new message. It went automatically to Thor’s, Loki’s and their father’s phone.

Two of the arrested men identified as members of Frjáls.

“Damn it…”

After glancing at the phone Jane looked at him questionably. “What does that mean?”

“One the things I would like to never have to explain to you. Dark spots in Asgardian history. It’s a Jotun separatist, nationalist organisation. Underground of course. Armed. They’ve been in existence for almost 100 years now, but during the last 20 years we haven’t heard much of them. Protests here and there. In the 90s they were in their prime. They liked to attack the Asgardian administration in Jotunheim. Using violence and guns. According to them they never seek to kill someone, just to
chase Asgardian administration out of Jotunheim. Scare them away. They don’t respect the constitution. To them Jotunheim is not part of Asgard but should be a state on its own. Ruled by the Ymirsons. Whenever the relationship between Valhalla and Útgarðar is somewhat stable, Frjáls fades into obscurity. When things are tense, like they are right now… but this is the worst thing they’ve ever done. Actually I can hardly believe that the fire was organised by Frjáls. Everybody in that building was Jotun. They wouldn’t hurt their own people. This is more like… a sign.”

“For who?”

“I guess for us. The court. The government. Now that the American policy has direct consequences for Jotunheim, they want to show us that there will be further consequences.” Thor wasn’t going to deny that he felt uneasy about what could be next. Sure, there was still hope that this fire was merely a rash act of some deluded radicals, but one never knew. Especially with Jotunheim.

Obviously still a bit confused Jane nodded. “Okay… and what is your father going to do? Is there much he can do?”

“Punish the people who did that. Negotiate with Hérou, convincing them that they won’t take the entire production away. Talk with the Lord of Jotunheim and that’s not going to be nice. Or maybe they are going to be supportive of repercussions. After all Jotun lives were put in danger today.”

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The last flames had been extinguished when the sun had set and now the firefighters could finally go inside the building and search for people perhaps still trapped there. Maybe it was foolish, but by now Loki was feeling a small hope that the intruders had indeed chased everyone out of the building.

One could reproach Frjáls of a lot of things, but they wouldn’t endanger their own people. Sometimes things were just as simple. At the moment they didn’t even know yet if the whole event had been orchestrated by Frjáls or if they were dealing with an angry mob that two Frjáls members had been accidentally part of. Too much of a coincidence?

Not really. Way too many Jotuns were already ready sympathizing with Frjáls and during the last couple of years it had been becoming way too normal to publicly talk about how their motives and ideas weren’t that bad. As soon as it wasn’t considered outrageous anymore to say positive things about a terrorist organisation, you knew that your society was in deep trouble.

Taking a gulp from his glass of wine Loki kept his eyes on the television waiting for some new piece of information that they didn’t possess already. Which would also be outrageous, because everybody had strict orders to inform the royal family and the government first.

On the other couch Thor was still whispering to Jane, probably explaining to her a few more details that no Midgardian could grasp about this situation. Once more this engagement seemed like a farce. A bad joke. The second major company that was going to move jobs to the United States and Thor brought an American woman to the court. They were never going to accept her. Every decision Thor was going to make would be second guessed. Jane’s influence constantly questioned.

Loki’s gaze wandered from his brother to his father who was still wrapped up in a hushed conversation with the minister of internal affairs. When had it become so difficult to only see his father and not also an old man? The slumped shoulders which clearly showed the burden he had been carrying for the last 40 years. How naïve to believe that it would ever get any lighter. The way Odin carried himself left little doubts government would rather sooner than later fall into Thor’s hands. Every passing day ensured that it would become more difficult for him.
Hérou was another disaster and Loki felt equally stupid and helpless for not having done anything about the American policy. Sure, he wasn’t in the political position to do anything, but speak out publicly and try to apply pressure. With a bit of luck the fire today would be a pretty good distraction. Maybe people weren’t going to talk about the jobs that were leaving the country, but about the crazy people that had set the company headquarters on fire and risked the lives of average employees.

Wishful thinking.

Loki felt a knot forming in his stomach when his mind went to the next logical conclusion. This was another cry for help from oppressed people. Or at least Helblindi would spin it that way. Damn it, Loki could already see him standing behind a fancy desk, holding a speech in which he drew comparisons to the French Revolution. Explaining to the entire nation of the headquarters of Hérou was the modern day equivalent of the Bastille and the poor people were rightfully trying to liberate themselves.

Yeah, that sounded exactly like something he would do. Or what Loki would do himself. Had somebody called the Ymirsons yet? Perhaps Loki should go ahead and do that. Only to end up talking to Helblindi’s bodyguard. Yeah, right…

“Worry doesn’t suit you. Nor does perplexity.”

Swallowing a sigh Loki turned to Frigga who had sat down next to him. “What expression would suit me better in your opinion, mother?”

The question lacked most of its bite, but Loki found it most strenuous and tedious to hold on to his anger when once again way more important things were going on.

“Pretty much anything. Fury. Determination. Most of the time though I expect to see you plotting.”

“I don’t see the point in it at the moment. I just want to know if people got hurt and then we go from there…”

Next to him his mother nodded and Loki didn’t pull back when she reached for his hand. “I am sorry that you got hurt. That was never my intention and I am sure that you know that…”

“Your intentions didn’t mean that much to me at that moment. Actually they don’t mean much now. You decided that you come make these decisions for me and you didn’t have any right to. I appreciate your advice and I always listen to it. That’s what you should have done. Giving me advice. Instead of taking over my private life.”

His mother repeated that she was sorry, squeezing his hand and Loki was glad that weren’t going to talk about it in detail. At least for now. So Loki squeezed back and he might have found the strength within him to smile when there hadn’t been a distraction.

Somebody was clearing their throat.

When Loki turned his head he saw a familiar face. He wasn’t sure about the man’s exact rank, but he was a highly decorated member of the police forces. A man that personally talked to his father whenever the Chief was otherwise occupied. Like right now.

“Your grace, I fear I am coming with bad news.”

The knot in Loki’s stomach began to hurt while his father slowly nodded. “How many?”
“There is still no confirmation on anybody being in the building, your grace. It’s about the men that got arrested.”

“What about them?”

“When the Jotun police forces were supposed to hand them over to the Special Forces from Valhalla, we were informed that 6 of the 10 arrested men had escaped custody. Among them the two Frjál’s members.”

At some point this had to stop. There had to be a moment where you couldn’t say “What more can happen?”

Thor was the first one to react, but his sharp voice and disbelief mirrored exactly what Loki was feeling. “What?! How is that even possible?! They had already been arrested!”

“I know, your highness. I don’t know what else to say at the moment. The situation is chaotic and until now we weren’t able to find out where they were brought to after their arrest. For a lack of a better word… the entire situation is very confusing. There seems to have been miscommunication going on.”

“Miscommunication? That has to be an understatement. They had been arrested. They can’t simply vanish!”

“Your highness… among the officers there is the suspicion that we are not dealing with unfortunate circumstances.”

“What does that mean?”

“There is a strong suspicion that… the Jotun officers who did the arrest also let the men go before they were to be handed over.”

Fuck, Loki needed to get on the phone. Instantly.

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The air tasted like ashes. Black sod was mingled together with the snow on the ground, creating the ugliest shade of grey. By now the night was hiding most of the atrocious sight, cladding the building in darkness. People were clearing the scene, finally going home.

Helblindi turned around, looking for the woman he had talked to only two hours earlier. She had been overwhelmed with tears, on the edge of breaking down. Her husband wasn’t answering the phone, he had been working late and could still be in the building. Helblindi had taken her aside, telling her that he would have people looking for her husband. After 45 minutes they had found him in an ambulance. Medics had been patching up a long cut on his arm, but that was it. The man was fine and his wife threw herself into Helblindi’s arms, thanking him over and over again as if it had been him who had been bandaging her husband’s wounds.

Now he couldn’t see both of them anymore, which was definitely relieving. They had gone home together in safety. Glancing at the burned out building again Helblindi sighed. There were just a couple of things that he would never be able to understand.

A hand touched his arm and Helblindi turned around to look at his brother. Snow and ashes in his black hair. The expression on his face grim.

“Any news?”
“Everyone who got injured is off to the hospital. Only small burns as it seems. Still no signs of anybody being the building. Looks like we got lucky.”

Nodding Helblindi squeezed Býleistr’s shoulder „I guess we can thank all the spirits… What’s wrong? You got that look on your face.“

Býleistr handed him a phone. “There, listen to the audio file. The usurper called our father 30 minutes ago.”

Definitely not to express his sympathy or to offer help, Helblindi could tell that from his brother’s face. Not saying anything Helblindi raised the phone to his ear and started listening to it.

The conversation was short, but long enough to almost had Helblindi lose it. His father had kept his calm, but Helblindi didn’t think he would be able to.

That was it. No more. First they brought upon that ridiculous policy that had caused today’s disaster and now they had the nerve to insinuate that Helblindi’s father gave an order to let the men go who had set the building on fire.

Shoving the phone back into Býleistr’s hand Helblindi stalked away, giving his driver a sign to open the door for him. So much of this could have been avoided if he had listened to his father. If he hadn’t been so arrogant to be convinced that he knew best. If he hadn’t listened to Loki. Býleistr was right. It was one family. The blood of liars, thieves and murderers. Why should one of them be any different? Helblindi had talked his father out of the plebiscite and now they were suffering the consequences.

He was going to make up for it though.

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“Lord Helblindi has accepted to take your call. Please be patient for a moment.”

Loki sat up straight, he hadn’t really expected to be put through. He was coming up with a headache and his heart was racing, but there was a chance now to pull this thing around. Maybe Stark was right and Loki could just work around his limitations. Together they didn’t depend on their fathers. Not if Loki had the public on his side. Not if he had Helblindi.

“Hello?”

“Hey, we have to talk. Everybody is losing it over here. This time things are definitely going to escalate if we don’t…”

The voice that cut Loki off was cold. Like in the stories that had been written about his family. “I merely accepted your call to tell you to stop trying to contact me. I want nothing to do with the descendent of thieves and murderers. None of my people want to deal with the likes of you. Have the most wonderful day, your highness.”

The call was abruptly ended and it left Loki feeling more helpless than ever before.
Hey everybody,

Geez, this one was hard to write...

“Why would you even think of calling me now? Really, tell me. What kind of state of mind are you in to think that I would feel the slightest inclination to talk to you at this moment?”

“You answered the phone, didn’t you?”

The same grin as all the time. How much Loki would like to be a carefree billionaire. A part of him wanted to believe that he would get instantly bored without the political gameplay or that lying on a beach and eating grapes would only work for a day. Actually Loki would probably be able to do that for quite some time. A humiliating thought.

“To tell you to stop calling me. You watch the news. You know it’s a bad time. Horrific actually. So stop wasting my and your time.”

“I merely wanted to know if you already have a plan for your new mess.”

“I don’t discuss matters of the state with you.”

“Still the same old song. I am not going to claim that I am an expert on Asgardian politics, but I have the slight feeling that things are a little more serious than that last couple of times.”

Granted Stark sounded interested enough, but Loki wouldn’t be bothered to explain to him what was going on. “It might.”

“Time to start looking for a loophole in that trade agreement.”

“Very funny… it’s all so easy for you, isn’t it? You can just ring in and give you funny advice that might be helpful or not. Doesn’t even matter. I don’t have time for this.”

“Will you take a deep breath and just sit your cute ass down on a chair and actually listen? You are such a drama queen. Hear me out before you tell me to fuck off. I might have something helpful to say. Can you believe that?” Stark sounded a little bit miffed and Loki bit down on his lip, feeling like he was being shut down. Or even worse – that Stark was right.

Although the man had proven that he could be serious at times he definitely wasn’t the person Loki wanted to discuss any of this with. Not when he already felt like losing his mind. There was a person who could help him and Stark wasn’t that person. A few days ago Loki had been searching for a distraction, but he was way past that point now. “Alright, say something helpful.”

“Get a room full of lawyers. Complete beast. Ones without any sense for right or wrong. No morals and no values whatsoever. Lock them in a room and don’t let them out until they’ve found a couple of loopholes in your policy. That would be start.”
Loki rolled his eyes, because really? For that he was getting yelled at? “A bunch of lawyers? That’s all? Like I haven’t thought of that yet? I’ve already consulted a specialist.”

“One? That’s not enough. You need a dozen. Different ideas and opinions. Because half of them will be shit, but one might come up with something useful. Could be all you need, one good idea.”

There was a sting of pain right between Loki’s eyes and he was tempted to say that Stark was giving him a headache, but that wouldn’t be true. Nonetheless he couldn’t deny his anger. Now directed at Stark. It shouldn’t matter what the American thought of him, but he seriously couldn’t believe that Loki hadn’t thought of the most basic things. “I am not in a position to gather that many people. It would attract attention and it would make the impression that I am trying to undermine the politics put in place by my father.”

“Which is what you are trying to do.” Stark pointed out and Loki snarled. “But you cannot be this obvious about it. There’s a difference between speaking out publicly when you think something is not a good idea and calling a team of lawyers together to actively turn everything around.”

What else to expect than Stark making matters worse for him. “You see that’s why the monarchy is a fucking stupid idea.”

“The form of government has nothing to do with the problem at hand.”

Stark was quick to say the exact opposite. “It is the fucking problem, because you are not willing to act more aggressively. Because it’s your father. By working against him you make him look bad and you don’t want that. You wouldn’t give a shit if you had to deal with some random minister. That’s why the state shouldn’t be a family business. You guys just won’t start to play hardball.”

One simply had to love the Americans. They had to shove democracy down everybody’s throats, not just the Middle East. Then we were completely astonished that the people didn’t want it. At least not the way they presented it. “Have you ever touched a history book in your entire life? Probably not, because if you did, you would know that royal families have been slaughtering each other for centuries. Fathers and sons. Brothers. Sometimes mothers and daughters. Because of power or disagreement over policies. Thereby your argument is invalid.”

“Yeah, cry me a river. All of that might be perfectly true, but it doesn’t apply to you. If anyone else was behind that policy you would have already rained fury and fury upon them. You don’t do it, because it’s your dad.”

“I don’t do it, because getting a bunch of lawyers is not the ultimate solution to anything. Sure, the American policy needs to be eventually dealt with, but the more immediate issue is the political tension in Jotunheim. Do you have some great advice on that too, Mr. Stark?” At least Loki now had somebody he could yell at and somebody who could take it.

Indeed Stark sounded rather relaxed as he gave an answer. “No, because I have no clue what your upcoming civil war is all about. You do though and you would probably be able to figure out what to do if you weren’t throwing a temper tantrum.”

Loki was seconds away from literally screaming into the phone, but then he would prove Stark right. Perhaps he indeed was right, but Loki definitely didn’t need to let him know that. What Loki needed was indeed to gather his thoughts. The last five hours had been overwhelming, full of information. Too much to take at once without getting lost in between.

“I am a spoiled prince who doesn’t get a say in what it is going on. I am allowed to throw a temper tantrum.”
“You’re right. Makes you adorable.”

“That’s really not what I want to hear” Loki rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes and waited for another joke or funny line. It didn’t come. “You know, your highness… I think I’ve told you before, but you could just tell them to go fuck themselves. It’s not that hard. Just make sure that you publicly your ideas beforehand and that nobody wants them. Then you can lean back and watch how things get a lot worse until they come begging you to do something about it. Or at least listen to you.”

The most tempting thought that Loki of course had had before. He would enjoy it immensely to make an overly dramatic entrance, letting out a couple of cuss words and then get on the next plane to Saint Lucia and lie on the beach all day. “I am quite arrogant, but seemingly still not enough to believe that everybody would be just desperately waiting for me to work miracles.”

“If your ideas are good all they need to do is listen… and that would be enough. Unless of course it’s not so much about ending the crisis and helping the country and more about being the one in charge. Is that the ultimate goal, your highness? Being in charge?”

Loki was going to shut this down instantly. “Mr. Stark, just because we’ve had casual sex and talk on the phone sometimes, don’t assume that you know me that well.”

“Hey, all these hours stalking you on the internet must be good for something.”

“Is that supposed to make me laugh or should I file a restraining order?”

“Come on, like you haven’t googled me. Seriously though. I’ve told you before that you got the sweet spot. Time to take advantage of it. You enjoy writing your essays, do your research on history and languages. Whatever your heart desires. Sleep in every day. Get a tan that you desperately need. Sip disgustingly sweet cocktails and date an American billionaire. You know, what people do when they for once try to enjoy life. Give it a try.” Stark was going for flirtiness again, not that surprising and Loki had to admit that it was somewhat charming. Unfortunately charm wasn’t one of the things he needed at the moment.

“You really are the type of person who tries to make their life as easy as possible, right?”

“Sure, life is complicated enough already. Why should I make things even harder than they have to be?”

“Well, I happen to be a rather complicated person. I guess I have to make things harder for myself.”

“Like I said – whatever float your boat.”

“Thanks for calling, Mr. Stark.”

“Anytime, your highness. I’ll keep in touch. Don’t forget to have some fun occasionally, you’re too young to die from a heart attack.”

Loki snorted. “Heart attacks don’t run in the family. I’ll keep it in mind anyway. Goodbye.”

“Ciao Bello.”

Hanging up Loki stared into pace for a couple of moments until he realised that he wasn’t thinking about anything. A blissful moment vanishing into nothingness. As much as he hated to admit it, this conversation with Stark had touched several sore points. Most of them Loki decided to ignore, because he simply didn’t want to think about them. The main point was Stark was right about Loki’s tantrum. There was no way he was going to be able to accomplish anything if he didn’t get a grip
and allowed himself a couple of calm minutes to start thinking. More than one thing needed to be taken into consideration and given the circumstances, they had to take one step at a time.

The issue that was the American policy couldn’t be solved in one day. So they had to look at Jotunheim and the attack first. Fine, Loki could do that. His father had scheduled a conversation with Laufey in one hour. Grabbing a piece of paper Loki started to write down his ideas.

After 20 minutes Loki had underlined a few words and then quickly left the library to head for the conference room. Heimdall opened the door for him, greeting Loki with a soft nod. Loki instantly spotted his father, Thor and the minister of internal affairs. First observations were easily made and Loki had to immediately deal with a numbing feeling. With rather slow steps Loki made his way over to his family and sat down next to Thor. His brother stopped talking when he noticed Loki, but he knew anyway what had been the subject of the conversation. One look at his father’s face and no more questions needed to be asked.

Stark’s words echoed in his ears and Loki wouldn’t allow him to be right about anything. That man may be his father, but more importantly – he was his king. “Father, you are in no state to talk to Laufey.”

Tired eyes looked at him, but Loki could clearly see the iron underneath. The fierce unwillingness that old age or even sickness could a king from going after his duties. “When has it become your job to make these decisions, Loki?”

There was no way to deny that there was strength in his father’s voice and he was capable of putting it on display. But for how long? For an entire conversation with the Lord of Jotunheim who would instantly make the discovery as Loki? Somebody who wasn’t going to hesitate to use it to his advantage.

“I was saying the very same thing.” Thor stated softly. “You are clearly not well and people can see it. This conversation is probably going to take a very long time. Do you really think that you are up for it?”

Both of his sons telling him the same thing and yet Loki knew that there was no guarantee for him listening to either of them. Loki looked at the slumped shoulders and the way his father was sitting in his chair, sinking deeper into it with every second. It was one of these moments when Loki wished that his father could simply retire to take care of himself and his health. One second later Loki thought that stepping down and doing nothing might kill him.

“And if I wasn’t? What would you do?”

Loki looked at his older brother who nodded. “I will talk to him, father. I guess it’s about time. I have talked to him before. I know what to do.”

Yes, that definitely sounded like the best idea how to handle things. Thor’s days as king couldn’t be too far off anyway.

Odin looked at Thor, scrutinizing him and Loki had no idea how this was going to go. Eventually though Odin nodded, then immediately focused his gaze on Loki. “Thor is going to talk to Laufey, but I need both of you agree on what we want out of this conversation. What do we have to do?”

Time to show off his list then, but Loki was going to let Thor start, otherwise it would look like he was trying to hijack the conversation.

“We opened a can of worms when he tried to find out how the Frjáls members escaped from
custody. We can’t let that go, because people need to be held responsible. But we need Laufey’s influence and position to help us with that. I think we should ask him for help. This needs to be cooperation.”

That sounded like the outline of a good strategy, Loki decided to chime in now. “In my opinion that’s the right thing to do. May I add a suggestion?”

“Go ahead.” Thor invited him to talk.

“We have the names of the people who fled from custody. The police needs to go after them. The task force should be composed of Jotun officers and officers who are from other parts of Asgard, better not from Valhalla. We have to sell it to Laufey as cooperation, not control. It’s important that we show him that we know this is a Jotun issue. That we respect that.”

Their father didn’t say anything, merely watched his sons closely as they talked. “That sounds like a good idea. Same thing with the trials. It will put the people at ease when they are held in Útgarðar. Obviously they are worried that people wouldn’t be treated fairly if the trial took place in Valhalla.”

Loki couldn’t agree more with Thor’s point and he suddenly felt something that resembled hope. They were of the same opinion and they were also right. Sure, Laufey would clearly be trying to stick to his own agenda, but Loki didn’t doubt that he would act in favour of his own people. If they had the Ymirsons on their side in this, they might be able to calm the population down.

As time was running out Odin interrupted them. “You’re going to be alright. Just remember that he is going to make things hard on you. He has to. From his point of view it’s his duty to make it as hard and as uncomfortable for you as possible. Even when you are arguing in his favour. He is going to try to wind you up. Which you can’t let happen.”

That was true and it made Loki slightly nervous, because it was no secret that Thor happened to have trouble keeping his temper in check. The determination on Thor’s face was obvious though. He didn’t plan on screwing this up. “I know what to do.”

Only two minutes later they had an incoming Skype call from the Lord of Jotunheim. Thor and Loki sat down in front of the big screen, the camera directed at them. Odin instead moved out of the picture. For now Loki had to ignore how slowly he moved. It was cruel to be aware of one’s parents’ mortality.

In contrast to Loki’s father Laufey not only looked ready for a fight, but also like he was going to win it. His hair was just as black as Helblindi’s. The rest of him was so much colder though.

“I was under the impression that I was going to talk to the so called king of Asgard.”

First provocation in the very first sentence, Laufey really knew what he was doing, but to Loki’s relief Thor seemed to look through it. “My father offers his sincere apologies, but an unexpected emergency demanded his immediate attention.”

Good, not alluding to his state of health.

Laufey offered them a cold glare. “So this discussion isn’t important enough for him to attend it. I guess then there is nothing to talk about.”

Thor was quick to respond. “As crown prince of Asgard and future king I am going to fill in for my father’s absence.”

One second. That was all Loki needed to see that it was all slipping away. Laufey narrowed his eyes.
Barely but still enough. “I have nothing to discuss with a man that feels nothing but disdain for my people and my kin.”

It was like feeling his own guts turning into stone, lying heavily inside of him, dragging him down. Thor was going to argue, but Loki could already see that it was useless. The apology hadn’t been accepted and by looking at these hard features Loki had an easy time figuring out who had been responsible for that.

“My Lord…”

Thor didn’t get much further, Laufey had him fall silent with a dismissive wink. “I am not going to share words with you, son of Odin. This conversation is over.”

Laufey was standing up and there were other words for it – Loki panicked. They could cut off the line at any second, so he needed to be fast. “Would you talk to me, my Lord?”

Thor turned his head to him, frowning and Laufey stopped mid-motion. Loki wanted to give his brother a little sign. Like ‘Let me try to do this, we can’t do anything else right now’. His heart was beating too fast and Loki dreaded either reaction he might receive.

With slow and deliberate movements Laufey sat back down, making a gracious gesture with his hand. “Say what you have to say, your highness. I am listening.”
“That went so much better than I expected. What should probably be worrying…”

Loki was rambling and that for no good reason. He felt drained, ready for falling into bed and sleep for several hours. Laufey really had the gift to suck all the energy out of you just by constantly keeping his eyes on you during a conversation. Unfortunately this was only step number 1.

“I guess so.” Thor had worn the same expression for several minutes now. One that Loki wasn’t used to and that he couldn’t place. Pensive but somewhat dark. “Sure, our suggestions are also good for him, but I was almost sure he would refuse, because he had to see that would help us out.”

“Jotunheim is more important to him than we are… There might be a successful cooperation possible in the future if we are willing to make some concessions…” Loki knew that he had to treat lightly, it was a sore subject for everyone.

As expected Thor didn’t show much enthusiasm. “I am not that sure. I don’t trust him and don’t forget that we still don’t know what exactly happened when the arsonists got away. He might know and there is no way he is going to tell us.”

“For that might be looking after his people.”

“So it’s okay to protect criminals that were putting lives in danger?”

Sighing in defeat Loki shook his head. “Of course not… but he have no idea if he is involved or not.”

“Right. A video conference with the Police Chief is scheduled in half an hour. Maybe he’ll have something new to tell us. About how the internal investigation is proceeding.”

That wasn’t going to be a nice talk. If it should really turn out that they had been helped to fly by the officers themselves. It didn’t matter if they had acted on their own, out of sympathy or if they had indeed had their orders. Laufey was still going to hold a protective hand over the policemen.

“Alright. Let’s wait and see what he has to say.”

Thor nodded, tapping the tips of his fingers against the table top. Loki wanted to say something to chase away the awkward silence, but nothing came to mind. It was a strange situation. This should have been Thor’s first official conversation without their father. First taste of what was soon to come. Laufey had refused and therefore it had been Loki who had had this conversation. Loki had no idea how this had to feel for Thor. Being pushed aside in such an important moment. Then again, it was his own fault. If Thor had kept his calm during the engagement dinner, Laufey wouldn’t have been
able to reject him as a negotiation partner. A rather nasty part of Loki’s mind whispered that it had been better this way anyway, because he somewhat doubted that Thor could have stood up to Laufey. To anyone else, sure, but any Ymirson got a rise out of him way too easily.

“I am worried about father…” It was Thor who broke the silence and Loki replied with a small nod. One of the things nobody wanted to think about, but reason demanded them to. “It’s getting too much. This year alone is just a constant succession of crises. He is of a certain age, not in the best shape. I am not exactly sure what he is waiting for, but… I think he is already planning on stepping down. Can’t do it right now though. Not during the celebrations of the 500 years anniversary. After that… I think you should be ready.”

“Is that even possible?” Thor muttered softly, showing off the smallest smile.

“Talking as a historian – sure. You’re well prepared. Old enough. You have a supportive woman by your side and in the worst case scenario I am also there to bail you out.”

“Like today?” Thor raised an eyebrow at him and Loki didn’t like the edge in his voice. At least that question was answered now. His brother was displeased about what had happened, about Loki having been forced to take charge. Which he hadn’t done voluntarily.

But frankly – Loki wouldn’t have refused for anything in the world. Not something that he had to say out loudly.

“He would have ended the conversation immediately. Would you have preferred me to not step up?”

“No, but I would have liked to be given the chance to make my case. You immediately stepped in, I could even try to convince him.”

“He was already ready to leave, Thor. Your apology never got accepted. He wouldn’t have talked to you.” Loki had to make that perfectly clear, because he really didn’t want both of them to eventually argue about this.

Thor was clearly miffed, but didn’t seem angry. Nonetheless Loki was sure that there was no chance Thor was going to lighten up during the rest of the day. “You are probably right and this was important, but still… You’ve talked about father stepping down. I am going to be king. Will you still be doing that then?”

The way Thor’s eyes wouldn’t leave his face for just a second told Loki that this was a serious question. “Would you prefer none of us talking to the Ymirsons then?”

“Damn it, Loki, could you please give me a straight answer and not do your whole answering questions with another question thing?”

Well, no playtime. “If you were king, I would ask you for permission first, because that is the correct way to do things. Are you alright with that?”

Loki raised his chin just the slightest bit.

Thor nodded. “Of course.”

They didn’t talk much until the video conference with the Police Chief. Loki instantly decided that he wasn’t going to open his mouth during this conversation. Or at least not too much. When it was necessary. It was important to let Thor lead this one.

A conversation that didn’t turn out to be very comfortable. According to the Police Chief he had had
several talks with various officers that had been involved in the arrest of the arsonists. Most Jotun policemen had reacted defensively and the other ones tried to be neutral, but eventually some of them had opened up and had told him in secret that there was a good chance that the arrested men had indeed been let go. Nobody knew or had seen anything. Fantastic. Things were never going to get easier.

When the video conference finally ended Thor uttered another sigh that perfectly summed up how Loki was feeling.

“They could have acted on their own, you know? Without anybody giving an order or alluding to something. Lots of Jotuns probably can understand the ones how set the fire.”

Thor raised an eyebrow at them. “Supporting criminals? Laufey is right when he says that people could have died.”

“They are furious about the policy and they associate it with us. Easy to hate. Easy to support everything that goes against it. I am not saying that they would have done the same thing, but perhaps it felt just right to them to turn a blind eye at a certain moment. The Ymirsons don’t necessarily have anything to do with it.” At least Loki refused to believe that Helblindi or Laufey were willing to protect people who put other Jotun lives in danger. That just didn’t feel right.

“Yes, that’s possible.” Thor shrugged. “At the moment it doesn’t change our situation. We still have criminals fleeing custody, because the policemen let them go. There is no other explanation. Sooner or later somebody will have to face the consequences.”

Yes, Loki knew that and he also knew that it was going to get ugly.

***

Heill skaltu for-eldra,

To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,

Help me to not fail you today. To make my kin and people proud.

To serve my rightful king and my beloved prince

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“What? You’ve never had it before? You’re missing out.” Arnþórr offered his Pølser to Bucky who tried his best to not screw up his face. “There is a reason why I haven’t tried before. It doesn’t look that appetizing.”

Shrugging Arnþórr took a big bite of what the Asgardians liked to call a hotdog. Bucky wasn’t fan of pickles and the sausage had a weird colour.

“Actually, we stole it from the Danish. We didn’t come up with it, but it’s really good. You aren’t shy about trying anything else, but this is where you draw the line? Alright.” Arnþórr smiled in mild amusement and James huffed. “I don’t have to love everything about this country. I wanna get something sweet. Let’s check out the other booths, okay?”

Nodding in agreement Arnþórr followed him, still munching on his hotdog. That didn’t stop him from taking Bucky’s hand. A gesture that got him a smile in reward. They made their way past a couple of booths until Bucky found one that soled fried apple slices.
“Do you really have to choose the one booth with the longest line?”

In response to Arnþórr’s complaint Bucky stuck out his tongue. “Just think a minute why there is a long line in front of this one and not in front of the one that sold you… whatever you are eating?”

“Typically American… not willing to try something that doesn’t look completely familiar to them.”

“I tried you, didn’t I?” Bucky responded, just to see how Arnþórr would react.

With a raised eyebrow as it turned out. “Do I look so foreign? Exotic?”

“A little bit.”

“Fair enough.” Shrugging Arnþórr turned back to his hotdog while Bucky patiently waited in line. He liked the crowded streets and the positive buzz, the chattering and the somewhat strange decorations. A cheerful street festival, totally Bucky’s thing. Except for food that he wasn’t going to try.

Now that he had his apples slices Bucky was perfectly happy. “So? What are we going to do now?”

“We still got some time before we meet up with your friends. We could check out the artisans. They’re showing off their work up the entire street. There is a famous blacksmith among them. Today they let people inside the shop, so you can check out their work.”

“Sounds cool.”

It was a short walk until they reached the street reserved for the artisans. Rather breath taking as it turned out. They weren’t just presenting their finished artwork, several of them were actually creating something out on the street. The variety of products was impressive and since the street was much narrower than the one they had walked down before, they were moving forward a lot slower. Too many people in a place. To Bucky it looked like half of Valhalla.

They stopped at several booths, checking out pottery, jewellery, cutlery, paintings and so on. Eventually Arnþórr manoeuvred him towards an old but charming looking building that turned out to be the blacksmith’s shop. “That’s it. You want to check it out?”

“Sure.”

The first thing Bucky noticed was the royal insignias. All over the shop. That probably meant that the blacksmith had been working for the royal family. A sweet lady with red cheeks greeted the people in the shop with a big smile. “Welcome, our next tour starts in ten minutes. In the meantime have a drink.”

Glasses were handed around and Bucky realised with relief that it was wine. Not mead.

“Please everybody raise your glasses and drink to the health of our graceful king Odin IV and his sons, the princes Thor and Loki. May their ancestors and the spirits protect and bless them.”

The words got repeated before everybody drank. Not just empty phrases, people meant it, Bucky could hear the vigorousness in their voices, the smiles on their faces. This was something that a lot of foreigners didn’t get. Sure, even Asgardians were discontent with politics and criticized their leadership, but that didn’t bring them to put the monarchy into question. There was so much history and loyalty tied to it, something that was hard to grasp if you had no personal ties with it.

After the drink and a tour through the shop Bucky checked his watch and told Arnþórr that they had
to get back to the main square or they would be late.

“Okay, let’s go. Anything I need to know about the new guy?” Arnþórr put an arm around Bucky’s waist and he liked the feel of it. How casual it was. Utterly normal.

“I told you, a friend from work. He doesn’t like me very much.”

Arnþórr instantly raised an eyebrow at that. “So why are we spending the afternoon with him?”

“Steve wanted a big group. Sam and me pretty much only know each other or talk to each other because Steve is around. Feeling’s mutual by the way. I am not the biggest fan of Sam, but we get along.” Bucky shrugged and Arnþórr seemed rather confused. “Why spent time with somebody you don’t like? You could have told Steve that you don’t want him to bring the other guy along.”

“That wouldn’t have been nice.”

“But it would have been honest and I wouldn’t have been forced to make small talk with a guy that doesn’t like you. Not really interested.”

It was mean, but Bucky couldn’t deny a twinge of satisfaction when he heard that. “Steve wants everybody to get along and I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

Arnþórr hummed in agreement. “Yeah, probably… but there is a saying in the trúa, you know. Spending time with people you don’t care about is lost time.”

“Shouldn’t you care about all people?”

“That’s a very Christian idea. Sure, you have to treat everyone with respect, but the ultimate goal in everyone’s life should be to make themselves happy. If everyone succeeded at that, there would be no need to try making someone else happy. So why spend time with someone you don’t really like. Don’t worry though, I am going to play nice.”

Good thing, because Bucky felt tempted to ask him what the trúa said about people who would find happiness in making other people miserable. That question could wait for another time. Right now Bucky felt perfectly content when Arnþórr pressed a quick kiss on his lips and then they continued their little walk. Two little girls almost ran them over, waving their little Asgardian flags, giggling loudly. Arnþórr shouted something after them, but his southern dialect got suddenly so heavy that Bucky didn’t understand each word. Not that important.

It was easy to spot Steve and Sam when they eventually reached the main square. Both of them were eating something that reminded Bucky of a French crêpe which he had never seen in Valhalla before. That was a really great thing about the celebrations, new things to discover.

“Okay, try to be nice, alright?”

“Steve is cool and cute, no problem there. I’ll see about the other guy.”

Bucky sighed, but it was rather playfully. He raised his hand in greeting when Steve finally noticed them coming closer and nudged Sam.

“Hey guys, how do you like the food?”

“Delicious. Hey.”

Time for the introduction.
“So, Steve and you already know each other. This is Sam, we also work together. Sam, this is Arnþórr.”

Bucky was still trying to roll the double r when Arnþórr already chimed in and added a little detail. “James’ boyfriend. Nice to meet you.”

Well, that was a new piece of information for everybody involved. Even for Bucky. Especially for Bucky. Now that the words were out Bucky realised though that he didn’t mind. Bucky didn’t mind being called Arnþórr’s boyfriend and he also didn’t mind seeing Steve wincing just the slightest little bit. Bucky completely missed Sam’s reaction, because he definitely didn’t care.

“Nice to meet you too. Great to have a local among us. Any recommendations what we should do? The schedule is too much for us to handle.” Sam was clearly in a good mood, probably still amazed by the fact that they had all got a day off for the 500 year celebrations.

“The speeches take place at 6 o’clock and I really want to hear them, but before that… entrance to all museums is free today. Over there they explain some old Asgardian drinking games…”

“I’m sorry what?” Steve looked like he wasn’t sure if he had heard right and Arnþórr laughed softly. “Okay, wrong word to describe them. Those are games we like to play when we are drunk, but they are just as fun sober. For example, there is this game where you try to drive a nail into a tree trunk with as little hits with the hammer as possible. It’s fun… but slightly more fun when you’re drunk. In the park they created an open-air gallery with photographs that depict the history of Asgard. The street artists are going to start their shows in about one hour. That’s all I can name off the top of my head.”

“Sound pretty good already. I’m sure there’ll be something for us to do.” Steve smiled and Sam was quick to agree. “Sure thing. I vote for getting a beer first.”

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Thor’s hands were shaking in a way that couldn’t be missed. Jane had mixed feelings about it. Of course she understood him being nervous before speaking in front of such a huge crowd and on the other hand she found it cute to see this big and strong man a bit out of his element. There was more to it of course.

Not just opening the celebrations and telling everybody to have a good time. Thor was supposed to apologize for what he said during their engagement dinner. Jane knew that he was going to do a good job, she just hoped that it would be enough to calm down spirits for a while.

“You’re going to do amazingly. No reason to worry.” Jane wrapped her arms around Thor’s broad shoulders from behind. She kissed his temple and felt him releasing a breath that must have come from the deepest point of his lungs.

“Yes? Because this is the one thing I was always really bad at… talking in public and convince the people of something… Loki excels at that. I was always better at… doing stuff. Talking isn’t my strong point.”

It was probably the first time Jane ever felt him being completely unsure about something. Almost afraid. That definitely felt out of place and Jane wanted to make him feel better. Because it was important and because she really didn’t like Thor doubting himself.

“That’s not true. You know how to talk. Or do you believe that I only fell for you because the blonde hair and the posture of a football player?”
Turning his head Thor raised an eyebrow. “Well, kind of, yeah.”

“Stunning attributes, I have to admit, but that wouldn’t have sufficed…” Jane smiled, running her fingers down his cheek. “But… you talked me into going out with you. You were charming, sweet and I could tell that you meant every word you said. Just talk to them the same way you talk to me and they’re going to understand. Believe me.”

Thor didn’t look completely convinced, but he smiled and pulled her close. No, Jane didn’t worry. She knew that this man could convince everyone if he let his heart do the talking.

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“What are you doing?”

Loki winced. So terribly obvious. Impossible to hide. Well, since he had already been caught, he could still play it cool. “I am doing some last minute changes to Thor’s speech.”

Not even looking over his shoulder. Good. Pretending that his heart hadn’t jumped into his throat. No, he was going to continue to let his pen scrape across the sheets.

Behind him his father continued to talk in an even voice. “This is not the time for a prank.”

If only. “Don’t worry. I am not adding jokes about finance minister’s bad wig. Some of the phrases they put together are clumsy and full of words that the Jotuns are not going to appreciate. I am putting a new spin on it.”

“So you think you know better than five highly paid writers and journalists?”

“Yes, most of the time. Also I know better what words will sound more natural coming from Thor and I know what words the Jotuns like to hear.” Loki stated calmly while scratching out another line and writing a new one.

“And how do you know what they want to hear?”

Loki stopped mid-motion, then took a soft breath. “Because I’ve studied every public speech Helblindi Ymirson held during the last 12 months. That’s the kind of rhetoric that we need.”

“Your brother has already prepared the other speech. Do you really believe that sudden changes 30 minutes before his entrance won’t confuse him?”

“I have full trust in Thor and I am already done.” Content with the new version Loki stood up and faced his father who looked at him with a gentle smile. He looked much better than just a few days ago, but Loki could still see the weariness in his eyes. That thought kept him so busy that he almost didn’t realise that Odin was studying him too. “You look beautiful.”

Taken aback Loki had no idea what to say. His father complimenting him on his appearance. He couldn’t remember that ever happening before. “Thank you…?” Loki couldn’t help but making it a question.

Still smiling Odin shook his head, clearly amused that it was so easy to make his son feel uncomfortable. Reaching out he smoothed down the sleeve Loki’s green suit. “I just can’t help but wonder… you were such a small child. Even more so in comparison to Thor. It’s a somewhat of a miracle to see you as such a tall and beautiful man.”

Loki couldn’t remember any other time when he had felt so uneasy. “Father, please, don’t start being
sentimental. I don’t think I could take it.”

Laughing softly Odin kissed Loki’s cheek. “Go on, Thor needs his speech and I am sure there are loads of people out there that want to see you…”

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By now it was clear who of their group was the Asgardian. Arnþórr was tugging at his hand, still trying to make his way through the crowd.

“Could you stop? This is the end of the line. Nobody is moving another inch.”

“Centimetre. Use the metric systems.” Arnþórr replied cheekily, but at least he had realised that this was as far as he could get.

Bucky had never seen anything like this in Asgard. The entire square in front of the town hall was packed. Reminded him of Rolling Stones concert that he had been to as a kid. People carrying their kids on their shoulders, waving little flags.

“I am kind of surprised to see so many people… I thought lots of people aren’t too happy with the royal family because of the new policy.” Sam asked a valid question and Arnþórr quickly shrugged.

“It takes more than that to ruin the 500 years celebration. It’s also not just about the king. Both princes are also going to be there.”

Both princes. That was going to be a nice story to tell sometime…

Next to Bucky Steve shifted around uncomfortably, the backpack of the person in front of him was way too big. “Any idea how long the speech is going to be? Because I am not staying here longer than half an hour.”

“Depends… there are rumours that the king is going to announce today that he is going to resign, nobody wants to miss that…” Arnþórr explained to them, but his words vanished in the loud chanting of the crowd. Bucky turned his head and saw the doors of the balcony of the town hall opening. The applause was deafening although the person coming out wasn’t a member of the royal family. The grand marshal greeted the crowd before actually announcing the king and his sons.

Bucky felt the urge to cover his ears when the people all around him started to cheer. They were too far away to make out anybody’s face, but it nonetheless easy to recognize the king who came out first, offering the crowd a small wave and they reacted favourably. The volume quickly rose into an unbearable crescendo when the two princes stepped outside. Even from this distance so easy to tell apart.

The microphones did a decent job though, Bucky had no trouble understanding the king greeting all of Asgard, thanking all of them for coming here or for watching in front of their television. Because this was a party for all of them, not just the royal family. Him addressing the crowd didn’t last very long though. After what only seemed a mere greeting the king told them that his eldest son and future king now had the floor.

The king and the older prince changed places while Loki remained where he was.

“Fellow Asgardians, today we are here celebrate and even more so to say thank you. To all of you. To everyone from Asgard, Álfheimr, Svartálfar, Jötunheim, Vanaheim, Niflheim, Múspellsheimr and Helheimr. All these regions and all the people living in them together form this magnificent nation that my entire family is so endlessly proud to be part of.”
There was a paused filled with cheers and applause. Bucky found it hard to not feel part of these people.

“The last 500 years haven’t been so different to Asgard than to any other nation in this world. We’ve gone through hardships, sufferings and so many times we’ve had to fight off foreign invaders that either sought to steal the riches of our beautiful nation or who disapproved of our way of living. Today we are all still here. Proud. Free. Undefeated.”

More cheering and Bucky smirked when next to him Arnþórr was shouting like everybody else.

“For us there is so much to be proud of. As a nation and as a people. For many years we have…”

During the aftermath Bucky asked himself why he hadn’t heard the first shot. They were trained for exactly that kind of thing. Instead Bucky only realised that something was wrong thanks to the people in the very front. The ones with the best sight started screaming first. For a couple of dreadful seconds screams of horror and cheers of excitement mingled together in a blend that shouldn’t exist.

Successively understanding kicked into every row of the crowd. One after another. Smiling faces turned into shocked grimaces. Then the screaming started in earnest. The most dreadful sound that had ever reached Bucky’s ears and it only got worse when he remembered how many kids were here. Getting pulled into panic by their parents.

Everybody heard the second shot. Everybody started to move, scramble, driven apart by fear.

Bucky felt somebody bump against him, almost causing him to fall over. Raising his head Bucky tried to make out what was happening on the balcony. By now the man on the ground was being pulled back into the building, the other two following close behind, their bodies shielded by security details.

One second later Bucky had to turn away and start moving with the crowd or it would simply trample him down.
Hello everybody,

I know this took very long, but it's also a pretty long chapter :)

Complete cliffhanger resolve :D

There was so much movement around him and Loki still felt like he was wrapped up in several layers of cotton. Everything seemed so far removed, all sound was softened, seemingly only the echo reached his ears. A security detail was talking to him, Loki couldn’t remember his name. He was right in Loki’s face and Loki didn’t understand a word.

There was something wrong with his cheek. After bringing one hand up to touch his face Loki took a look at his fingers and there were stains of red on them. He could remember feeling the warm, wet drops hitting his skin.

Then being brutally pushed to the floor.

“… highness… to leave…”

Loki squeezed his eyes shut to get himself out of whatever state he was in right now. Breathe. Wasn’t that what everybody always said to people who were having a panic attack? If that was what was happening to Loki right now. He had no idea.

That wasn’t Loki’s blood though.

Opening his eyes again Loki snapped back into life. “Where is my brother? Is he dead? Where is he?”

“Our highness…”

“Where?!!”

“Your brother is on his way to the hospital. He was shot in the shoulder. Your highness, we need to…”

Two. There had been two shots. Loki had heard the first one, he had felt the blood on his face and when he had been pushed down Loki had heard the second shot. There had been two.

“Father? Where’s…” Loki tried to look past the security detail and at the same time got up. His first step was shaky and the other man instantly tried to steady him, but Loki wouldn’t let him. Not now when he had spotted his father at the other side of the room. Completely ignoring the security detail Loki got up to his feet, rushing past him. It was one of these moments that Loki only rarely allowed to happen and this time had he had no control about it anyway. No thoughts in his head, no plan, no nothing. Just the strong need to touch his father and hold him. Odin stumbled a little bit as Loki threw himself into his arms. “Pabbi…”
His own voice was unrecognizable, leaving his lips in form of a sob. Only after agonizingly long seconds Loki felt his father hand’s on his back and in his hair. The relief that his touch brought Loki almost had him crying and he clung to Odin. In a way that he hadn’t done since his early childhood.

Unfortunately it couldn’t last.

“We have to see Thor…”

“We can’t go together.”

“But…”

“Loki, you know the protocol.”

A raw and untamed part of him wanted to say ‘Fuck the protocol’, but of course he knew that it wasn’t that simple. Somebody hadn’t just fired a gun at his big brother, but at the crown prince of this nation. There was no guarantee that this attack was over and Loki and his father couldn’t leave together. One thing wasn’t debatable though. “I’m going to the hospital to see Thor.”

“Your highness, first we have to get you out of the town hall.”

Letting go of his father Loki looked at Heimdall who looked as composed as ever. “Separate cars. Your grace, you will be escorted to the adjoining building. A car is waiting there. Your highness, since you cannot travel in the same care as your father, you will have to stay here for another hour. Until the situation is under complete control.”

“I am not waiting half an hour to…”

“Your highness, I am responsible for your security. You are not giving commands in this situation.” Loki almost flinched at Heimdall’s harsh tone, but he knew that there was nothing he could do. So Loki watched his father leaving, staying behind in a nice room with three bodyguards and no windows. The right setting to go crazy.

“Your highness, we have to…”

Loki actually hissed at the person that wanted to examine him. “I am fine! I didn’t get shot at!”

Not him, but Thor. While Loki was sitting here and… Somebody, a person made of flesh and blood, somebody who had a family, who was a son, perhaps somebody who had siblings had pulled out a gun, aimed it at his brother and had pulled the trigger. Two times.

That was something Loki had read about so many times, something he had written about in his papers. Attempts on the life of a politician. In this case the future king of a country. Loki should be able to think about this with a clearer head. To analyse, to understand, but all sanity seemed to slip away. Somebody had tried to kill his brother. They might succeed, what did Loki know? Then this was Loki’s future. Every time he was thinking of his brother this was going to dominate his thought. His brother being shot right next to him. Loki feeling his blood on his face before even realising what was going on.

Shoulder. That was what the security detail had said. There was a good chance of surviving that. Stomach. Back. Head. All of that was worse than shoulder. Thor was a big guy, healthy as one could be. He was going to be fine. A scar, that was all.

Thor was going to be fine, but Loki was still feeling sick. His fingers were still sticky with blood and he remembered it spraying on his face. Loki felt like he was going to throw up.
“Your highness?” One of the bodyguards was stepping closer to him, which probably meant that Loki was showing some obvious signs of distress. He had no idea which though.

“I need to go to the bathroom…” Getting up to his feet seemed harder than the last time Loki had done it and he was surprised that the urge to vomit didn’t lead to anything. So instead Loki faced the mirror and stared back at somebody he didn’t know. His wide eyes were too big for his face, standing out even more due to the unhealthy paleness.

At least the red stains on his cheek were much smaller than expected. Loki splashed his face with water and rubbed hard until the blood had all washed down the drain. Clinging to the sink Loki took a few deep breaths, trying to gather his thoughts. Logic. He was good at that. Sure, him being a reasonable person was all bullshit. Loki was exactly like Thor. He got overwhelmed by his emotions and was completely driven by them. The difference was that Loki could wait, patience was one of his better virtues.

Right now he needed to make use of that. Try to get a clear head and think about what was happening from an outsider perspective. The man who got shot wasn’t related to Loki.

So who was he?

The son of the king. Soon going to be the ruler of this country. Being shot at during a celebration speech. Pretty symbolic. Served on a silver plate. What were the possibilities? Loki closed his eyes, searching in his mind for plausible scenarios and the first one was rather obvious. A Jotun attack. Either a group or an individual who had been pushed over the edge. Or somebody who had been hit hard by the new policy.

What was the purpose?

Killing the son of the king would have what consequences? Putting Loki next in line who thought that the policy was terrible. It sounded reasonable, but a Jotun wouldn’t care. To them Loki’s entire family were a long line of usurpers. Every single one of them was the same. If Loki were a radical Jotun he would try to blow them all up at once. Make sure that the murderers and thieves died all at once.

Would the American policy change if Thor was killed? More likely since his death put somebody next in line who loathed the policy.

Other reasons? A deranged individual who was craving for attention? That happened more often than people thought. If that was the case, then there was no point in pondering. 500 years ago Machiavelli had already written down that no leader could ever protect themselves from.

Loki took a deep breath, then brushed his hair back behind his ears. Better. This was what he needed to do. Thinking, draw his conclusions, think about what needed to be their next steps. Otherwise Loki would lose his mind, thinking about Thor.

Walking back into the room Loki ignored the intense gazes of the bodyguards and pulled out his phone. The news was all over the assassination attempt already. A country in shock. Right, that wasn’t surprising.

All of Loki’s guts started to clench painfully when he saw that there were videos. Of course, he should have thought of that by now. The opening of the celebrations was being broadcast in all of Asgard. The entire nation had seen his brother getting shot. Now he might die and Loki sat in this room, unable to do anything.
His finger hovered over the video, but Loki couldn’t find the strength in him to click on it. How absurd. Loki had been standing right next to him and hadn’t seen anything. While every person in front of the TV had had a perfect view.

There were other photographs though. Not of the balcony, but the people on the square. Loki bit his lip, feeling horrible for having forgotten about something so obvious. So many people and then somebody fired a gun. There must have been panic. People running for their lives. There had been persons of all ages. Little children. Maybe Loki was going to be sick after all.

“I want to know what is happening outside the town hall…”

“Your highness, we can change the room, so you have access to a television, but you cannot approach a window as long as the situation hasn’t been resolved.”

Situation. Loki closed his eyes for a second. A very vocal voice in his head told him to simply storm out. What were they going to do? It was their duty to protect him, but he was also their prince.

Unfortunately Loki knew that he couldn’t and wouldn’t move. After all there was a chance that there was still somebody out there with another gone or another instrument to kill someone. A member of the royal family. If their ancestors failed to protect Thor, Loki was going to be next in line and he couldn’t risk being hurt.

Sitting tight was all he could do. Loki already knew that Heimdall wasn’t going to answer him, but he tried calling him anyway. He just needed to know how Thor was doing. Loki needed the confirmation that he hadn’t been standing next to his brother just before his death.

Nobody answered his call and the second Loki hung up his phone started ringing again. His mother. As quickly as he could Loki pressed the phone to his ear. “How’s Thor? Is he okay? Do you know…”

“Loki, where are you? Who is with you? Are you alright?”

Why even ask that? Loki was sitting here, doing nothing, locked up almost and Thor was… Loki didn’t know. “I’m still at the town hall. Do you know anything about Thor? About father?”

“Are you alright?”

His mother was ignoring his questions and Loki couldn’t hold back. He was yelling and he felt three pairs of eyes on him that he couldn’t care less about. “I am talking to you on the phone, of course I am alright! Now will you tell me if you know anything about my brother?!”

The three seconds of silence were almost enough to make Loki lose his mind completely.

“I merely heard that he arrived at the hospital, I am on my way there.”

Loki nodded despite her not being able to see him. “Alright. Call me when you get there and know how he is doing.”

There was some form of protest, but Loki couldn’t even stand the thought of talking to her and exchanging meaningless phrases while none of them knew about Thor’s fate. “Get me a television…”

***

“We need a doctor in here!”
“Steve, calm down. They’re doing the best they can.”

“Clearly not. We’ve been waiting for over 45 minutes.” Steve kept pacing around the small room while James still sat unfazed on the hospital bed. Or at least he pretended to. Steve could see that he was in pain. How could he not? All the medical staff had done until now was giving him an ice bag to put on his lower arm. Which clearly wasn’t enough.

“They are a lot of injured people. Little kids. I can wait.” James’ voice sounded a little strained and Steve swallowed heavily. Since the moment they had got here, his heart had been racing, he felt jumpy and the urge to simply drag one of the doctors into this room wouldn’t leave him alone.

James, the one with the one who was in actual pain, had remained strangely quiet until now. Any other time or with anyone else Steve would have found that admirable, but right now he wanted James to scream and shout, because maybe then somebody would finally get here to take care of his arm.

“I get that, I really do, but… this really doesn’t look good.”

This way the adrenaline was never going to go down. First the shots and then panic. Steve had thought that they had ended up in the middle of a terror attack, that somebody shooting into the crowd, but it had turned out to be an assassination attempt. Nobody had an idea if that attempt had been successful or not and although Steve personally knew and liked the prince, he was way more concerned with James.

Steve didn’t want to think back to the last two hours of his life. People screaming and running in fear for their lives. Everybody knew what happened when such a big crowd drifted off into panic and yet they had been lucky that the main square was connected to two rather big streets, so the crowd could dissolve itself rather quickly. Too late nonetheless.

People fall down, they get trampled over and… Steve winced merely thinking about it. He had lost all of his friends in the flood of people. At least he had been lucky, he had been carried along. For James things had been different and what happened put Steve in a strange conflict. A part of him wished that he would have been there, to help. Another part was immensely grateful that he hadn’t seen James falling down.

The bruises had already started to form and thanks to some miracle they were small and a few in between. And there was James’ arm.

Steve didn’t want to imagine how many pair of feet had walked over it. The flesh was blue and red, an abnormal colour and nobody was coming to take care of him. This was more than a little bruising, anyone could see it.

“Could you… try to call… Arnþórr for me again? Please.”

Steve couldn’t hear the words that James was uttering, only the severe pain he was in and it instantly seemed to slip beneath Steve’s skin in the form of millions of nails. Why was nobody coming? Just because James was sitting there with his back straight that didn’t mean that he didn’t need help. It only meant that he was strong. No, Steve couldn’t take this any second longer. “I’ll get you a fucking doctor.”

“Steve…”

Ignoring James’ protest Steve left the small room standing out in the busy corridor, feeling more helpless than ever before in his life. “We’ve been waiting for an hour, we need a doctor in there!”
A nurse was trying to rush past him and that was all it needed to push Steve to the edge. “My friend needs medical help and we’ve got told to wait an hour ago!” Ugly words were lying on Steve’s tongue, wanting to get out. Like asking them if they were doing this on purpose because they were American? If they didn’t gave a fuck if somebody was going to lose his arm.

All of that and worse if Steve had got the opportunity, but he was suddenly grabbed and pushed aside. Steve’s training immediately kicked in as he turned around and easily freed himself, instead grabbing the arm of his attacker. Who turned out to have gone through similar schooling, since his reflexes were astonishing. Looking back Steve was sure that a proper fight would have broken out between the two of them if somebody hadn’t started shouting. Not scared or worried. Stern, dominant. The man who was dressed in a black suit let go and took a step back. Only now Steve could take a look around and he saw four other men, dressed in the same way. Police? Military? Their posture made clear that they weren’t civilians and Steve’s eyes were automatically looking for guns.

“Leave him alone, I need to get to… Agent Rogers?”

The familiar voice belonged to the Duke of Glæsisvellir who was surrounded by those four men. Definitely bodyguards. The prince’s presence had one millions implications, but Steve couldn’t think of them when there still was no doctor.

“Your highness…”

The prince walked closer, he was still dressed in green, his face as white as a sheet, the black hair messy. “Are you hurt?”

There was no time to wonder why the prince would even bother with him. He was the prince though, that might finally get him some attention. “No, but my colleague and nobody bothers…”

There was soft frown on the prince’s face, one of his bodyguards was whispering something into his ear, but he waved dismissively before moving past Steve into James’ room. One of the bodyguard’s blocked Steve from immediately following him and he might have snapped if he hadn’t heard James’ surprised “Loki?”

Only seconds later the prince came back out and muttered to one of his bodyguards. “I want a doctor with him in there this very second. As soon as Doctor Strange is done with my brother, I want him to take a look at Agent Barnes. Now.”

While Steve was still wrapping his head around the Asgardian words the prince was already walking away with three of his guards, one was heading into the other direction. In less than a minute a doctor joined James and Steve in the small room. “Let me please take a look at your arm, Agent Barnes.”

To Steve it felt so strange to finally be able to sit down and breathe. Almost like passing out.

***

The fiancé was still crying and Stephen wished she would just stop, because it was distracting, annoying and just a little bit over-dramatic. This country was in a crisis and it was blatantly naïve to believe that you could marry a member of a royal family without having somebody wanting to shoot your husband. That fact that it really happened was merely a sign of poor security. Hopefully some people would get fired.

Putting down the x-rays Stephen sighed and turned back to the prince. “Like expected. A waste of
my time.”

Watery eyes were staring at him and Stephen was having a hard time not rolling his own in response. At least the prince was actually listening to him, pale and still half knocked out from the painkillers and the operation, but he was paying attention.

“That means?”

“That means that the guy who tried to shoot you did a horrible job and your doctor a pretty good one. No damage done to the nerves. There will be no permanent physical limitations. There might be pain, sure, but you’re going to be able to use your shoulder like you’ve done till today.”

Now the fiancé was sobbing with relief and Stephen needed to go out, because he was getting paid for looking after the younger one, not for this kind of drama.

“Thank you, Doctor Strange.”

“Thank your little brother, he pretty much bullied me into coming here, but looking at your file I can assure you that you are in good hands. I wish you a quick recovery.” And please don’t call me again.

Turning around Stephen opened the door and almost bumped into one of these annoying guards. Seriously?

“Doctor Strange, would you please follow me. The Duke of Glæsisvellir wishes you to look after another patient.”

Stephen was definitely going over his contract, because this wasn’t fair. Like he had already told them – a waste of time. It wasn’t like Stephen had much of a choice right now, so he was going to check this one out and then go home to catch some sleep. Like a good employee Stephen followed the guard which led him to a part of the hospital that wasn’t locked off. Alright, so no important person got hurt. Stephen was going over his grocery shopping list in his mind when a door was being opened for him. Young man, probably early thirties and… huh… maybe this wasn’t going to be a waste of his time.

“Good evening, I am Doctor Strange. The Duke of Glæsisvellir sent me to take a look at what my colleague is doing here.”

Three pairs of eyes were looking at him in confusion, but Stephen couldn’t care less. Instead he walked over to check out the nasty bruising on the patient’s lower arm. Nothing he hadn’t seen before, but that didn’t count as a good sign. “How long since you’ve received this injury?”

The brunette clenched his teeth. “Three hours… I guess.”

The blonde man next to the bed nodded. At least he wasn’t crying.

“Well, then somebody should better measure the intra-compartmental pressure to make sure we’re not having a case of compartment syndrome.”

“We’re already preparing for that procedure.” The doctor who barely looked old enough to get into a bar replied somewhat defensively and Stephen felt somewhat tempted to smack him. He didn’t doubt his words, he just didn’t like the tone. Fond memories of his interns came back to him. They hadn’t even dared to breathe next to him if he had looked at them a certain way.

“Then you should prepare a little faster.” Stephen put some extra-dismissiveness in his voice and then focused his attention on the patient himself. Eyes glazed over from pain and painkillers. What a
wonderful combination. “On a scale from 1 to 10 – how bad is the pain?”

The sweat beads on his forehead were already answer enough. “About 8.”

“Wow, then you have quite a tolerance for pain, my friend.” Stephen had almost a little respect for him. “Did I mention to that the prince sent me to make sure this fine American fellow is going to get the best medical care? Better time to hurry up, because this bruising is rather severe and given the swelling I would bet my eyesight that we’re dealing with compartment syndrome. Are you going to tell the prince that this nice man lost a limb, because you weren’t fast enough.”

Sure, Stephen was being completely unfair and just trying to apply unnecessary pressure, but he missed being in OR badly and this was as close as he could get. Also, he was trying to diagnose this injury just by looking at it. Nobody was that good. Not even Stephen. Then again, compartment syndrome was most of the time located in the lower arm or lower leg. The American’s arm looked like somebody had tried to squeeze it between to large blocks of cement. Another victim of the human stampede. In those cases it was always bad to be an adult male, their bodies could take the most, so they had to wait. Kids and fragile women first.

“What do you mean with ‘losing a limb’? There is a risk he will lose his arm?!”

Blonde guy again, probably the boyfriend. Stephen was glad that he didn’t cry, angry was so much easier to deal with. “That is one of the possible outcomes of compartment syndrome. The pressure within the body compartments is too high and the issue isn’t properly supplied with blood. That can result in the tissue dying off. A fasciotomy is needed to release the pressure and that needs to happen rather quickly before the damage is irreversible. So? Any results yet?”

***

It was four hours after his brother had got shot when Heimdall sent a very simple message. Shooter captured. Jotun - Frjáls

Loki knew that things had completely slipped from their grip. Now they had to hit back and no party involved would recover from that.
Hello everybody,

It took over 65 chapters, but we're finally here. Complete chaos. Have fun :D

Married. A little girl.

Heimdall went over the information several times in his head, determined to have every single detail at his disposal. They had let him wait long enough. An assassination attempt needed to be planned long beforehand, so there was no risk that the other one might still come up with new details for a cover-up story. That wasn’t going to be the case here. No member of Frjálss would ever deny being involved in a complot against the crown.

No use to deny something that fills you with pride.

Grabbing the bottle of water Heimdall opened the door and walked into the interrogation room, accompanied by the interpreter. Not the first and not the last time. He had seen people reacting to him and all different kinds of ways. Þórirsson was looking perfectly calm, sitting there, not moving a muscle. Not even a reaction for Heimdall coming into the room. Despite the nonchalance which didn’t seem to be an act, Heimdall could feel the tension radiating from Þórirsson’s body. Anger, it was polluting the air. Was he angry in general or because he had failed? His blue eyes were cold and calculating as they followed Heimdall as he came closer. Heimdall knew he wouldn’t get answers despite Þórirsson’s willingness to talk. This was definitely going to be a long conversation. Unfortunately not the time to ask about motives or ideals. Gently Heimdall placed the glass on the table before sitting down. “Do you know who I am, Mr. Þórirsson?”

The reply didn’t come instantly, his penetrating eyes lingered on Heimdall’s face. Þórirsson didn’t spare the interpreter a single glance. Then he answered. In Jötnar of course, despite perfectly understanding Heimdall’s question.

The interpreter was quick to translate. “Yes. I am familiar with your person.”

“Then you also know that we need to have a conversation.”

“Go ahead.”

As expected Þórirsson wanted to talk, but he wouldn’t be saying the things that Heimdall needed to hear. This was a platform, not matter how small. Good enough to put an ideology on display. Heimdall wasn’t going to build him any bridges. “Today you fired 2 shots at the future head of state in an attempt to kill him. You will be put on trial for that, but you are not going to be the only one. I want you to name me the people who helped you and who knew about your plans. Most importantly I need to know if another attack on the Búrison family is planned. Enough people got hurt today in the hysteria after you fired your shots. Little children ended up on the ground during the mass panic. I am not eager on seeing these things repeating themselves.”

To get him on the very first try of course hadn’t crossed Heimdall’s mind, but he had to recognize
that he was way further away from getting a word out of Þórirsson than initially thought. Although the man in front of him was driven by anger, he wasn’t being controlled by it. Heimdall had chosen his words carefully and Þórirsson had been listening with equal attention. He said something and the interpreter seemed irritated. “This is a really nice interrogation technique.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Þórirsson placed his hands flat on the table causing the cuffs to clink. “The way you talk, trying to not push any of my buttons, so you can direct the conversation. Mostly staying away from calling him the prince or the royal family. Mentioning the kids because you know that I have a daughter. What’s next? Are you going to tell me that you understand? That you would have done the same in my position?”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Exactly, because you devoted your life to serve the usurper. How could I ever believe a single word leaving your lips?” There was no use in trying to make the atmosphere more pleasant. “Am I lying when I assure you that we will be staying here until I have the names of your accomplices.”

Unfazed Þórirsson rolled his neck to try to get into a more comfortable position. "For how many generations has your family lived in Asgard?"

“My family background isn’t important for this conversation.”

“Oh, I disagree. Given the colour of your skin I can’t be the first one to ask. You’re working for the court, so I suppose more than 20 years. You are married, believe in the trúa and yet you betray your own people.”

“I am not interested in your views on the monarchy or on honour. You will have time enough to talk about them in court. I want to know who help you preparing the attack.”

“Nobody.”

“That is impossible.”

“I disagree. It’s shockingly easy. You need a high window and a gun. Granted Asgardian gun laws are a bit of a pain, but the rest is child’s play.”

Maybe it was indeed a better strategy to let him talk, hoping that the words would eventually trip him up and reveal something important. “Not really. I will gladly tell you what we already know. The window you are talking about belongs to a hotel room that you are not able to afford. You paid in cash, but during the last three weeks you didn’t withdraw anything close to that sum from your bank account. The rifle you used is a high-quality weapon. Expensive and hard to come by. There is no record of you buying it. Most importantly – you used a fake name and a fake ID to check into the hotel. That is a lot of work to do for a carpenter from Útgarðar.”

“It’s the mistake that everyone involved with the usurpers likes to make. Underestimating what a Jotun can and is willing to do.” For the first time his words had an edge to it. They were harsh and cutting. Something that Heimdall could work with.

“So all of that was just you? Forging official documents. Possession of an unauthorized rifle. Attempted murder of the Asgardian crown prince which equals treason and assault. Not to mention the people who got hurt during the mass panic. Are you sure nobody else was involved? Just you?”

No hesitation. Not even a second. Þórirsson was lying right into his face. “Yes.”
Sighing Heimdall leaned back and then pretended thinking about what Þórirsson had just said. “It’s not that I don’t respect loyalty, because I do. You are willing to take the fall for your friends. Which is honourable, but it also means that you are going to get accused of a long list of crimes and there is no way to soften the blow. All of that makes you a good friend and a fantastic member of Frjáls but also a horrible father and husband. Your daughter is only four years old and now she will have to grow up without her father. Your wife will have to care for her alone.”

Heimdall paused to let the words sink in. Sure, Þórirsson had thought about all of this before, but it was something entirely different to hear somebody say it out loud. Þórirsson adjusted his position in his chair, but he was ready for harsher realities than this one. Frjáls had properly prepared him and they had made a good choice. “My little girl has a big family and the most wonderful mother. She is a beautiful Jotun child who deserves a father who is willing to risk everything to make sure she has equal opportunities as every girl from Valhalla. That she can use the same words to express her thoughts as her ancestors. That’s what a good father would do. Risk everything to provide her the future she deserves.”

“I doubt that our daughter is going to see it that way when her father is not going to come to pick her up after school.”

“One little girl missing her father but knowing he is a hero against millions of little girls and boys who grow up in a country that considers them second-class. In a country that refuses its rightful king his throne.”

Radical Jotun ideology and the sincerity behind it was terrifying.

“That was a very emotional speech and as surprised you might be, I can see your reasoning. I don’t agree with it and I thank all the spirits that you failed. That’s what you did, you failed. Your daughter can visit her father in prison and the crown prince’s wounds will heal and he will ascend to the throne. Your daughter won’t see you as a hero, she will only see your absence. The King will show you mercy if you give up everybody else involved. The one who offered the money, the one who got you the fake papers and everybody who had any knowledge of what happened today.”

Heimdall witnessed with distress as Þórirsson’s face right in front of him got distorted by disgust and a bitter rage that Heimdall knew nothing about. “If the man you call king were to show me anything, I would spit in his face.”

“You tried to shoot his son tonight and all you would do is spitting the king in his face?”

Þórirsson snorted and shook his head. “He is an old frail man and hopefully nature will soon take care of that… unfortunately he spawned two more male members of that despicable offspring. Who would dare to be surprised? Vermin and parasites are so hard to kill.”

Something was surging in Heimdall’s chest, something that didn’t belong here. Right now it didn’t matter that he had seen both Thor and Loki scrap their knees as little boys.

“I am not interested in your propaganda. Let’s bring this to an end, shall we? The names of your accomplices.”

Þórirsson stared Heimdall down without any difficulty. “I acted completely on my own.”

Reaching out Heimdall grabbed the Jotun’s wrist, easily holding it down while he used his other hand to push his sleeve up. “And what is that?” He was referring to the big rune right above the marriage markings. “Merely the most dedicated members of Frjáls wear their tattoos. You are part of an organisation. Why should you act on your own?”
Thanks to unshakable conviction and perfect preparation Þórirsson didn’t even try to pull his hand away. “And what do you, the child of immigrants, servant of the usurper – what do you know about Frjáls?”

For now they weren’t going to get any further, so Heimdall had to take it to the next level and then give him a chance to think about it. “Nothing, of course. What I do know is what’s going to happen next. The Asgardian intelligence service is going to take your house apart, then your work place. They are going to interrogate your family, your friends, every single person you know. They’re going to go through your private files, your accounts, your credit information. Your wife’s. Your brother’s. That’s going to take a long time and they’re going to be thorough. The carpentry definitely needs to close for a few weeks and the problem is that even if the intelligence service isn’t going to find another connection to Frjáls… they are going to find something.”

Þórirsson balled his hands into fists and Heimdall noticed how they were shaking slightly. Good, he would have to dwell on that a little bit. “I will take a little break. See you in ten minutes.”

As Heimdall turned his back on him he could hear him shouting in Jötun and every single word was oozing with disdain. The interpreter followed Heimdall, clearing his throat. “He wished death and plague upon you and the family you serve.”

Not very surprising.

Outside the room Heimdall immediately turned to one of his men. “Anything on the fingerprints in the hotel room?”

“Nothing yet, but there’re over 100 to get through.”

“You got into contact with Þórirsson’s wife? Hopefully she might be able to talk some sense into him.”

“We reached her, but it’s unlikely that she would be supportive.”

“What did she say?”

“She refused to speak Old Norse, but she told the interpreter that she has never been prouder to be married to him than today.”

***

Loki hadn’t noticed the splatters of blood on his jacket. Only back at the palace he realised thanks to the uneasy glances of a maid. In his room Loki tore his clothes off and slipped into the very first outfit he found in his closet. Then he suddenly stood in the middle of his bedroom and experienced a feeling of being completely lost. Something he hadn’t actually felt before.

What was he going to do now? Leave the room and talk to the intelligence service? Call the hospital? Sit down on the floor because he had forgotten how to make his legs obey him?

Somebody took that choice from him. Loki was still unable to tell what was happening to him when two arms wrapped him up in a crushing embrace and he heard gentle words being muttered into his hair. Long seconds passed and Loki still couldn’t move, his body being completely stiff.

“It’s alright, my love. You are fine. You are safe. My special prince…”

If he could only be a child again when all of this hadn’t existed. When the world had been what Loki wanted it to be. No, he wasn’t a kid anymore, but Loki nonetheless buried his face in his mother’s
neck, finding long needed solace. Maybe he didn’t need to do anything. It could be enough to just
stand here and have his mother hold him. Even though it was only a short moment, it actually
allowed Loki to breathe and to calm down the slightest bit.

“Have you talked to your brother?” Frigga was petting his hair and Loki tried not to think of Thor’s
pace form in the hospital bed. “Yes… for a minute. The security wasn’t thrilled by the idea of us
being in the same room."

“Rightfully so. How is he doing? I wanted to go there, but protocol won’t allow it. I talked with Jane
on the phone, but she was a crying mess.”

Loki felt like a mess himself although the tears hadn’t started to fall yet. “He’s Thor, he is trying to
shrug it off. Somebody shot him, he is still full of painkillers, in hospital and he is trying to shrug it
off.”

“That sounds a lot like your brother…” After kissing his forehead Frigga pulled back and Loki could
see that her eyes were watery which didn’t help.

“Mother, I… I need to talk to father and… I want to know about the state of the investigation.”

Nodding Frigga squeezed his arms. “I am going to look after your brother. It’s all going to be fine. I
promise you, Loki.”

To be honest, Loki had no idea what she was referring to. How could this all going to be fine? The
last attempt on the life of an Asgardian monarch had been over 200 years ago and now?

Loki tried to smile at his mother before leaving his rooms. He would feel better if he kept his mind
occupied. The Jotun crisis had just reached completely new heights and Loki feared what was going
to happen during the next three days. The intelligent service had to investigate in Jotunheim and Loki
couldn’t imagine the reaction being anything else than disastrous.

The emergency task force had set up their headquarters in the conference rooms. Loki was
acknowledged with a little nod as he entered the room and sat down on a chair at the left end of the
table.

Information was raining down on him, leaving Loki once again in a state that he didn’t know how to
react to. Suddenly the man who had tried to kill his brother had a face and a name.

Þórirsson. 34 years old. Born and raised in Útgarðar. Two brothers and a sister. A carpenter, had
been working in the same place for all his life. Member of the voluntary fire brigade. Married to
beautiful black haired woman. Father of a little girl who was three years old. No criminal record.

“We assume he is part of a sub-group of Frjáls, he is wearing the markings. This group is most
probably responsible for organizing and executing the assassination attempt. By this time our agents
are going through all of his social contacts. The entire work place is going to be raided in about half
an hour, agents are on their way.”

There it was, the moment that would ultimately tear their country apart if they didn’t do this right. If
they didn’t find a way to cooperate, Loki found that he had to clear his throat two times to be able to
say anything, but at least that immediately got him the attention. “Only intelligence agents? Are there
Jotun forces involved?”

The minister of the interior shook his head. “We contacted the Lord of Jotunheim, but he refused to
give Jotun police forces any orders since it hasn’t been proven yet that the attacker was Jotun. At
least he claims so. A confession doesn’t mean anything to him if it was made only in the presence of
royal guards. He is not going to acknowledge the confession as long as he doesn’t hear it himself from Þórirsson’s mouth.”

Well, Laufey had finally made it to cross the line with Loki. Until now he had almost always found a piece of understanding for the Lord of Jotunheim inside of him. This was just insane. Laufey was refusing to support them in the fight against terrorism. Which meant that they had to storm houses in Jotunheim and drag people out without the support of Jotun forces. Which would result in protests or immediate riots.

None of them had a choice. They had to get all the people involved in the assassination attempt and if the Ymirsons refused to help them, they had to do it on their own.

“What did Þórirsson say during the interrogation?” Loki shortly glanced at his father whose face seemed to have lost the ability to show any kind of emotion.

“The usual Frjál propaganda. He refused to name any accomplices or define his proper motivation, but his disdain for the royal family became very clear.”

Loki knew that he wasn’t the only one.

***

The only source of light in the room was the TV presenting Tony images of Asgard going to shit. Apparently all it needed to get America’s attention was a member of the royal family getting shot and the police and civilians fighting each other in the streets. It didn’t quite remind him of a warzone yet, but they were getting there.

Admittedly Tony had been late to the party, he had spent the day arguing with the board about the change of direction he had in mind and when he had checked his phone, he learned that the crown prince of Asgard had been shot and that he had survived. A little fact which hadn’t been confirmed for several hours.

Tony had started watching when things had escalated in the first possible way. Granted, the news were still few and in between, but from what he had gathered the Asgardian intelligence service had been raiding some place and the public hadn’t reacted kindly to that. Somebody had thrown a stone, assaulted an officer, something like that. Evidently whatever had happened had been the last straw. Something had been unleashed and it wasn’t going to be easy to put that genie back into the lamp.

Now there was talk about the Asgardian government sending military to the crisis zone and there was never going to come any good from that. At least in this kind of situations. With your own population being the enemy.

Feeling rather uneasy Tony tried once more to call the princeling. He didn’t know what he expected to happen, because once more he received the message that the number he had just dialled didn’t exist. Well, at least they weren’t taking their security measures lightly.

In all honesty – Tony knew that the situation was dire and yet there was hardly a reason to worry for the little prince. After what happened today the royals wouldn’t be left unguarded for even a second. One should rather worry about the everyman in Jotunheim. This was going to get ugly and Tony had a very bad feeling about this. Sitting here on his comfy couch with a glass of wine in the hand.

***

The chants were even audible in the conference room. Without any windows to the front of the building. Despite the dire situation Helblindi had to think about what made people sing. Sadness, joy
and maybe desperation? Their people were singing. Songs that their mothers taught them. Folksongs. Beautiful.

And yet this was just a small part.

“My lord, we have to make this decision now. If the forces don’t receive their orders soon, they will act on their own. The people on the streets are their wives, brothers and friends. They are not going to watch.”

“And they shouldn’t.” Sometimes Helblindi didn’t recognize his little brother. A young man that had always liked to put a smile on display. Now his face was grim as the times they were living in and the worst thing about it was that Helblindi could understand perfectly. He would probably be the first one to scold anyone who would dare to smile tonight.

Their father was sitting his chair, both hands placed on the table, fingers entwined. At least he looked the same way he always did. Pensive, serious, calm, hard to decipher. Helblindi didn’t want to be in his position right now and at the same time there was nothing that he wanted more. Today was one of these very rare moments when you knew that you were making history. The revolutionaries in Russia must have felt the same way. Had they also heard the people sing?

“Father, they’re sending the military! Against our people! Because they resisted their despotism! We cannot leave them alone!” Byleistr was raising his voice, he didn’t seem sovereign at all, reckless and impulsive. Helblindi wouldn’t listen to him in this kind of state and yet he found himself agreeing with him.

“Thank you, Byleistr. I am aware of the situation, but whatever we decide to do next - it has to be well considered. Thought through. Right now we are deciding over the fate of all our brothers and sisters. Such a decision cannot be rushed.” Laufey sent Byleistr a dark glance which had him immediately going silent.

The silence allowed Helblindi to hear the chants again. They were giving him goose bumps and Helblindi could feel an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. A mix of excitement and nervousness. Also there was pride. Their countrymen were singing, because they knew Laufey and his sons were in this building. They were here for them. They were all part of the same family and Helblindi wanted to rip anyone apart who might try to hurt them.

It had finally happened. Today the Jotun soul had decided that it wasn’t going to be crushed. Today the dog had turned around and bitten the hand that had kept beating it. There would be consequences.

Helblindi stood up, his legs wouldn’t allow him to keep sitting anymore. “It’s not our decision, father. It’s yours.”

Laufey looked up at him and Helblindi once more knew that he was being tested. He was the future Lord and whatever Laufey was going to decide now, Helblindi’s entire life-task would be to ensure the legacy. To ensure that Laufey’s decision wasn’t going to be a failure.

If they were going to claim their rightful titles tonight…

“Does my son not want to voice his opinion? Because I want to hear it.” Helblindi felt the expecting eyes on his skin and they could still hear them sing.

Raising his head Helblindi shook his head. “I will gladly share it.”

“Go ahead.”
“You are the Lord of Jotunheim. It is your decision if you want to send our forces out to stand up against the Valhallan officers or if we tell our people to go home. But you have to respect the fact that the people have made perfectly clear what decision they want you to make. When the intelligence service started to go through their houses, they got up to chase them away. They tore down the statues on the main square. The ones in front of our doors are singing songs for us. The other ones are fighting in the streets. They have made very clear what they want. What could be more important than that?”

They owed it to them. Byleistr nodded firmly while Laufey remained motionless. The silence was weighing heavy on Helblindi, so he tried to concentrate on the singing. They deserved so much better. It couldn’t be a surprise for anyone that eventually someone had picked up a gun and tried to rid them of one of the men that caused their suffering. Nobody should ever feel entitled enough to hold it against them.

The silence was ended when Helblindi’s father spoke up once more and with the silence ended the last 500 years.

“Contact the so-called government in Valhalla. Inform that hereby their police forces have no longer any authority within Jotun borders. Within the next 30 minutes we will send out our own forces to escort them out of our city. If any man or woman wearing a Búrison emblem raises a hand against a Jotun, our own forces will use violence against them. I need a camera team, I want to talk to the people instantly.”
Hey everbody,

Let dive into the chaos. Don't worry, answers to your comments are going to come a couple of hours later ;)

Have fun

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful or anything…”

“Then shut up.” The British doctor didn’t deem Bucky important enough to look up from the chart and he was clearly sounding annoyed. He hadn’t acted any different the entire time, but to be honest, Bucky wouldn’t trust his own word. For the first time in hours he actually felt like he could have a clear thought that wasn’t dominated and clouded by agony. Now everything was dulled down and Bucky was sure that the swelling was feeling a lot less intense. He was definitely fine enough to talk back at the doctor. “What I wanted to say is that this is the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen.”

A hoarse laugh came from the other end of the room and Bucky smiled, being reminded of Steve’s presence.

“You must be a terrible agent if the inside of your own arm makes you feel squeamish…”

One had to wonder what made someone choose to become a doctor when this person so obviously hated people.

“I think I could have happily spent my entire lifetime without seeing the bone while it’s still inside of my arm…” Or the tissue, the muscles and pretty much anything that was considered gross. Nonetheless Bucky couldn’t stop himself from glancing at his lower arm. The sight was indeed hard to stomach. They had cut him open from his wrist to his elbow and it had been pure relief. That didn’t mean it didn’t look horrendous. They had covered the large incision with a transparent material that still allowed everybody present to see inside of Bucky’s arm. Including the bone.

Despite the doctor’s mean statement Bucky was anything but squeamish. That didn’t mean he was enjoying seeing the inner workings of his anatomy.

“You’ll be seeing it for quite a while.” The doctor explained carelessly, clearly unbothered that the Asgardian doctor who had actually done the procedure was also present. “During the next few days we should find out if we were going to be able to close the wound normally or if we might be in need of a skin graft.”

That didn’t sound very pleasant, but still so much better than losing his arm. Letting his eyes slide closed Bucky nodded and decided to enjoy the painkillers. Should they carry him away and lull him to sleep.

“Thank you, Doctor Strange.”

“Good luck. At least your case wasn’t a complete waste of time.”
Despite not seeing anything Bucky could tell that Steve was glaring at the doctor. Not too long for sure since Strange was finally leaving the hospital room. He was quite an unpleasant presence, but Bucky knew that things only had started to get going as soon as he had entered the room.

“Agent Barnes?”

Right, the Asgardian doctor.

Opening his eyes again Bucky was met with a smile. “Of course you are free to rest now, but a sage is on a way here. It’s the usual procedure after a surgery. We can call it off, since you are American. We just need to know what you want.”

Nodding softly Bucky answered with a smile. “Yes, I’d like that. Thank you.”

The other doctor left too and Bucky let out a sigh. It had been a very long time since he had felt so tired. He didn’t really feel like talking, but he couldn’t just fall asleep and let Steve sit there. Not after he had been waiting around during Bucky’s surgery.

“How are you feeling?”

Steve’s voice sounded a bit unsure, as if he wasn’t sure if it was safe to talk. He had been coming closer and Bucky thought that he looked pale. “Groggy. Beat up. Lucky to be able to keep my arm. Grossed out…”

A hint of a smile ghosted over Steve’s face. “Yeah, I agree. You look like a prop out of a horror movie.”

“Hey, I am allowed to be grossed out by myself. You’re supposed to feel sorry for me.”

“I was scared shitless, okay?” Steve turned way too serious way too quickly. “First nobody is taking care of your and then this guy shows up and talks about you losing your arm. I was scared.”

One day Bucky really had to teach Steve how to lie. Why did every word that came out of Steve’s mouth have to be so brutally honest? Bucky actually wondered if he might be able to come up with a convincing lie if threatened with violence. In this case it felt very nice to see the brutal and raw honesty on Steve’s face.

“Then I am sorry for getting you scared… but I am really grateful that you’re here. I really don’t want to imagine what it would have been like to be completely alone.”

“I wasn’t very helpful though.”

Bucky would have rolled his eyes if he hadn’t been so damned tired. “I would have said no if you had offered to operate on me. Don’t worry. It just felt good to have somebody here to… look out for me.”

They were in the same boat now since Bucky had been equally honest and it brought him joy to see a faint blush on Steve’s cheeks. Bucky was sure that he would hate himself if he knew and that was just a sad thought.

“Anytime…”

A single word and again so much sincerity, Bucky could feel his chest tightening. He felt like he should say something. Like there should be something obvious that needed to be voiced, but he just couldn’t put his finger on it.
“So… a good thing that you’re playing tennis with the prince. Who knows how quickly otherwise someone would have showed up.”

No painkillers could dull Bucky’s senses so much for him not to notice that Steve was just saying something for the sake of keeping the conversation going. Another time Bucky would maybe tell him that there was no need for that. “Yes, I guess I should let him win the next match…”

Bucky wanted to add some joke when he suddenly could forget about the drowsiness, the pain and his open arm for a second. The reason why he was lying in this hospital bed. “Loki was here… which means that his brother was brought here after the attack. Did you hear anything while I was in surgery?”

Steve answered with a small nod. “I checked on my phone… the court released a statement that the prince is being treated and that his life is not in danger.”

Releasing a long breath Bucky allowed himself to feel relieved. At least for Loki’s sake. He wasn’t going to lose a brother today, but the next couple of months were going to be pure agony. There was no doubt in Bucky’s mind that the assassination attempt today had to do with Jotunheim.

“That’s good. Really good…”

“Yeah.” Steve agreed before clearing his throat in the most awkward way imaginable. Bucky thought it was cute. “About the prince… Since when are you on first name basis?”

Bucky tried desperately to keep the smile of his face. “Long story. Perhaps I’ll tell it sometime…”

Steve clearly wanted to say something, but a knock on the door cut him off. The man outside didn’t wait for an answer, he entered the room regardless. It was the sage, looking friendly but tired. Bucky could only imagine what was going on in the hospital after the mass hysteria. “Agent Barnes? My name is Aevar. I am here to help you with your regeneration process.”

The confusion was so obvious on Steve’s face when he mouthed the words “A priest?” and Bucky merely smiled at him. He clearly couldn’t explain the principles of Asgardian medicine to Steve. Not now. “Nice to meet you, Aevar.”

Said man came closer and took a look at Bucky’s arm. No wince, nothing. He must have seen worse. Maybe even today. “Do you want to tell me what happened to you?”

His voice was gentle and easy to listen to. “I was in the crowd and when people started running… I fell. I was lucky. I got back up to my feet very quickly, but before that… people ran over me. Especially my arm.”

Aevar nodded while Steve eyed him suspiciously. Which was adorable. “Your luonto protected you from greater harm which means that you are a strong person. Are you still feeling pain?”

“A bit… the morphine does a good job though.”

“But you are anxious. Agitated. What is it? Your wounds will heal easier if we cast away all bad and malicious spirits around you.”

Bucky could see Steve’s eyebrows shooting up, but he couldn’t pay any attention to it. Not when it was directly pointed out to him what he was trying to push down. Unfortunately it had only taken that one sentence it all came back up. The next breath Bucky took was shaky and he bit his lip, because he was being ridiculous. Somebody had been shot tonight. Maybe somebody had died in the mass hysteria. He was going to be fine and his worries were so minor. “I am alright… just… tired.”
Aevar had the friendliest of smiles and Bucky believed him that he cared although they didn’t know each other. “Your luonto is powerful thanks to you and it served you so well today. Don’t poison it by lying.”

It was easier when he closed his eyes. It would be easier if Steve wasn’t here. “I was watching the speech with my boyfriend and… I lost him in the crowd. I have no idea where he is or if he’s doing okay and… I feel terrible, because I actually forgot about him for a couple of moments when I was so glad that I am not going to lose my arm and then… I already start worrying about scar tissue or what might happen if my movability won’t be the same as it was… This is ridiculous.”

“It is not. Nothing you feel in this situation could ever be ridiculous. Is there a way for you now to contact your boyfriend?”

“No, I lost my phone…”

Aevar nodded pensively. “I see. I wish at this time I could offer you more than advising you to pray and trust his ancestors to look out for him. In the meantime we have to look out for you. It’s you who is shaping your luonto. Fear and bad thoughts are hindering it to support your healing process. You are not doing your luonto and Fylgja any favour. We need to clear your head, concentrate on what you’ve already overcome today and focus on yourself. 20 minutes of silence would be a start.”

“You want him to meditate?”

Turning his head Aevar smiled benevolently at Steve. “That is a very Midgardian way of putting it, but why not? It’s standard practice after a surgery. It helps the patient to get familiar again with their injured body. We’d need to be alone though.”

Given Steve’s skeptical nature Bucky thought it was better to instantly ask him to leave, because he doubted that Steve would understand.

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“What we are witnessing could be a historical change. The atmosphere here is amazing, cannot be put in words. Everybody seems to be out in the streets. People gathering in groups, attaching the Jotun flag on every possible surface of the public space. Only minutes ago the crowd tore down the famous statue of King Gautr. Police is standing aside, letting the general population do as they please. There haven’t been any riots or acts of violence since the Valhallan forces recoiled and cleared the streets. At this time it’s impossible to tell what will happen during the next couple of hours. People are eagerly waiting for the next statement of the Lord of Jotunheim and besides that there still tense anticipation for the reaction of the government which cannot be…”

It seemed bizarre that they had to watch TV to know what was going on in their very own country. Granted, the officers were describing the very same picture, but since they had orders to stay off the streets, they got their images from the TV. Pictures that Loki would normally only associate with states in the Arabic world or shaken by civil war. Wasn’t that arrogant? All that was needed for a civil war was a single shot being fired. Who knew if the mood in Jotunheim wasn’t going to change from one second to the other? At the moment things were peaceful enough, but how much was needed before people stormed the buildings that contained the Valhallan administration. After all they had to protect the people working there.

Not every person living in Jotunheim was Jotun.

“No matter what way you’re deciding to go, your grace, you need to come to a decision fast. By telling the police to step back we’ve sent a very strong message to the Ymirions and especially to the
Jotun population. The longer Valhalla doesn’t interfere, the more the average person will get accustomed to the idea of the government stepping aside altogether. Then it would be very hard to get the situation back under control.”

Loki listened to the general and he couldn’t help but agree although something about the man’s tone made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. A part of him wished that Thor was here and to hear what he had to say. They would probably disagree, but soon it was going to be Thor in their father’s seat and Loki knew that the Jotun crisis would still be as permanent then. Anyhow, Thor should be here.

Looking quite small in his chair Odin nodded slightly, but Loki thought that his face seemed absent. Not that it meant anything. “Pulling back the police forces was the right decision. I am not going to tolerate street battles in any area of Asgard.”

“We’re not debating this decision, your grace. Unfortunately we cannot remain inactive for too long. The Ymirson family and the general population is going to see this is a concession and there is a good chance that Laufey is going to seize the opportunity to declare Jotunheim’s independency. This is a precedent that we cannot risk.”

Loki shook his head at the defence secretary’s words. No. That was not going to happen. “Most of the Jotun population has no interest in independency or a Jotun State.”

All eyes in the room turned to him, but Loki only felt his father’s. It was the general though who responded first. “What makes you come to this conclusion, your highness?”

The doubt was obvious, put on display and Loki appreciated it. “Back during the negotiations I talked to Helblindi Ymirson. He said that Jotunheim and Asgard are one and he doesn’t want a Jotun State. He also said that most of his people share his opinion. I am perfectly sure that there is nobody else who knows better what goes on in the Jotun soul. I trust him on that.”

“I see your reasoning, your highness, but we cannot ignore that this new crisis has been caused by the assassination attempt. Which has been orchestrated by Frjáls. They want the Jotun state and we have no inclination to think that will stop their terror at this moment.”

“The Ymirsons are going to take action against Frjáls, they are no supportive of them.”

“Even if they are profiting from Frjáls’ actions?” The general was raising both eyebrows. “We know that the group behind the assassination attempt must have a wealthy sponsor. The Ymirsons are the wealthiest family of this country.”

The meaning of these words seemed to twist Loki’s insides. Sure, this suspicion has been floating in the air since the very beginning, but they couldn’t be careful enough. Such a thought voiced could have riots as an immediate consequence. Not in his weakest moments Loki would ever dare to dream that his own family was as popular as the Ymirsons were in Jotunheim. To utter an unfounded idea without any kind of proof could easily end up being fatal. “I don’t believe that the Ymirsons are involved with Frjáls.”

Finally his father took over the conversation and waved dismissively with his hand. “At the moment it doesn’t matter who paid for the expenses of the shooter. What is more important is the peace within Jotunheim. The Lord of Jotunheim decided to declare your forces to enemies and we took a step back to make sure that no more people would get hurt. I agree with you, general, that we have to get the situation back under control. I don’t see a non-violent way to achieve that without Laufey’s help. We need cooperation between Jotun and Valhallan forces. Otherwise the Jotun population is not going to accept any intervention.”
“Until now the Lord of Jotunheim hasn’t seemed to be willing to help us. We should come up with several other scenarios how to react if he isn’t going to be supportive.”

“It depends on the reaction of the general public. If the crowds are going to dissolve or if even more people will come out on the streets.”

“Now I need to talk to Laufey. Contact him.”

Loki released a long breath, but he didn’t feel any relief. That conversation could go both ways and there was no guarantee that Laufey wouldn’t make matters worse for whatever reason. Helblindi didn’t believe that their fathers could solve the conflict. But during their last conversation Helblindi had also made clear that he didn’t think too highly of Loki anymore. Biting down on his lip Loki forced himself to ignore that thought. Helblindi was just another piece in this way too complicated puzzle. Like Loki.

The people in the room scattered, there was nothing to talk about before they hadn’t talked with Laufey. Loki jumped at the opportunity to change his position, sliding down on the chair next to his father. “Do you believe that there is any chance that Laufey is going to collaborate?”

Exhaling softly Odin rubbed one of his temples. Loki could see the longing in his tired eyes. Longing for something as simple as a good night of sleep. Which wasn’t going to happen anytime soon and they all knew it. “I honestly have no idea, Loki. Perhaps. You always believed that Laufey cares about his people than anybody else. If that is true, he will see that this would be the best thing to do. The reasonable thing to do.”

Loki nodded softly. “Right…” Then he remembered Helblindi’s cutting voice. Telling him that he didn’t want to deal with the descendent of liars and thieves. “I just hope that we haven’t pushed them too far.”

His father frowned and Loki shook his head. No, after all that had happened he would bring up Thor and his stupid mistake.

It took more than an hour to establish contact with the Lord of Jotunheim. Which was a very clear sign. He had let them wait. There was no video feed, they only got his voice over the speaker and Loki felt a strange sickness building in the pit of his stomach.

“So this is what you want from me? Telling me own forces to cooperate with you to go against my own people?”

Loki’s tongue was begging to say his piece, but his father was doing just fine. “No, this is not what I have said. What I am proposing is us working together to re-establish order within our borders.”

“I don’t think that order has to be re-established. People are merely voicing their displeasure with your procedures.”

“May I remind you that we asked you to cooperate in the investigation of the Þórirsson case.”

“No, you asked for support in raiding his workplace and harassing his family. Something I am not going to do when I cannot be sure of the man’s guilt.”

“He confessed.”

“A confession is worth nothing if we don’t know how it was delivered.”

“Laufey, I have no desire to go through this all over again. Let’s stick to the hard facts. A man tried
to shoot my son, the future king of Asgard. The man who was arrested at the scene is Jotun and has connections to Frjáls. It’s in your own interest to fight terrorism. We should work together on this.”

“You use a lot of lovely words when all you want is to chase my people off the streets because they are speaking out against you. Let’s not pretend that this is about anything else.”

Loki was gritting his teeth, having a hard time not to start shouting. Suddenly it was so much easier to understand why his father disliked this man so much.

“This is about finding every individual that was involved in the assassination attempt and putting them on trial. We’re not tolerating terrorism and attacks on the constitution. About finally putting an end to Frjáls.”

“You are not getting any support from Jotun forces to go after innocent and righteous citizens. I am not going to be part of that. You pushed the people too far and now they’re having their voices heard. I am not going to stop them from doing that.”

“So you are stopping us from going forward against terrorism?”

“Call it whatever you like. You are watching TV like everything else. You know what is happening in the streets of Útgarðar. That my people are burning the signs of the usurpers. Just an hour ago they pulled down the statue of your ancestor. Isn’t that terrorism to you? Do you really expect me to invite you back within our borders knowing that? It’s not going to happen. My people are going home whenever they choose. These are protests. They have the right to do that.”

“Yes, they have and I as their king have the duty to protect them. There are terror cells among them. Are you going to hinder me from doing that?”

It should have been a question of morality, but Loki knew that Laufey was going to move around it. Because from his point of view it wasn’t about that at all.

“You are wrong about this. It is my responsibility to protect my people and I will do just that. I protect them from foreign police men and military that would use violence against them for defending themselves. That is all I have to see.”

The phone connection was ended and Loki first impulse was to grab the edge of the table and flip it over. Instead of doing that he remained sitting, balling two hands into fists. What was that man doing? Voluntarily pushing his own country into chaos for what reason? That man wasn’t stupid, he knew that they couldn’t stand back when the initiators of the assassination attempt were still in Jotunheim. They couldn’t stand back when people were tearing down the symbols of their family and when it was only a question of time when the protests would turn into riots. That always happened with so many people out there in the streets, even if they were there to celebrate something.

Clearing his throat Loki broke the silence in the room. “Perhaps we should think about… setting up a plan how to evacuate the people working in administration in a worst case scenario…”

The general nodded in agreement. “A reasonable idea, your highness.”

Loki couldn’t find anything reasonable about the entire situation.

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Steve was resting his head against the wall, feeling tired for the first time in hours. Hours? To be honest, Steve had no idea how long he had been at the hospital. Not that it mattered, because Steve
wouldn’t have left under any circumstances. Not as long as he didn’t know that James was going to be fine.

Now that sage, shaman or priest or whatever was with James and the rest of the world was catching up with Steve. The hospital was still busy and Steve merely wanted to close his eyes and sleep for a bit.

Mostly to distract himself Steve pulled out his phone and went over the news. Nothing really that he wanted to see. Speculation about the assassination attempt and Jotunheim was seemingly going into complete revolution. Somewhere in the back of his mind Steve knew what this meant and that he should be concerned, but at the moment he couldn’t bring himself to feel anything. His eyes merely scanned the article, taking in phrase like ‘people throwing stones at buildings’, ‘several persons injured’ and ‘sending the army’. Steve had to look into this again later when he was capable of having a clear thought.

Somebody was calling his name which had Steve confused, but as he lifted his head he could see Arnþórr rushing towards him. So he was doing alright, that was good news. He looked exactly like Steve was feeling.

Run down. Scared. Shaky.

Words were leaving his mouth too quickly. A stream of Old Norse that was hard for Steve to grasp, although he could easily guess what he was talking about. Raising both hands Steve told him to calm down and Arnþórr only looked frustrated by that. At least what he said next was short and easy to understand. “Where is he?!”

Had Steve looked like that only one hour ago? Like he was falling apart any second. Steve believed that he might have. “In that room. He’s okay. He’s had surgery and…”

“What?!”

The shock was clearly visible on Arnþórr’s face. He didn’t want any explanation though, just turned around and stalked towards the door to James’ room.

“Wait. He is in there with… a sage. They’re… taking care of him after the surgery.”

It was surprising how quickly Arnþórr stopped dead in his tracks, his hand hoovering over the door handle. “Alright… is he… is he alright?!”

“Yes, he is just… scared.”

Turning around Arnþórr brought both hands up to run them through his hair and his eyes were watery. “We all are.”

Something told Steve that he wasn’t just talking about James.
Invitation

Chapter Notes

So, an update in the middle of the night. Why not?
Let’s finally do something against the crisis - but is it a good idea?

“… not going home until we get an apology or he personally comes here to talk to us! Pretty much every single person in this country has a reason to shoot the usurper’s son, but they immediately arrest the first Jotun they could find!”

“They tell the king that they are willing to engage in negotiations and nothing happens! Then the duke gets shot and they immediately jump at the opportunity…”

“Nobody should be punished for trying to shoot him. They should get a medal.”

“No officer speaking Old Norse and wearing an emblem from Valhalla is going to arrest anybody! Only the rightful king has the authority to do so!”

“If they want to tell us something, then better say it in Jǫtnar. Don’t come in here with your secret service and tear down our doors! You have no right! No right!”

“Long live the King! May all the spirits bless Prince Helblindi!”

The ache had settled in deep. If Loki had tried to locate it, he would have said it lay somewhere behind his eyes and went back to the back of his head. It only got worse with every chanting of Helblindi’s name. Which was rather pathetic given the circumstances. Loki tried to draw comparisons in his head. Maybe one of them would have him to see things clearer. Or even provide a solution.

The French Revolution? Not quite the same. Driven by injustice, hunger and poverty. The comparison ended right there. The average Jotun family made more money than the average family in Valhalla. Throughout the history of their nation Jotunheim had always been the wealthiest region. None of them was suffering from hunger.

Injustice – yes. There was the Language Act. The general distrust that crown and the administration fostered against them. The fact that they still weren’t in charge of most of their administration. Nevertheless it had suddenly become a little easier for Loki to understand the position that his father had had over several years. Laufey had indeed jumped at the first and worst possibility to harm them without much regard for his own people.

Or was Loki looking at this from the wrong perspective? He was an Asgardian prince, not Jotun. Would he ever be able to see this situation from another point of view? Was that even possible?

“This is it. This time we have to give them something. Or a lot. Otherwise we will have to go in there with guns and soldiers and then… whatever happens it will destroy any relationship we have left with Jotunheim. I fear we would unleash a wave of terror and create more groups that strive for separation.”
Loki could see that the general didn’t agree with him and honestly – why should he? His job was to promote the army as the solution for every problem. Nonetheless he was a smart man and Loki was ready to have his opinions questioned. They needed to look at this problem from every different angle.

“With all due respect, your highness, but we’re already facing terrorism. They can’t go much further than they already have. They tried to kill the future king of this country. Which is not only attempted murder, but also an attack on the constitution and an attempt to destabilize the country. We’re already facing terrorism.”

“I am not arguing with that, general.” Loki shook his head. “But at this moment we are only facing Frjáls as a terrorist group and what they did…” He had to push the thought away that Thor was his brother. It was necessary to look at the situation like a prince, not like a family member. The man they had tried to kill was the future king of Asgard and that was all the information that Loki needed to have. “What Frjáls did was an atrocious act, but it was an isolated attempt. On a single person. For now their hatred is focused on the administration and the royal family. I don’t want to risk creating a bigger rift between the Jotuns and the rest of the Asgardian population. I don’t want to see the day that we have a Jotun terrorist targeting Asgardian citizens. At this point the Jotun situation is terribly fragile. People might be easily pushed over the edge. I don’t see them deciding to go home and call it a day anytime soon. We have to make peace and we have to give them something. There must be concessions. If we use violence or force to re-establish the status quo… the Jotun won’t hesitate to use violence against us.”

“They haven’t hesitated to use violence against the police forces.”

“That’s not quite the same. I am not saying that we have to give into all demands, but there need to be concessions.” Loki didn’t know how to make this any clearer. He was strongly thinking of the Language Act, but who knew if it could be enough or what Laufey had in mind.

It made Loki weary that his father had decided to stay quiet for such a long time. Although there was no emotion visible on Odin’s face, his eyes were clearly attentive and Loki felt the urge to shift around in his chair.

Eventually his father was speaking up and Loki’s heart was beating too fast. “The problem is that there haven’t been any demands. The average Jotun protester can say whatever they want in front of a TV camera. It is Laufey who speaks for them. If we are honest – he hasn’t said or demanded anything. Which is very telling and most of all concerning. I am tempted to believe that he is actually trying to provoke an escalation of the conflict.”

“Father, I refuse to believe that he would risk Jotun lives.”

Odin looked at him and something like a sad smile appeared on his lips. “Laufey Ymirson is a politician and a member of ancient nobility. He was raised with Jotun traditions and with strong beliefs. Besides that he is also a smart man who knows that there are no simple solutions and he possesses a great willingness to do whatever it takes. If he has reconciled himself with the fact that there is no other way, he might be determined to go ahead. It is fact that he refuses to cooperate, but at the same time he doesn’t make any demands.”

There was some truth to these words and Loki just nodded while the minister of defences spoke up. “It absolutely vital to come to a decision, your grace. The terrorist group that tried to murder your son is still roaming freely. At this moment we are allowing the Jotun population and the Ymirsons to hinder our investigations. Not to mention that the masses on the streets are an uncontrollable factor. We don’t have much time left to debate what we are going to do. I highly doubt that the Lord of Jotunheim is just going to sit back and watch the situation unfold.”
No, that was simply impossible. Something else that Loki didn’t have the time to think about, because they got interrupted.

A slightly shaking voice and by the look in his eyes Loki knew that it was over.

“Your grace, a crowd of people just stormed just stormed one of the administration buildings in Útgarðar. They threw stones against the windows, climbed inside and then opened the doors. Parts of the building are on fire.”

As the dire realisation set in Loki could feel his stomach clenching and he might feel the slightest bit dizzy. This was it. Now they had no choice anymore. What else could they do now but tell their officers to get back on the streets and also send in the military? It would take a miracle for things not to completely escalate. Loki desperately wanted to write a letter to his ancestors.

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The images on the tiny screen had taken a turn for the worse. For a moment Steve had to remind himself of the fact that they were in First World country. One of the wealthiest countries in the world. Fantastic free and general health care. A rather tough but still amazing education system. The streets were clean, going out at night in the big cities was considered mostly safe. It wasn’t hard to admit that life was pleasant here. Therefore it was so much harder to grasp what was happening right now.

Steve had trouble keeping up with the news since the way they delivered the information in Old Norse was too fast for him. Then again, it wasn’t necessary to understand every word they were saying. Sometimes images indeed said more than words.

A burning building, people still out on the streets, stones being thrown, flags being burned.

Those scenes weren’t supposed to be happening here. Sighing softly Steve put the phone away and instead looked at Arnþórr who was still pacing around. Ever since he had arrived, he hadn’t been able to keep still. Not very surprising since Steve didn’t do much better. People had different ways of showing their nervousness. Or their fear. Arnþórr was the jumpy kind of guy and Steve was pretty sure that he only managed to stay in one spot himself because of his training.

What Steve couldn’t do was to continue watching him. Or think about burning buildings. Least of all he could keep doing nothing, because then he would only be thinking of James. His open arm and the fearful expression on his face. There was nobody else here to talk to and probably nobody else with an ounce of understanding.

“We tried to call you. James lost his phone and he didn’t know your number by heart. We tried one or two combinations, but we didn’t reach anyone. I guess they were completely wrong…”

Finally Arnþórr stopped, glancing at Steve, but not really looking at him. “No, I didn’t receive a call. I tried to call too. I couldn’t… It looked like a war out there.” For a moment Steve thought that he wouldn’t keep on talking, but he did. “Police everywhere, ambulances and… I lost him in the crowd. I just lost him. I went to his place, then to another hospital… I wasn’t sure… I was already imagining things…”

Steve got that. Hell, he had been present and he had been imagining things. Even now he had to remind himself of the fact that James was going to be okay. “He fell and a lot of people ran right over him, but he is a tough guy. He quickly got back up to his feet. His arm got messed up though. They had to cut it open to release the inner pressure. It looks pretty nasty, but he is going to be alright. Just so you know.”
Arnþórr carefully eyed Steve’s face and he eventually nodded. “Thank you. It’s good that somebody was here with him. How is your friend? I hope he is alright…”

“Yes, Sam sent me a message. He is okay. Thanks for asking.”

Then there was new silence and Steve found it so hard to talk to him. After all they didn’t know anything about each other, they had nothing in common but James. Who was Steve’s best friend here and Arnþórr was his boyfriend. Everything seemed rather weird.

“Do you have any idea how long this is going to take? The… session with the sage I mean. I didn’t even know that something like this existed.”

“Impossible to say. That depends on him. How he is reacting to it. Usually people say that it takes as long as it takes. It’s important. I suppose we just have to wait.”

What a horrible word, but Arnþórr was right, there was nothing else to do. Leaving or going home wasn’t an option at all.

To have something to do Steve got them two cups of coffee, passing by hospital staff and rooms with half open doors that revealed other patients. Bruises, broken limbs, results of the mass hysteria. Perhaps the prince was still here in the hospital or they had brought him away hours ago. Both was perfectly possible. Steve wasn’t eager to think about what was going to happen during the next couple of days.

After Steve had returned with the coffee they more or less sipped it in silence. Not for long. Finally the door to James’ room was being opened again and Steve felt the weight of the world falling off his shoulders. The sage offered him a little smile as he stepped out. “If you wish you can talk to him. He’s doing better.”

Evidently Arnþórr didn’t need to be asked twice. He was already in the room when Steve had only made the first step.

“Oh, thank God…”

“By all the spirits. Are you okay? Your arm…”

Slowly Steve walked in, being confronted with Arnþórr leaning over James, resting one hand on James’. Nervousness and anxiety was still written all over him, eyes obviously glued to James’ open arm. Simply everything was wrong about this situation.

A somewhat embarrassed and nonetheless absolutely happy smile made its way on James’ lips. “I know… it’s pretty disgusting, but like that I can keep my arm. I was so worried that you…”

Words were smothered by Arnþórr’s mouth on James’. There was a surprised sound and then something that resembled a laugh. So that was how things were supposed to be, right? One moment being scared, shaking and a complete mess. Then everything was alright again and somebody even made you laugh. It still felt weird and Steve knew that nothing was alright.

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“All eloquence went out the window and with it Loki’s will to refrain himself from punching a hole
into the wall. He couldn’t stay in his seat anymore, he was pacing up and down, asking the minister to repeat the Russian statement again and again.

It was hard to keep his thoughts focused and search for counter measures when he could only think of a pair of dark blue eyes and an arrogant smile.

Of course this was Helblindi’s doing. No doubt about it. His secret meetings with Romanoff had paid off and Loki felt the anger sitting deep in his gut. How was he supposed to feel when the one person he had once considered the solution to all his problems turned out to be a nail in his coffin. Well, it was no surprise. It was absolutely brilliant and therefore very much like Helblindi. Loki would have rather seen his brilliance working in his favour. In reuniting people that were drifting apart.

“We cannot let the Russians dictate what we are doing. Just like the Americans. We are our own people, our own government.”

“They don’t want us to do something that you aren’t fond of yourself…” His father pointed out the obvious and Loki was seconds away from screaming. “No, I don’t want military troops marching into Jotunheim, because we’ll probably kick off a civil war and only leave burned earth behind. But what are we supposed to do?! A building is on fire! We’re only lucky it’s in the middle of the night. Laufey won’t cooperate and they’re tearing down street signs and from the latest news we knew that masks individuals are roaming the streets, setting cars on fire. We can’t stand aside and wait for someone to get hurt. It disgusts me that we have to do this, but I see no other way.”

Disgust was not a strong enough word. Especially since Loki had hoped to one day destroy the American Policy by turning towards the Russians. That hope had just been completely destroyed.

“I agree with the prince, your grace.” The minister of the interior nodded. “We cannot let the Russian dictate our internal politics. Jotunheim is spiralling out of control and we have already been waiting too long. All we need is a definite order and our troops are ready.”

For a moment Loki let himself realise how wrong he had been at imagining this scenario. He hadn’t thought that his father would hesitate this long before actually acting against Jotunheim. Even now the wrinkles on his forehead clearly came from worry and now from age. But what did those details matter?

Thor had been shot and he was in hospital.

Buildings in Jotunheim were on fire.

Frjáls was probably roaming the streets.

At some point talking didn’t help anymore.

Sighing Odin nodded and he had never looked so old. “Alright, tell the general that…”

“You grace, forgive me for interrupting you, but the Ymirsons are giving a live press conference this very moment.”

Within less than a second Loki turned to face the screen on the wall. He already knew that this message was going to make things worse, but if he gave up hope now he could just go crazy anyway. A part of him had expected to see Helblindi, but the person who appeared on the screen was Laufey. As official as he could get. The traditional dark blue frockcoat, his hair neatly tied up behind his neck and his expression was so grim it seemed appropriate for a funeral. How perfectly fitting.
“I hereby address all my brothers and sisters. The past as the present have treated you unfairly. Cruel even. While it does give you the right to speak up and to scream, it doesn’t give you the right to endanger yourself or any of your Jotun brothers and sisters. I understand your anger and your rage which couldn’t be more justified. The day will not come that you see me condemning you for being proud or angry. It cannot be tolerated though that Jotun lives are being put in danger. A burning building that stands for oppression and a two-class-system doesn’t mean anything. Your well-being means everything. Who else is going to care for it but us?”

Loki once more became familiar with the bitter, almost acid taste in his mouth. Well, at least he wasn’t actually promoting violence, but it wasn’t much better.

“Now I want to address the government of Valhalla. Nobody is surprised by your plans or by your pathetic fear to lose what you call control over our beautiful region and the wonderful people living in it. You can send your troops and soldiers if you want to. Who is going to hinder you? Or you could stop pretending and start talking to us. Not me or my son, the future Lord of Jotunheim. But the once you are actually deciding over. The people of Jotunheim which you are obviously so afraid of. They are so much more than what you give them credit for. Also unlike you they are willing to listen. If you came here and talked to them. Like only one of your family line has done before. Show us that you are ready for an actual dialogue instead of immediately calling your troops and acting like a colonial power. We are here. We are not going anywhere. Whatever it is that you are trying to achieve – come here and talk to us about it. You pretend to be King of this region. Act like it. Come here and talk to your people. Tell them what is happening and what you want from them. If you don’t consider them important enough to do so, we will come to the same conclusion. The Lord of Jotunheim is ready to welcome you anytime.”

That was it. Short. Simple. Everything that was necessary.

Wit, cleverness and most of all recklessness were traits that Loki admired, that he felt attracted to and yet in this very moment he wasn’t able to feel anything but raging anger. Which was only made worse by the simple fact that at least half of Laufey’s request was completely reasonable. Going to Jotunheim, talking to the people, making them feel more like part of this nation. It would have spared them so much. Maybe. There was no guarantee.

And now? Now it was merely a challenge that Loki’s father couldn’t win.

“Your grace, before you even start considering the Lord’s proposition, I must inform you about the immense security risk. Apart from the general protests, there are too many unknown factors. Frjáls are a much stronger presence in Jotunheim than in the rest of this country. The Jotun police forces have already shown theirloyalties and I believe it’s fair to say that at this moment we have no idea if we can trust the Lord of Jotunheim to provide the necessary safety for any member of the royal family.”

There is was once again. The knowledge that the general was completely right and nonetheless Loki hated him for voicing these words. Which was such a pathetic feeling. Loathing the person that spoke out the ugly truth.

There was more than one person who could do this.

“Father… Loki began softly, licking his lips, fearing slightly that his voice was going to betray him. “He took that choice from us, because he is right. We have to go there. At least this way we could make clear what really happened and the general population won’t learn it from rumours or radicals.”

Searching for support Loki looked at his father who had closed his eyes, both hand placed flat on the table top. There was no direct response, just the face of a man who had tried all of his life to not go
down a certain road and was now forced to do just that by gunpoint. Unfortunately Loki wasn’t sure how was holding said gun.

Eventually light blue eyes of his father opened again and there was nothing old about the determination inside of them. “Thank you for the analysis, general. I don’t intent to go to Jotunheim.”

A hard slap across Loki’s face. “Father, that’s madness. It might be our only chance to calm an approaching storm.”

Nothing about Odin’s demeanour softened as he turned to Loki. “No, going to Jotunheim would be madness at this time. Your big brother is still in hospital, recovering from a gunshot wound. The people who are responsible for that are orchestrating what is happening right now. I am not going to play into their hands. I am not going to go.”

“But…”

“No, there will be no discussion about this, Loki. Nothing can be said now that would change things. We’re past this point. We are going to bring in the military. Which is the only thing left we can do – something you agreed on.”

Speechlessly Loki stood there. Knowing that everything was falling apart and he once again felt completely helpless and for once without an idea what he was supposed to do. Insisting sounded like a good enough start. “Yes, we should be suspicious of Laufey’s offer, but an actual visit would send a message to the general population. Perhaps there might be a chance that they…”

“Loki, the answer is no!” It was a hard task not to wince when his father shouted at him. “Your brother is the future king of Asgard, he was to hold the speech today. It would be his duty to do this, but he is at the hospital because they shot him. I am not going to go. There are no other options.” Odin shot him a dark glance that didn’t promise any mercy.

“This isn’t…”

“Loki could go.”

His entire body froze as these three words interrupted him and Loki’s spun around to see his mother standing in the doorframe. Her face so much whiter than he had ever seen before. But her voice wasn’t missing any of its strength. “Loki is the second prince of Asgard. If he speaks for the crown his words is worth just as much as Thor’s. Loki could go.”

So this was what it meant to be torn. When the mere idea of Loki going to Jotunheim seemed utterly bizarre and incomprehensible and his very next thought was that it was about time. Loki didn’t know if he could do anything better than anybody else, but at least he was willing to try. Except that he didn’t want to go and at the same time it couldn’t be soon enough.

It wasn’t though like Loki’s thoughts on the subject actually mattered the tiniest bit.

“No.” His father had stood up, his voice was cold and harsh as human vocal cords would allow. “My son is not setting a single foot into Jotunheim.”
One of those. A message delivered with such ferocity and determination that it was obvious that the conversation had come to an end. No more arguments, protestation, not even agreement was tolerated anymore. For Odin all was said and done, Loki’s eyes darted to the one hand he had placed flat on the table top. A slight tremor clearly visible. He would rather go for anger than old age.

The following silence was tense and crushing. Nobody of the people present was eager to be the first one to speak up, to break the silence and to draw attention to themselves. It couldn’t last though. Here and now were the place and the time to decide the future course of their country.

Loki hated everything about this state of being. Having been rendered speechless, having been confronted with a set of ideas which didn’t make any sense to him. Which scared and excited him at the very same time. Not something that was entirely unfamiliar to Loki. He took a shaky breath, trying to shake off the silly concept of him going to Jotunheim. An idea that bore an appealing absurdity. Most importantly though – it would not help.

Eventually it was the minister of the interior who was brave enough to break the silence. “Please forgive me the remark, your grace, but it might not be the worst of ideas to send the Duke of Glæsisvellir to Jotunheim. His popularity is at a high level since he spoke out against the American policy and the Jotun might react favourable to him, given what he said about the Language Act during his university speech. The prince might be able to…”

“Have I not made myself clear enough? I am not going to Jotunheim, nor are my sons! No more is going to be said about this issue.” The King’s words didn’t leave any room for doubt and it came naturally to Loki to want to protest. To start the debate although he had no idea if he actually could do anything. If it was a good idea to even get involved.

“Father, I would like to make this decision myself.”

“There are no decisions to be made. I forbid it as your father and your king.”

“All options have to be considered and I believe…”

“This is not an option.”

“But I am sure that…”

“I said no!”

Odin was yelling, voice as hard and unbending as steel when he got up to his feet and made harsh,
“Everybody out! Leave, all of you!”

“You may not! Everybody but my son out of the room!”

There was some awkward shuffling around as high ministers and generals gathered their papers and slowly left the room like little boys that got scolded from their school teacher. Loki glanced over his shoulder to see his mother. On her face was a faint smile which was probably meant to be encouraging. After Loki had hinted at a nod she equally turned around and a big part of the Asgardian government left the conference room. With a soft thud the doors were closed behind them and Loki put on his usual show.

Sometime during his life it had become less of a show and more of state of being. His back got straighter and his shoulders were pulled back. His eyes following his father’s every move, not backing away. Loki wasn’t going to show the tiniest weakness. If he couldn’t do that in front of his father, he wouldn’t be able to do it in front of Laufey. The Jotun people. Helblindi.

Despite all that Loki didn’t even know if he wanted to go or if it might be a smart move. The possibility hadn’t occurred to him. Not until his mother had brought it up.

With his father there couldn’t be the shadow of a doubt about his opinion. Odin had made his thoughts very clear, with his voice and every other way that he could. Only on rare occasions Loki had seen such a dire expression on his father’s face. The same face that had smiled brightly at him when Loki had for the very first time ridden a bike.

“Father…”

Once more the hand gesture. The one the King used to make a subject fall silent. The King was talking to him, not his father. So Loki had to answer as a prince. The prince he had always wanted to be.

“I have no idea what kind of evil spirit whispered into your mother’s ear to even suggest such a mad idea.” To emphasise his point Odin was shaking his head. “I still cannot believe… Laufey would never publicly propose such a meeting without an ulterior motive. None of us is going there. Not when it was probably Ymirson money that financed the attack on your brother.”

Counter-argument. Right now. “That hasn’t been proven. Until now we don’t even have a lead that would point in that direction.”

“We have their hatred for us and an attempt on your brother’s life. Those are strong enough leads for me. The fact that it was Laufey who suggested it is enough to be weary.”

“We cannot dismiss every suggestion just because if came from a certain person.”

“A person that thinks himself king and who would gladly see our family imprisoned or dead.” Loki kept his face stoic and his body unmoving when his father raised his voice again. “Whoever is responsible for the attack on Thor, Laufey approved of it. Did you hear him condemn that action? No, all he condemned was his own people hurting each other. He didn’t even mention your brother. Because he does not care. Because he is content that Thor was almost killed. This man would never invite any of us in hope to solve the Jotun conflict, only to harm us.”

Swallowing softly Loki focused on his father hand, seeing the tremor that was clearly provoked by anger. A 500 year old rage that couldn’t be silenced or reasoned with. It wasn’t the first time that Loki wondered when it was going to infect him. If it was only a question of time. If it could be
compared to a genetic disease. They all carried it within them and at a certain age the symptoms would get visible. Taking a hold of him too. Was it the same with the Ymirsons? Did Helblindi have it too?

“Father, don’t believe that I am easily convinced to trust somebody. I hardly trust anybody and I definitely don’t trust the Ymirsons. But what other options do we have? The anger of the Jotun people has been unleashed and I don’t see any other way to negotiate than to show good will. We could do that by going there. We should do that by going there. I understand the security risk. The situation in Jotunheim is not safe and we don’t know if our potential host has his own plans. I agree that you shouldn’t go there. Sure, the King’s word would mean the most, but it is definitely not safe. Thor as the crown prince would be the best choice, but he cannot go there. That leaves me. I am second in line, I don’t know how much my word would mean to any of them, but I am more than willing to talk on behalf of our family. On behalf of Asgard. Almost I am the smallest risk. It makes sense for me go there.”

So the decision has been made. Loki was willing to stand up for it.

The instant protest that he had expected didn’t come. Instead his father walked around the table, looking hardly like the old man that he was. Again Loki remained his calm, not moving when Odin forcefully grabbed his arm. Fingers painfully digging into his arm with a power that could only be fuelled by anger. “Our ancestors are my witnesses that I have never once laid a hand on you or Thor, but I swear it takes all of my strength to not slap you.”

There was only so much Loki could do, his tight grip on control faltered a little bit and he couldn’t keep the surprised expression off his face. “Father, we cannot let ourselves be ruled by our personal disdain for the Ymirson family. There is so much more at stake than having to make concession to them. We risk the least if I…”

The pain came out of nowhere and its sting was harsh and intense. Loki’s hand came up to cover his burning cheek, staring at his father in disbelief. What stared back at him was untamed anger and something Loki hadn’t noticed before. Fear.

The hand that was still grabbing his arm tagged at it and Odin’s eyes were shimmering strangely. Causing Loki to feel a lump in his throat. "How do you even dare… All your life you loved being responsible for trouble and mischief by saying whatever you want, by voicing the most harmful and vile thoughts that crossed your mind… but I will not accept this. You are not going to call yourself a small risk. As if it were to kill me any less if something happened to you while going there. As if something like a risk to your life could be measured…”

Words, Loki’s most powerful weapon, left him once more and he merely stared at his father who wasn’t hiding anything.

“I am not going to send my own son to the wolves. They tried to kill your brother and you believe for one single second that I would ever send you there? That I would ever allow you getting hurt? I have spent decades praying to my ancestors for you and Thor and when they finally sent you I swore to protect you. With everything I have and with my life. So I swear on my life that I will not let you go there.”

Loki felt his chest tightening and at the same time something inside of him opened up and he was threatened to be overwhelmed by the emotions that his father was sharing with him. By this much simpler reason to refuse negotiations.

“Father… I am sorry.”
Not saying anything Odin’s grip on him loosened a bit and Loki was choked up by the clearest display of love he had ever witnessed during his whole life.

Yet it couldn’t be enough to take his mind off the big picture. It could never be enough.

“I didn’t want to make it sound like it didn’t matter what happened to me because of my rank. I… I know as a father you would never make the decision to send your son into a dangerous situation, but you cannot make that decision as a father. You are King and a big part of our nation has slipped into deep crisis. I am best fitted to go there and talk to them. I firmly believe that I can find the right words. I’ll take Heimdall with me, parts of army. More bodyguards than I’ve ever had. But not going is not an option. Not if there is still a way to mend things without the threat of violence. I have to go there, you know it. I serve my country and my King, but you have to know that I will go there. With or without your permission.”

Loki’s heart was beating way too fast. From fear of actually going to Jotunheim and from causing his father anguish. There was no moment in Loki’s memory when he had been more afraid. Maybe his father was feeling the very same thing.

That his father was going to yell at him seemed like a certainty. That there would be protest, accusations and bitterness. Instead Odin put a strong hand in the back of Loki’s neck and pulled him close. It was a firm, almost desperate embrace. It did nothing to relieve Loki of his fear and made him feel better nonetheless. His arms felt weak when he closed them around Odin’s shoulders, holding on to him.

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“No, this is madness! Have you lost your minds!? He cannot go there!”

Thor wanted nothing more than to jump to his feet, to make his frustration visible, but the painkillers were still making him dizzy and his head felt way heavier than it had ever been in his entire life. Not that it mattered right now.

“It has been decided, Thor. My plane leaves in an hour.” Loki used that dry tone that made Thor want to hit him. Why had everyone gone crazy during his short stay at the hospital? The mere idea of letting Loki go there when the entire region despised them and they had already gone as far as possible and there was no guarantee that they weren’t going to try again. Thor would bet the crown that they would instantly make a second attempt if they got the chance.

Slightly desperate Thor looked at his mother. If anybody was capable of talking Loki out of this madness, it was her. “Mother, please, you know that he can’t go. It’s an announced visit. Frjáls knows that he is coming. It’s an opportunity served on a silver plate.”

The smile Frigga offered him told Thor that it was a lost cause. It made him loathe the bandages and the painkillers, because they hindered him from making a real case for himself. From knocking some sense into all of them.

“Darling, your brother wants to try everything before sending the army to Jotunheim. It is about time we show them that they matter, their causes matter and how could they believe us if none of us is willing to go to them? Your brother is our only option to do that.”

No, Loki wasn’t the only option and Thor had trouble not to start shouting. He was the crown prince. It would be his duty to go to Jotunheim and try to mend things. Now they were going to send his little brother and if Loki got hurt, it would be Thor’s fault.
“We cannot trust Laufey to…” Thor made an effort to stand up, but a rush of sizzling pain combined with nausea went through him.

“Thor…” Jane’s voice was trembling like her hands as she put them on his fine arm, gently pushing him back into the chair. “Don’t. You just left the hospital…”

And why should Thor care? The bullet had gone right through, without destroying a major artery or a nerve. The wound itself didn’t mean anything, it was nothing and Thor would be damned if it should take his voice away. “It’s not Loki’s place to go to Jotunheim! Father is King, I am the crown prince. If anybody goes there, which is still a reckless and bad idea, it should be one of us.”

Loki had put on that completely unbothered expression which Thor knew was all show, but it made his blood boil nonetheless. “You are hurt, Thor, you cannot go and neither will father. Also you are right, there is a risk to it. But our options leave only me. The Ymirsons guaranteed that transport will be safe and I will take my security with me.”

It almost made Thor laugh. “Guarantees from the Ymirsons mean nothing. Even if they weren’t involved in the attempt on my life, they are definitely disappointed that I didn’t die. They have no interest in keeping you safe.”

Thor could see the hesitation in Loki’s movements as he went over the pages of the first draft of his speech. Of course. Loki was smart, perhaps the smartest person in the room. He knew about the danger and was trying to play it down. “I am perfectly sure that Helblindi Ymirson is true to his word and wouldn’t mean me any harm.”

Those were words that didn’t make much sense. Had Loki forgotten about the engagement dinner? How Helblindi had done nothing but provoke him and then played the victim with his little brother. Thor couldn’t understand how Loki could still believe that there was a chance to negotiate with these people. They believed themselves the royal family and therefore they couldn’t be wrong. “Even if I were to trust that dirty lawyer as far as I can throw him… Laufey is in control and there is no doubt about how he feels about us. Why should he let you come when there is a chance that you could possibly mend things with the Jotuns? That’s against anything he wants!”

“Laufey wants the best for his people.” Loki replied drily, crossing out a paragraph of the speech and Thor was about to lose it. His little brother had always been too stubborn for his own good and now he wanted to steal away Thor’s opportunity to protect him. “Alright, but you can’t argue with the fact that Laufey believes it would be best for Jotunheim if we all just disappeared.”

“I have enough trust in his sanity that he will not throw me in the dungeon or kill me and hide the body. What would he gain from that? I am not the King, I am not the crown prince. If they dared to hurt or kidnap me, they’re still causing all-out war. That’s not going to happen. I have convinced father. I don’t have to convince you.”

Thor gritted his teeth, he wasn’t going to let this go. “But…”

“No.” Loki hissed sternly. “I will not fight with you, Thor. We’ve almost lost you today. Please don’t make us fight.” The look on his brother’s face became so much more gentle and Thor bit his lip, because he perfectly understood, but this was Loki. His little brother. Also Thor was the crown prince, it was his duty to protect him. So why wouldn’t Loki let him?

Thor turned his head to see his mother’s smile. No, there was no way that she was going to let him go. The day would never come that Frigga would let Loki walk straight into danger. That couldn’t happen. Loki was the one thing she cherished and loved most in the entire world. Frigga would tell him to stay, so that he was going to be safe and
sound.

“Mother, tell him!”

“The responsibility our family carries is heavy and at times we have to face the reality that there are more important things than ourselves. This is not about us, but about the whole nation. Your brother has to go and he won’t go alone. He will be safe. More than that, he will know exactly what to say to the people and how to say it. You only have to trust your brother.”

Thor did trust Loki, that wasn’t the problem. It was the Ymirsons and the rest of Jotunheim.

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One hour and five minutes. That was how much time a flight from Valhalla to Útgarðar took and how much time Loki spent over his speech. How was it possible for them to be so far apart when the actual distance was so small? Also how was Loki supposed to talk to more than a single Jotun person when he was already shaking with fear?

Loki had no idea if he could do this or what he was even supposed to do. Had he only agreed to this to upset his father? To be finally proven right?

It was impossible to get Thor’s look off his mind. Loki had spent all the time looking over the words he was going to say when he had only wanted to wrap himself around Thor and thank all their ancestors that he was okay. Unfortunately their mother was right, there were more important issues than themselves.

Sighing softly Loki put down the pages that he failed to remember and looked out of the window. There was nothing but blackness to greet him. Due to security reasons they weren’t going to land in Útgarðar, but a on a small airport a few kilometres outside of the city. The little piece of information about the visit of an Asgardian prince had already been announced. Laufey had been very fast to make sure of that. So that nobody could back out.

Although Loki had stayed away from any sort of media during the flight, he knew what was going on anyway. Disappointment, even more anger. Why would they send the second son? The one with no power. The expendable one. Was it another try to insult them? Or was the royal family just showing them that there was no trust at all.

The poor heart in his chest was working overtime, Loki thought it was getting hard to breathe as it hammered against his ribs. No, he wasn’t going to show any weakness right now. Heimdall was sitting on the other side, always keeping an eye on him. Loki was under no illusion. During the next couple of hours he would be under constant surveillance. The agents and officers here for his protections and the Ymirsons wouldn’t let him roam freely around.

Was it pathetic that Loki believed he might be heading for straight towards a panic attack? He who believed himself so much more cunning than everybody else? This was what he wanted after all. An opportunity to have everybody looking at him. Listening to him. For him to make the difference. Only now Loki had no idea if he could do it.

Was this now the opposition in a democratic system felt? It was so easy to talk and demand when you weren’t in charge yourself. As soon as they ended up with a little bit of power they realised that they didn’t know any better and they were completely helpless.

Like Loki right now.

Closing his eyes for a second Loki reached for his phone, but he wasn’t going to take a look at it
anyway. He already knew that he hadn’t received a message from the person he wanted one from. Writing one himself wasn’t an option either. Also unnecessary. They would see each other soon anyway.

With disdain Loki realised that he had started chewing on his thumb nail. Uttering a sigh Loki opened his eyes again, trying to remind himself that this was what he did best. Talking to people. Bring up arguments. Maybe lie.

“Your highness, we are going to land in five minutes.”

Nodding softly Loki thank Heimdall and then worked on putting the face he was going to wear for the entire night. Calm, perhaps even a little bit stoic. Nobody was going to see that he was just a scared child, in way over his head.

Two men were in front of him as they opened the door. Loki wouldn’t take a step on his own. Two more behind him. And everybody else on this plane.

A car was waiting for them on the runway. Fancy, but not a limousine. Good, they were keeping their promise to not attract any attention. Officers clad in Jotun uniforms were standing right next to it and among them the mayor of Útgarðar. His face wasn’t calm nor stoic. Resentfulness and repugnance.

Alright, Loki should get used to it.

Heimdall was one step in front of him as they walked down the mobile stairs.

“My Lord Búrison. Welcome to Jotunheim.” The mayor said and Loki clearly heard what he really meant. The Midgardians had a nice phrase for it. Go to hell.
Hello everybody,

Good news - without even searching I found a living, breathing equivalent to what I imagine Helblindi looking like. No surprise, he is British :P

Anyway, Loki is in Jotunheim and people are not glad to see him. Things happen. God, it took so long to finally get here, right? ;)

Have fun

Despite the biting cold the air was already sizzling. Heimdall was already reacting when Loki was still deciding if he should let it go or say something. He would have probably let it go.

“This is a diplomatic visit. The prince is to be addressed with his proper title."

What a promising start.

The mayor cocked his head, looking Heimdall up and down. “I am already doing the Lord a courtesy by talking in his language. Don’t question our hospitality.”

Loki took a little breath and hinted at a nod, telling Heimdall like this to take a step back. Of course he had had to expect people being hostile towards him and not acknowledging his royal rank was absolutely natural to them. If Loki was to start a fight about this every chance of reconciliation would vanish instantly. Loki wasn’t going to risk that. “Thank you for welcoming us. I am grateful that you took the time to pick us up.”

The mayor’s eyes darted back to Loki and while there was still no sympathy in them, he didn’t look actually angry which Loki interpreted as a little victory.

One of the officers opened the door for them and the mayor made an inviting gesture. “After you, my lord.”

Heimdall grimaced, but Loki knew he wouldn’t say anything. Just like nobody was going to call Loki a prince in Jotunheim. It was Heimdall and one of Loki’s security details who got into the car with him. Along with the mayor and two officers. It wasn’t going to be fun, with no words to say. At least there wasn’t a lack of scrutinizing glances. Loki could feel several pairs of eyes, running up and down his body, trying to take in every detail and then categorize it. How odd he had to seem to them. Someone so easy to despise, but also someone who was always far away, hard to grasp. More of a concept than a real person. Loki would be scrutinising himself too.

They were going over the details of the transfer and although Loki listened and made his own remarks, he couldn’t stop himself from looking out of the window. The night was pitch black and the snow which stuck to the window was pure white. A part of Loki wished that it were day, so he could actually see Jotunheim. Thousands of tourists came here every year to enjoy the country’s magnificent beauty and Loki had never been here.
Unfortunately Loki was sure that Útgarðar wasn’t going to show its most beautiful side tonight. Streets bursting with angry people, waving their fists.

The thought of that instantly reminded Loki of the knot in his stomach. It was painful and the knowledge that relief was still far away didn’t make it any better. For Loki it had been rather hard to realise and admit that he was scared. Which wasn’t an entirely new sentiment, but the circumstances definitely were. Despite being a public, political figure, Loki had never feared for his own safety during an event or a visit. Either the atmosphere had been calm and easy, nothing that would ever make Loki think that he might be in danger. Or security was all over him.

Now things were different. Loki was still in his own country, but still far away from home. There would be no support for him whatsoever and he definitely didn’t trust his hosts. As it turned out Loki had been wrong in his assumptions about the father and at the moment he hardly wanted anything more than being able to trust the son. After being burned so many times it seemed rather unlikely. Although none of it had really been Loki’s fault. So many things that just weren’t under his control. Impossible to handle.

Loki’s skin began to tingle, then to crawl. One of the officers was staring at him and clearly not trying to hide how his eyes were fixed on Loki’s face. Eyes on him were nothing new, Loki had got used to that from his earliest childhood. This was still different and it made Loki uncomfortable. Open hostility wasn’t something that Loki was very familiar with. Trying to ignore the penetrating gaze Loki kept looking out the window, watching the lights of the city approach.

What were one or three pairs of eyes against what was about to follow? Loki wasn’t going to speak into a camera and the ones watching him weren’t going to be friendly either. Would it be easier if Loki felt good about this speech? Words had immense power, nobody knew that better than Loki, but he also knew that at a certain point words couldn’t be enough. Again, he knew what to do. One big gesture for the beginning that would make perfectly clear that they are willing to make one step towards the Jotun population. It was right there, in sight even, only Loki didn’t have the ability to make that decision. Not legally.

His uncontrollable train of thought only stopped when there were more and more houses next to the street. Illuminated by the lights of the street lamps. Different from Valhalla. Beautiful timber frames and facades, cobbled pavements. More impressive and beautiful than on the countless photographs that Loki had seen. Nonetheless this place felt foreign, as if it wasn’t part of Asgard. A horrible thought to have, playing exactly into radical ideology.

Loki kept observing the city from the safety of inside the car and notices that of course it was still alive at this hour. People in the streets, little gatherings. No chaos, protests or screaming masses, they wouldn’t have taken that route. Still, Loki could feel the agitation and it made him even more nervous.

“Do you like the city?”

He almost flinched at the mayor’s question. “I do. What I can see in the darkness looks beautiful. I am curious to see it during the day.”

The conversation didn’t go any further and Loki thought that there was a good chance that the mayor thought he was lying. Eventually their car pulled up to a large, striking building that Loki recognized as the town hall. The car column passed a narrow get that led into the inner courtyard and finally the vehicle came to a halt. Loki bit the inside of his cheek as he waited for Heimdall to take over.

First the security details of the other two cars had to get out before Loki could set a single foot outside. It took less than two minutes until the security details had assured themselves that everything
was safe and Heimdall left the car. Loki followed.

It was another gorgeous place, looking even lovelier because lots of it was covered with fresh snow. Another time Loki would probably have really taken the time to check it all out, marvel at the architecture, but within seconds all of his attention was focused on something else. Someone else.

Helblindi and Býleistr were waiting for him in front of the big wooden gate that most definitely was the entrance. Judging by their faces smiles had become distant memories. Both were wearing long dark blue coats and snowflakes were tangled in their black hair. Loki wondered how long they had been standing here, waiting for him.

“Your highness, welcome to Útgarðar.” There was a mocking tone in Helblindi’s ‘your highness’ that hadn’t been there before. Nobody bowed their head, but Loki would be damned if he mentioned that.

“Thank you for greeting me and for your hospitality, my lords.” Loki found that it just as hard for him to smile as for them.

“We are rather surprised that somebody accepted our invitation.” Býleistr didn’t need to say anything else to make clear that Loki was a disappointment. Well, was he in for a surprise. At least Loki hoped so. The mayor greeted his princes and Loki pretended that he didn’t hear or understand the not so hidden insults and disrespect. Finally Helblindi took a step forward and gestured at the gate that was immediately being opened by two guards. “It’s cold outside. After you, your highness.”

That was all he said. As they walked through the corridors of the town hall Helblindi remained silent while Loki listened to the Jötunar whispers behind them. They met up with Laufey in a nice conference room and Loki put on his poker face. He wasn’t going to let this man see how Loki felt about his latest actions.

“Your highness. It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to Jotunheim. It honours you that you have listened to the pleas of your people and that you came here.”

Despite his best tries to read Laufey’s body language and tone Loki couldn’t figure out if he was being mocked or if the lord was being honest. Both would be equally confusing.

“I am here, because I strongly believe that the conflict that tears our nation apart can be mended. I am here to do everything that’s necessary to accomplish that.”

If they let him, because Loki doubted that it was in everybody’s interest. Thor would definitely be surprised that Loki hadn’t been kidnapped yet. Or killed.

“Please, sit down. Someone bring the prince a glass of water.”

As Loki took the seat that was offered to him he could hear Býleistr muttering about why Laufey was calling him a prince. His father reacted with a dark glance that shut Býleistr down and Loki pretended to be oblivious to all of that. In the meantime Helblindi had sat down opposite of Loki and Loki did his best to not look at him. This was a distraction that he absolutely didn’t need. Although he wanted to know if Helblindi’s perception had changed. Or if Loki was still the son of murderers and thief and therefore one himself.

“Thank you, my lord, but I don’t want to waste any time. I want to address the people as soon as possible. Explain the government’s actions and the necessity of the police raid.”

“Necessity?” Býleistr snorted and Loki had trouble keeping up his poker face. “Was it necessary to storm the work and living place of innocent people and drag them out on the streets?”
“No, it would not have been necessary, my lord if the Jotun forces would have agreed to cooperate with this issue. Things would have gone down much smoother that way.”

“Why would we support your despotism?”

Loki immediately felt the urge to yell, because what other adequate reaction was there if somebody showed such ignorance and twisted reality to make it fit into his ideology. Then again, there was no chance for success if Loki answered with success. It was necessary to remain calm, only then Býleistr might maybe realise that he was crazy. “Our definitions of despotism have to be quite different. There was an investigation. Þórirsson was arrested close to the scene and he confessed. He is a member of Frjáls and a raid of his living and work place was the next step in the investigation. A necessary step.”

“A confession obtained by the royal secret service doesn’t mean much. Did they arrest the black haired, blue eyed person in a one kilometre radius?”

_During Býleistr’s rant Loki’s eyes travelled to Helblindi who sat there in silence. His face didn’t give anything away. He could be agreeing with everything that his little brother said or believe that he was insane. Loki wouldn’t know._ “What you’re so subtly insinuating is ridiculous. Þórirsson is quite proud of what he did. His fingerprints are on the weapon. That man tried to murder my brother and due to the course of events it is without question that he didn’t act alone. Therefore it is absolutely necessary to find his accomplices.”

Býleistr already opened his mouth to voice another nasty thought, but Helblindi was faster than him and Loki noticed how quickly Býleistr pressed his lips back together. “Is that what you are going to tell the people?”

“I’m going to tell them the truth.”

Helblindi cocked his head and slightly arched one eyebrow. “That’s the funny thing about truth. Everybody acts like it’s an absolute, unshakable thing and yet every single person has their own version of it.”

“You asked me to come here to explain to the people what is happening. That’s I am going to do.”

“Nobody asked you to come.” Býleistr hissed and Laufey needed a single glance to make him fall silent. In that way he reminded Loki of his own father. Only Laufey’s stare was so much colder and Loki was sure it made everyone at the table uncomfortable.

“Anyway…” Loki cleared his throat. “I am talking on behalf of the royal family and like I said. I don’t want to lose any more time.”

“You can talk to them anytime you like.” Helblindi stated neutrally and Loki missed that passion in him. Ice blue eyes that burned with fire. “People are gathering in front of the building. Getting more by the minute. They are very curious about what you have to say.”

As the meaning of that sense reached Loki’s mind he needed to suppress a shiver and before he could ask any questions, Heimdall was speaking up. “If you are implying that the Duke of Glæsisvellir holds his speech on the balcony of this building, then that suggestion is as unacceptable as it is tasteless given the latest events.”

Ever so calm Helblindi turned to Heimdall. “It’s Jotun tradition for the sovereign to address the people from that particular spot. I am sure that the Duke is going to respect that. I understand your concerns, but I can guarantee you that our security measures are impeccable.”
The words ‘unlike yours’ were left unspoken but heard by everyone. Heimdall, naturally, wasn’t going to accept that. Loki on a balcony in front of a big square surrounded by tall buildings with windows. Impossible. While Loki couldn’t deny that the idea scared him, he also knew that it would send the perfect message. That they weren’t afraid. Not of the general Jotun population. That they were respected their traditions. Loki’s main concern was that any change of location would take time and they didn’t have any. More importantly it would send a wrong signal.

Heimdall was still laying out every point why this was unacceptable as Loki raised his hand and shook his head. “It is alright. It sounds like a good place. I will have a change of clothes and then I am ready to talk to them.”

“Your highness, I must protest. The security risk…”

“The decision has been made.”

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Tony was sure that the princeling had lost his mind. Not very surprising. It was bound to happen with all that stress and his refusal to rewind for longer than five hours. Now going to the part of the country that was completely going to shit after his brother had been shot, standing next to him. It was so incredibly stupid that Tony was absolutely sure that it had been the prince’s idea. That would be so like him to finally go there and do it himself, because he always knew better.

Idiot.

A smart idiot. These things existed. Tony should know, he was one himself. It kind of pissed him off that he couldn’t send Loki a message telling him that he was a fucking idiot and that he needed to have some sense slapped into him.

Gritting his teeth Tony turned up the volume of his TV although he wasn’t going to understand a word anyway. Couldn’t be much longer till the prince took the stage.

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“He can’t do that. Father, you need to call him and tell him that he cannot do this.” Thor knew that he was pleading and he didn’t care. In his stubbornness Loki was blind to all risks and he would go through with whatever plan he had come up with.

Odin’s face was a still mask as his eyes wouldn’t leave the TV. “Do you believe at this point there is anything I could say to your brother to stop him?”

“You’re his father and his king. If you forbid him to speak, he will have to respect that.”

Something like the hint at a smile ghosted over his father’s face, making Thor wanting to scream in despair. “Sometimes I wonder if you even know your brother. Nothing I could ever say to him would make him stop.”

“Then please call Heimdall and tell him to stop Loki from getting out there. It’s too dangerous.”

“Thor…” His mother walked around to kiss his temple and rest her hand on his shoulder. “You love your brother and therefore fear for him, but you must trust the ancestors to protect him like they protect you. Better. He is going to be fine. Trust your brother to find the words to reach these people. He knows that this is necessary. You have to believe that he is going to be fine.”

All of that was true, naturally, but this time Thor couldn’t find enough solace in trusting their
ancestors to protect Loki. Especially since both of his parents obviously had resigned to the idea that there was nothing they could do. Because Loki was so terribly stubborn.

So Thor could just sit there and wait for things to happen like they were supposed to be, without having any influence on them. There were so many people. A seemingly never ending crowd of pale, black-haired people. A so familiar setting to the 500 years anniversary celebrations and yet it couldn’t be more different. This wasn’t a crowd that had come there to have a good time or to actually listen. For them Loki was something like a foreign invader and they wanted to rip him apart.

And the people Loki was with right now weren’t any better. For all he knew the Ymirsons could even be acting nicely around Loki, they surely wanted him to fail. Wanted him humiliated and chased away by the people. There was no way Loki was safe there.

Thor’s heart sped up as Laufey stepped out. That tall man with that undeniable presence who was definitely going to turn this crowd against Loki before Thor’s little brother had even said a single word. Thor wished he could step in there and bring Loki right back home.

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Laufey didn’t say much and a part of Loki wished that he would continue to talk forever. So he wouldn’t have to take another step forward and face the reality of what he was going to do. Exposing himself in front of all these people who definitely only felt repugnance for him. It all depended on Loki being able to make them understand that they weren’t all that different and Loki wanted nothing more than to re-establish unity. Re-establish? Had it ever been there? Could it ever be there? If Loki was completely honest – he had no idea and he was afraid to find out.

Loki’s ears perked up as Laufey finished his short introduction. So that was it. Time to go out there and face the music. That was what he had always wanted, right? Taking charge himself, because Loki was always convinced that he knew so much better. Time to prove that to everyone. Especially to himself.

Laufey made a step back and Loki took a breath. No more thinking. This was what he was good at. Loki walked out and it resembled stepping into another world. It greeted him with hatred and animosity. Like a dark, impenetrable mist that engulfed him and eventually blocked his windpipe. Breathing instantly became a distant memory.

Underneath him was a sea of people, an indistinguishable mass that was vibrating and projecting so many emotions directly on him. None of them positive. For a few seconds Loki tried to make out different faces, finding actual people in this crowd. It turned out to be a severe mistake. There were no faces. Merely grimaces, distorted by anger and utter disdain. No matter where he looked it was all the same. Which wasn’t a surprise. Loki had known about this, but as it turned out actually experiencing it was something else entirely. He hadn’t known that being hated by someone could attack all of his five senses at the same time. Loki could see them loathing him and he could hear it. An unforgiving sound that violated his ears and made Loki want to curl up into a ball and disappear. Some of them were yelling at him, others seemed to only be screaming and the booing. Again, Loki had experienced loud crowds before, but this was deafening.

By putting his hands on the balustrade Loki tried to keep himself from shaking or even worse, falling down. He hadn’t known that it would feel like this. Probably similar to drowning. All around him, something that he couldn’t escape and what seemed to be physically attacking him. Or was this what proper humiliation felt like? Something far worse than his mother mangling with his private life. Being despised and regarded as dirt by so many people.

Swallowing softly Loki tried to tune out the sound of them voicing the disgust that they felt towards
him and told himself that this was a faceless, nameless crowd. Group dynamics. It could be swayed. Taking another half step forward Loki placed himself directly in front of the microphone, praying to his ancestors that he hadn’t lost his voice. All he had to do was to remember the words.

“People of Útgarðar. Brothers and sisters. Tonight I’ve come here before you to…”

He had no chance. The microphone couldn’t compete with the screaming and yelling that had only got worse since the second Loki had opened his mouth to speak. None of them was interested in what he had to say. They wouldn’t listen to him.

“I am not here to make excuses or give half-hearted explanation for what has happened during the last two days. I am here to try to find…”

The words died on his lips when he thought he couldn’t hear them anymore. But he could hear them, a couple of words that were being repeated, chanted. **Murderers. Thieves. Usurpers.**

“I…”

There was no getting through to them. Nothing Loki could say to get them to listen to him, to get them to at least give him a chance to make a case for himself or for his family. Loki saw no way to tear down the wall between them, it was too high and too dark.

Except…

Loki held on tighter to the balustrade as the thought washed over him. If he played all his cards, he would never be able to pretend that he hadn’t had them all along. There was no going back from there and Loki really didn’t want to do it. He thought of the songs of his childhood which only belonged to him and which he wouldn’t share with anybody. Even if he wanted to, Loki doubted that he could still do it. Such a long time ago.

Loki’s silence got lost in the screaming and yelling. When he looked at them, it became clear that they couldn’t go on like that. An entire part of the country hating them and if Loki could do something about that, then he had to.

At this time Loki’s heart was beating so fast in his chest that he feared it might be louder than his voice. The words tasted foreign on his tongue, like something he shouldn’t be saying. Loki stumbled on the first syllables, but he found out that it was easier if he just kept talking, giving a damn about his pronunciation. Just saying what he wanted to say.

“Jotuns, Asgardians, brothers and sisters. I know you are not fond of me or me being here. I cannot deny that this saddens me, but I would be lying if I told you that I didn’t understand. The last two days have been harsh on you and you have going through hardships that were unnecessary and which could have been avoided. It would have been my family’s duty to stop these things from happening although there is no absolute excuse, I am sure you understand that almost losing my brother two days ago took a toll on my family, taught us fear that we hadn’t known before. Fear that paralysed us and didn’t allow us to take care of the entire nation as we are supposed to. An unforgivable fault that I am now trying to correct. Therefore I need your help.”

As Loki dared to look at them again there were different faces but their expressions were similar. Wide eyes and parted lips. They were in shock. Untameable hatred had turned into something else. Something like wonder.

Now Loki could hear the sound of his heart beating. It was the only sound in complete silence. Hundreds of people had fallen silent and they were listening.
Exhaling softly Loki couldn’t to talk before the words would leave him.

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Not being able to comprehend what he was hearing Býleistr turned his brother who still hadn’t moved. Arms crossed in front his chest in an indifferent pose, but those unique, incredibly expressive eyes showed that he was experiencing the same kind of shock. “What’s going on? How does he know how to speak Jǫtnar?”

Helblindi shook his head. “I don’t know.”
Hello everybody,

I am back from vacation and here's your new chapter. Loki's speech and some of the reactions.

The remaining answers to the comments will still go out, don't worry.

Have fun :)

“I know I stand before you as a stranger, a fact that pains me and that I wish to change. I cannot do that without your help. You let me feel your anger and although I cannot right every wrong that has been committed during the last 500 years, I will try to find a compromise with Lord Laufey regarding the events that have dominated the politics of our country for the last weeks. My elder brother Thor, with whom I share blood and ancestors, was shot while trying to speak to his brothers and sisters. As the person who grew up with Thor nobody knows his flaws better than me. He has many of them, but our ancestors and the spirits evened those out with a big heart and much care. I was always the troublemaker, the one with the big mouth. Not because I spoke against my parents or my tutors, but because I would talk my friends into doing things to get them into trouble, then later on I would twist their words to underline my innocence. My brother was never like that. Whenever he messed up or even worse when he hurt someone, Thor would always own up to his mistakes. Also he would try everything in his might to undo the damage. Before Thor got shot he was about to do that, to ask for forgiveness for his mistakes and offer his apologies. He got robbed of that chance, so I have to do this for him. We are all just people. We try to live after the trúa and honour each other. But sometimes our worst sides get the best of us. This is what happened. My brother let himself be ruled by anger and got overwhelmed which he deeply regrets. On his behalf I ask for forgiveness. I sincerely hope the second son of Laufey will find in himself the generosity to grant it.”

Flaws

Rule

Robbed

Here and there Old Norse words were slipping into his discourse and Helblindi made mental notes of them. He had closed his eyes and tried to tap his fingers against his thigh to the rhythm of the other’s words. It wasn’t in the grammar but in the vocabulary and most of all in the pronunciation. Off ever so slightly and so easy to notice for any native speaker. Then the Old Norse that kept showing up whenever Loki didn’t have a word lying on his tongue. Alright, that seemed about enough to figure it out. Now what to do about it?

“Whatever my brother may have done and whoever was hurt by his actions, it didn’t give them the right to put themselves over the trúa. The man who shot my brother violated one of our most sacred rules. Not only that, he endangered every other person on the square. Lots of them were injured. Little children among them. None of that is acceptable. The man who took the shots was Jotun, a member of Frjáls and he was not acting alone. I am speaking from the heart when I tell you that I
want to protect my brother from further harm, but it is also my duty to protect all of you. Every citizen of this beautiful nation. We cannot deny what we have seen. Shots fired in a crowd of people. Panic. People stepping over each other. The ones responsible for this tragedy have already proven that they don’t value our sacred principles. They risk the lives of innocents. Frjáls has done this before when they set fire to public building without even knowing if everybody had left. We stand by and risk something like that happening again. That’s why officers were sent to this city, to find the accomplices of the man who wanted to take my brother’s life. Though mistakes have been made in how the investigation proceeded, there is no denying it its necessity. I have come to speak on behalf of my father, to cooperate with the Lord on the continuation of the investigation. It is something we should do together.”

Why now? There had been countless of opportunities before? Granted, none as good as this one with the big oaf of a brother out of the picture. Loki had kept his cards close to the chest and Helblindi wasn’t going to fault him for that, he was doing the very same.

Now he had to think of every word he had merely whispered in Jotnar next to Loki. Most of it absolutely harmless. Most of it. Perhaps he should feel embarrassed about this, but that wasn’t in Helblindi’s nature. He was rather intrigued. Curious to find out what reaction he had provoked at the time. Unfortunately his memory didn’t provide any detail, but at the time Helblindi hadn’t known that his words hadn’t met deaf ears.

“This is not the only thing we should do together. There are others. Hundreds. Trying to cross the damp that lies between us. That is not something that can be achieved in a single day. There have to be efforts made on both sides and my family is willing to do its part. There can be no rapprochement if we aren’t all equals and therefore the things that stop us from being equal need to be abolished. The Language Act is a relic of old and dark times. A testament to a King’s failure to show understanding and grace. A law that was upheld for centuries under the pretext of creating unity when it does nothing but divide us. I have met up with Lord Helblindi a few weeks ago, discussing possible paths our nation could go in the future. It has been our conviction then and it is our conviction now that the Language Act is archaic and has lived on way longer than it ever should have. Therefore I swore to him that the Language Act would be abolished. I don’t see any other way to earn your trust and to rebuild this broken relationship. This is a beautiful region full of history and it’s part of an equally beautiful country. I will not pretend that we don’t have hardships and difficulties to overcome, but I have no doubt that this wonderful country that we’re all part of can do that and so much more. If you find the grace to be willing to give us a chance. This is Asgard. Together we create our destinies. Not any other nation. Just us. Together. May your ancestors protect and your fylgja guide you.”

That one was brilliant. Helblindi should have written down notes. So much about wondering where the prince’s ambition had gone. There was no recent speech in Helblindi’s memory that was as ambitious as this one. It took a lot of guts or cold blood to be this willing to throw one’s entire family under the bus. To put his father and brother on the spot on national television. Not that Helblindi cared very much, because what Loki just did there would have the most wonderful consequences for Jotunheim if the next cards were played right. Still, one had to wonder about the prince’s motives. Because either this was a bold and reckless move to put himself on the throne or Loki really felt that this was his moral obligation.

Perhaps a combination of the both. The next couple of days were going to be definitely interesting.

The silence after Loki had stopped talking lasted several seconds and to Helblindi that alone was a little bit of magic. The offspring of Búri, the man they all cursed in their prayers and letters to their ancestors, was standing in the heart of Jotunheim and had made a crowd of Jotuns listen to him. That alone was an almost unachievable task. It became even stranger. So much that Helblindi couldn’t be
sure of anything anymore.

Of course they weren’t cheering. They could never be cheering for a descendent of that forsaken usurper. That could ever happen, Helblindi didn’t think that it was in their DNA. For him the atmosphere felt rather awkward, bordering on confused. A Búrison was talking to them, so how should they ever believe a single word that was leaving his mouth? Given his ancestors Loki was prone to lie and to cheat. But no Búrison was ever going to offer them the Language Act, not even as a means to an end. They would never go as far as publicly put their greatest weapon into question. It was unthinkable. Yet Loki had just done that merely one minute ago and they didn’t know how to react to that. They couldn’t trust him. He didn’t care like all of them. So how was he able to speak Jotnar? Would they really go that far to feign interest?

No, it just didn’t make any sense. Why would a member of that crude family humiliate themselves by learning the one language they despised so much that they wanted it to disappear from the surface of the earth? The mere prospect of using that language had to disgust them. Yet they had all heard it. A Búrison using that language in an official speech was as big of a contradiction as there could be.

They were confused, unable to make sense of what had just happened and that was perfectly okay. The next days were going to show where the wind was going to blow and Helblindi was going to make sure that he had some influence on how that was going to happen.

So no cheers, but they applauded. Hesitantly, not sure what was happening to them. That was miracle enough.

Helblindi wouldn’t trust the miracle immediately, he was going to get to the bottom of it and find out what could work out for him and what not.

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It wasn’t the usual kind of sickness. Loki was under the distinct feeling that he could bend over and throw up everything that was still in his stomach any second. The idea even seemed tempting. Shouldn’t it be a relief?

How did people feel who were standing at the edge of a cliff and finally decided to jump? Shouldn’t it be a liberating to fall, because you’ve finally made that step and there was no turning back? Ending that numbing internal struggle if you should do it or not. Or maybe it made everything worse. Because now you were falling and after the fall came the inevitable crash. Loki wondered if it was going to break his bones.

A little part of him was dancing, whistling with joy. Ignoring the reasonable part that knew that the consequences would be rough. Dancing and whistling because he also knew that history was being written right now and Loki was directing the pen. Sure, a history should be content experiencing events that change society and analyse them afterwards. Still, for once Loki turned out to be that change and was there anything that he wanted more. It scared him how quickly he could think of something that he might desire equally.

“My lord…

Turning around Loki stepped back inside, his ears humming with the sound of silence. Yes, he had heard the tentative applause, but it didn’t matter to him. How could it ever mean as much as the silence? A Búrison standing in front of a Jotun crowd without them shouting at him that they wanted to flay him alive. Writing and defining history.

He had to think of his father’s stern and disapproving eyes. The disappointment on his face. Thor’s
shock and following anger.

Loki wanted to vomit so badly.

Trying to distract him from his own wariness Loki took a look around and immediately felt smothered by the tension around him. Seemingly his speech had had the same effect here as on the people outside. The few staff members present and the mayor didn’t even try to hide their astonishment. Loki was confronted with wide, disbelieving eyes that he could feel sticking to his skin.

The Ymirsons, of course, were as always sustaining their noble grace. Well, Laufey and Helblindi were. Býleistr put the same reaction as everybody else on display. Maybe even worse so. Not that it mattered much to Loki, he was way more interested in the father and the eldest son. So much that he hardly dared to look at them in fear of seeming eager.

It should be scary sovereign Laufey was in any kind of situation. Loki tried to remember seeing him smile, but he couldn’t think of any occasion. Instead he was standing there and although Loki must have defied all of his expectations, destroyed all of his plans for today, he looked composed, almost disconnected. Probably this was the kind of man that didn’t give himself the time to be confused or surprised, in his mind he was already going through multiple scenarios how to get an advantage out of his new turn of events.

About Helblindi… perhaps he was just as shocked like everybody else, but since there was grace in anything he did, it was impossible for him to appear the same way like the others. Loki glanced at those ice blue eyes and he wasn’t so naïve to believe that behind them he wasn’t being analysed and picked apart. Nonetheless his lips were slightly parted, those perfect eyes a little bit narrowed and Loki was scared beyond words.

“I would like to talk to the prince in private. Will you follow me, your highness?” Without waiting for Loki to answer Laufey casually left the room and a staff member made an inviting gesture for Loki to go after him. Swallowing down the rising bile in his throat Loki refused to take a deep breath since the others would see it. The hardest part had already been done. What else could make him shudder?

“Thank you.” Loki said with firm voice and in Old Norse as he slowly followed Laufey through the door. A most beautiful salon waited for him on the other side. A burning chimney, a priceless carpet and comfy chairs. The door was closed behind him and as Loki was still checking out his surroundings and trying to prepare himself for whatever Laufey had in mind.

“I figure you prefer white over red?” Laufey’s back was to him while he opened a bottle at the most impressive bar. The words were in Jǫtnar and Loki suppressed a shudder at the thought of actually having a conversation in this language. They still seemed foreign, something so far away, almost unreal. “White.” Loki eventually replied in his mother tongue and Laufey didn’t bother to look at him to scold him. “You’ve just held a spontaneous political discourse completely in Jǫtnar. A single word shouldn’t cause that much discomfort.”

Inwardly Loki cursed himself and then decided that he could easily do this. Who else but him? He was the only one willing to compromise. There Loki quickly weighed the words on his tongue, still feeling awkward using them. “Yes, I prefer white.”

Another absurd scenario. The head of the house Ymirson, the Lord of Jotunheim was here in this room with him and preparing him a drink. He was providing a service for Loki. Like a servant. He would have never thought that Laufey might do anything of that kind. The Lord did exactly that though, eventually he handed Loki a glass of white wine in a crystal glass and held up his own for a
toast. “To your discourse.”

Not saying anything Loki held up his own glass before taking a slight sip. Too much would probably make him dizzy at the moment. After they sat down Loki waited for Laufey to say whatever he had in mind. It didn’t take long.

“You did a very courageous thing today, your highness.”

Loki fight the urge to squirm, Laufey’s had the most intense gaze he had ever felt on his skin. Trying to figure him out, perhaps even looking beneath Loki’s skin.

“The people wanted somebody to come to them and explain to them what is happening. I was merely doing my duty as a member of the royal family.” There, Laufey should know that Loki didn’t consider himself anything less.

Tilting his head to the side Laufey kept his eyes fixed on Loki, studying every expression. He almost sounded amused but not mocking. Seriously engaged. “You did more than that. A lot more. You told the truth and I believe that you meant it. What I do not believe is that you are speaking for your entire family.”

So he was being tested again.

“Would I be here if that wasn’t the case? You are right about something else, I meant what I said and there are negotiations to be had between our two families. About the reorganisation of the administration after the abolition of the Language Act. We also need you to publicly endorse the service of non-Jotun police forces within Jotunheim. Complete cooperation between our families and forces in the investigation of the assassination attempt on my brother.”

They were playing poker and Loki was willing to put all on the line.

Then he saw Laufey smile. Ever so slightly. It wasn’t as uncomfortable as Loki had imagined it.

“You know that things don’t happen so fast, your highness. It is not my decision what is going to happen next. The ones you just talked to, they will decide. If they decide that they want what you offered, you can count on any kind of cooperation that I can offer you. Until then you are my guest. I advise you to enjoy the beauty of Jotunheim. You would be the first member of your family to do so in centuries. The people would take kindly to that.”

Loki licked his lips unsurely and took a sip from his wine to hide it. “I am glad to see that you are also looking for a quick common solution.”

No way that it could be this easy. Laufey had already come up with something else, Loki just knew it. Why hadn’t he asked him about being able to speak Jǫtnar? Why on earth would he ever suggest something that would possibly warm up the Jotun population to a member of the royal family? Was he laying out a trap? Did he hope that Loki would eventually show the same stubbornness like Odin or Laufey himself?

It was him who had asked for the Jǫtnar lessons months ago. Loki had talked about the abolition of the entire Language Act. That was more than he had asked for. Yet it wasn’t enough. In that moment Loki could feel it. Suddenly he realised under Laufey’s stare that his father was perfectly right. This charismatic and strong man thought himself a king and only the crown would eventually be enough.

That was something Loki would worry about another day.

Perhaps the Lord of Jotunheim was capable of reading his thoughts. “My biggest interest is the wellbeing of my people. I am willing to cooperate if I can be sure that your intentions are in their
favour. If I can be sure that your promises don’t turn out to be empty words because your father and your brother don’t share your opinions nor your strategies.”

Although Loki doubted that he could fool him, he wouldn’t back off. “I have told you before – I speak for the royal family.”

That smile was still on Laufey’s face. “And what interesting words you chose to do just that.”

There. Finally.

Loki waited for the question, going over all possible answers in his head.

The question never came. Loki wondered what kind of game this was. Wasn’t he asking to show Loki that he didn’t care? That it ultimately didn’t matter to him?

“I always use interesting words. It is kind of my thing.”

“I am looking forward to find out what everybody else is thinking of them.” Laufey drank up half of his glass, then put it away. “You must be tired after your long flight and these stressful couple of hours. You are guest of the house Ymirson. I will have one of our drivers escort you to the estate. There will be time to continue this conversation tomorrow.”

Everything about his tone made clear that there was no debate about this. It served Loki just right, he was indeed tired and he needed some time alone to think about what to say to his father. It was a sheer miracle that the call hadn’t come yet. “Thank you, I appreciate and accept your hospitality.”

Nodding softly Laufey stood up and led Loki to the door. “Good night, your highness.”

Loki had half a food out of the door when Laufey added something. “Eventually your father will be very proud of what you did today.”

Yes, Loki thought so too, but he didn’t understand why Laufey would care. It was most probably another calculated move to confuse him. He wouldn’t play into Laufey’s cards by thinking too much about it.

The next couple of minutes passed in a blur. Loki was led outside into another stunning car and Heimdall was sitting next to him. He was immensely thankful that there was no attempt to make conversation although Heimdall definitely had the same questions like everybody else. The drive to the city house of the Ymirsons didn’t take long and the staff awaited them at the door. Even now Loki longed to see this house in daylight. It surely looked like a marvel. The reception hall was vast, a lot of dark wood. Rustic and luxurious at the same time. It had to be the strangest thing that Loki actually found the home of the Ymirsons inviting. That thought made him smile as the staff told him that he was going to lead him to the guest wing.

“That will not be necessary. I will look after the guest of honour.”

Loki’s head flung up and he saw Helblindi casually strolling down the huge stairs. Right, he should have known that the challenges hadn’t been over for today. As soon as Helblindi had reached the last step he slightly bowed his head and showed a smile. Though he hadn’t seemed particularly hostile two hours ago, his demeanour was a lot warmer now. Sure, all of them were planning something, including Loki. Helblindi dismissed the staff member and turned to Loki. “I will lead you to your chambers if you please.”

He was speaking Old Norse.
Helblindi was also still the best shot Loki had of pulling this entire thing off. Unlike Laufey he seemed to be willing to talk and cooperate. At least he had been. Maybe Loki could get him there again. Loki quickly told Heimdall that it was alright. He needed an opportunity to talk in private.

After another smile and Helblindi made an inviting gesture before leading Loki away. They were walking down a long, beautiful hallway when Helblindi spoke up. “I liked your speech.”

“Thank you.”

“Your rhythm was uneven though and your pronunciation needs a lot of work. So much I actually started to wonder if you were able to understand me if I were to start a conversation.” The switch from Old Norse Ætnar was smooth and sounded so perfectly easy.

Laufey hadn’t mocked him, so now it was Helblindi’s turn? Well, had Loki actually expected this family to be impressed? He wasn’t impressed by the feedback either. “I understand you perfectly fine.” Loki replied dryly, trying to make it sound as good as possible.

Helblindi stopped and when he looked at Loki his smile had turned into a smirk. “So I can assume that you also understood perfectly well what I said to you at the dinner for the ambassadors.”

Loki felt his whole body tensing up, his heart skipping only one beat before he had himself under control again. He felt positive that he hadn’t shown any visible reaction. That didn’t mean he didn’t feel his chest tightening. Raising his chin ever so slightly Loki answered “Yes, I understood.”

There was no way to deny anticipation, he scrutinized Helblindi’s face to be able to guess what he was going to see, but everything Loki imagined was very far off. Helblindi continued to smirk and then walked further down the hall. “You need to roll the ‘r’ more. You sound like you’re coming up with a really bad cold.”

Was he serious? Frowning and feeling the slightest bit annoyed Loki followed him another couple of steps before Helblindi stopped and opened the door to his left. “It’s one of the most beautiful rooms in the house. I am sure that you will find every comfort imaginable, but if you still find something missing, do not hesitate to let the staff know. I assume you want to visit Útgarðar tomorrow. Being a magnificent tour guide is one of my many talents. I will meet you tomorrow morning at 7:30 for breakfast. I wish you a most pleasant night, your highness.”

Helblindi bowed his beautiful head and walked away before Loki had the chance to say anything. After closing the door behind him, Loki leaned back against it and released a long, shaky breath. The bed looked rather tempting from over here. Before Loki had finished that very thought his phone went off.

His father.

Running one hand through his hair Loki tried to steel himself for the impending conversation. That one was going to be worst of all.
Little lies

Chapter Notes

Hey everybody,

Loki is still in Jotunheim and everybody is pretty confused. Except Helblindi. He is a pain ;)

Have fun, answers to your comments are on the way

The expression in Thor’s eyes was completely unfamiliar to Jane. It evoked the strong fear within her that being shot would essentially change the man she knew. That he would perhaps lose some of that almost child-like sweetness that she loved so much about him.

It was sucking all strength out of her, that constant fear. First for Thor’s life and now of the consequences. An unknown feeling that Jane would have never thought to be someday part of her life. Having to see her fiancé break down on live television, only to realise that somebody had shot him. Being escorted to the hospital and going through the worst hours of her life. The not-knowing. If Thor would live or die. Or what kind of life he was going to have if he should survive.

Now Thor was sitting just next to her. Unusually pale, his arm in a sling and a bandaged shoulder. He was going to be completely fine and yet Jane was still trapped in a dark hole of insecurity. The shooter had been caught, yes, but Jane wasn’t deaf. She had heard her future father in law, Thor and even some of the ministers talk. A single man alone could not have done it. It was the work of a terrorist organisation and that idea made Jane want to grab Thor’s hand and run.

Those things weren’t supposed to happen in European, first world countries. Clean streets, brightly illuminated at night, safe to walk around, hospitals open and ready to take you in 24/7. No, this was the place where Jane should never have to worry about her fiancé getting shot. She should have to worry about that nowhere. This wasn’t what she had bargained for. Marrying a prince that was going to be a king Jane had thought about a golden cage and corsets. Perfect manners, seeing Thor way too rarely and being photographed every single time she took a step outside.

All things that she had been willing to accept. Thor being shot at? No. That was something she couldn’t do. And now? What was going to happen now?

Loki had gone to Jotunheim which had been an immense relief, because it allowed Thor to stay here in safety. Sure, she was worried about Loki, but most of her time was spent watching Thor and trying not to feel a cold shudder running down her spine whenever she saw the sling.

From the very second she had met him Jane had known that this man was going to change her life. She had never been really afraid before yesterday. God, Jane hadn’t known what actual fear was.

Now they were here and Thor wore that expression that Jane didn’t know and which was worrying her. There was shock and something quite dark. Something that Jane couldn’t put her finger on. Everybody but her was staring at the TV screen, listening to what Loki was saying and for once Jane wasn’t the only one who had trouble understanding him.
“What is he doing? What by all the spirits is he doing?!”

Thor’s voice went through all the possible volumes. From a whisper to almost a shout and Jane winced, instinctively putting a hand on his good shoulder. “Hon…”

Obviously Thor didn’t hear her or didn’t care. His eyes were fixed on the screen, staring at his younger brother who was still speaking. Although Jane was concentrating on her fiancé she didn’t miss that Loki looked even paler than usual. Sure, he had to be scared, who was crazy enough to suggest he should talk to the people on a balcony. Especially after what happened to Thor just… Jane shook her head to rid herself of the feeling that her throat was closing up.

“Your brother is talking to them. He’s trying to reach them.” Unlike her son’s Frigga’s voice was soft and calm, she was always trying to reassure everyone. Unfortunately she wasn’t able to do much at the moment. Thor’s eyes were wide, his lips parted and his entire body showed off his bewilderment. “Mother, he’s speaking Jótnar! I had no idea he was able to do that! Did any of you know? How? We can’t even tell what he is saying!”

“Interpreters are already working on the translation. We’ll have it as soon as Loki has finished his speech.” To Jane Odin sounded strangely neutral, matter-of-fact. Detached almost. Maybe that was necessary in his position. Jane wouldn’t want to switch places with him. One child getting shot and the other one was putting himself in the exact same position. It was horror.

“Father, did you…”

Odin raised his hand and Thor immediately fell silent. “I had no idea.”

“Your brother is a very gifted person, Thor. He has always had a gift for languages. He must have learned it like he has learned other languages…” Frigga offered Thor a small smile, almost somewhat timid.

Thor turned to her. “Yes, I understand that, mother, but when? That has to take years! How can he learn such a complex language without any of us knowing and why didn’t he tell anybody? This is a pretty huge thing to keep a secret.”

“Your brother will tell us eventually. Now we just have to hope that whatever he is telling them is going to have the desired effect. Trust your brother, he knows what he is doing.”

Nodding to what his mother was saying Thor pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a deep breath. Once more Jane felt like an outsider in their world, not able to comprehend why Thor was upset or why Odin seemed completely lost in thought. It didn’t matter too much anyway. Jane’s desire to make Thor feel better was stronger than her unease. She grabbed Thor’s hand and pressed a kiss on it. There was no visible reaction, but Jane thought that she could hear Thor breathe a little easier.

Still, Thor kept asking the very same question. “Why did he keep this from us?”

As the speech finally ended and when Loki left the balcony Jane could feel a lot of the tension finally leaving the room. Not all of it, of course. It only took another minute before a staff member entered the salon, bowed his head and handed out sheets of paper. It was a translated transcript of Loki’s speech.

Odin calmly took his while Thor pretty much ripped it from the staff’s hand. Jane glanced over his shoulder, but since the translation turned out to be written in Old Norse it was pretty useless.

Once more the face of Thor’s father remained completely blank while Thor seemed almost disturbed by what he was reading. Inside of Jane worry was rising quickly and when she wanted to ask Thor
what was going on, he was already lowering the sheet, staring at his father. “He cannot do that. He
doesn’t have the right to make those kinds of decisions. He just promised them something that he has
no power to do. Why is he doing that? Why is he trying to force your hand without even…”

Thor trailed off when Odin stood up and turned his back to them. “I will talk to Loki.”

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His heart was probably two beats away from jumping right into his mouth. Breathing in deeply
through his nose Loki slowly walked over to a chair and sat down. This was going to be a hardship.

What Loki had done had been completely necessary. This was definitely the best way to stop their
country from further drifting apart. From people wanting to tear each other into shreds when they
were really brothers and sisters.

Loki accepted the call and focused on keeping his voice steady. “Father.”

“Are you alright, Loki?”

Not the first question that he had expected. His father sounded concerned and Loki suddenly felt
bad. “Yes, I am doing okay. I am sure Heimdall is keeping you updated. Everybody is treating me in
an appropriate way.”

“You are staying at the Ymirson’s townhouse?”

Odin already knew where he was, but Loki answered nevertheless. “Yes. I know this line is safe, but
I am also pretty sure that the room I am staying in is bugged. So…”

“That is alright. We are not going to go into details. I am sure you can imagine what was going on
when all of us watched your speech.”

The reproach was audibly, but it was a lot more subtle than Loki would have expected. “I can
imagine.”

“I don’t really think you can.”

“Father, what I did…”

“No, Loki. You will have to explain when you come back. Not just to me. Regardless of what I
think of what you said during your speech… you will have to discuss it with Thor. Very soon your
brother is going to make these decisions and therefore you don’t have to explain things to me but to
him. You threw everybody a curve ball here.”

Again, not exactly what Loki had expected. Especially now. All these years Odin had been
unbending when it came down to the Language Act and now he pulled back, because Thor was
going to be king soon?

“I will gladly explain my reasoning to Thor. I stand behind it.”

“I want you to come home first thing in the morning.”

So they were going to fight anyway. “I am going to stay. At least a couple of days. I cannot show up
here, make a few promises and then run off again. I want to understand this place, talk to people.
Show them we’re not what they think we are. Also I was invited to stay. It would be an affront to
immediately leave again. I am sorry, but there is no discussion to be had.”
At the other end of the line there was silence. Loki feared to get dizzy, because silence was worse than shouting. At least in Loki’s opinion.

“Do I need to give you an order as your king?”

“You know I am right, father.”

Silence once more.

“No matter what they might tell you and no matter how reasonable or good it may sound, do not trust them. Because no matter what you tell or offer them, they will not trust you. All we can ever hope for is some form of compromise, but no actual cooperation. Despite everything they might say, they only see in us the thieves that stole their place. They won’t hesitate to put a knife into your back if you turn your back to them.”

There was more than the usual contempt that Loki had heard a million times before. There was even more worry. “I know, father. I am anything but naïve. You know that.”

“I definitely hope so, Loki.” Odin paused for a second. “It’s strange. I am severely disappointed and proud at the same time.”

Feeling choked up Loki didn’t know what to say. “Father…”

“Heimdall is not leaving your side, do you hear me? You are not taking a single step alone in that city. Our security, not theirs.”

“I understand.”

“Good… Take care. Your fylgja will guide and protect you and so will our ancestors.”

By the time their conversation ended Loki felt exhausted. He let his head fall back and stared at the ceiling. So here he was. In the guestroom of the Ymirsons. In Jotunheim. Loki couldn’t tell if his father had merely gone easy on him and if the great storm was still coming. There had to be consequences since Loki had acted completely on his own and was obviously trying to force the abolition of the Language Act on his father. Was he really so tired that he was willing to now completely step aside and let Thor deal with this mess?

No, Loki didn’t want to think about any of that for at least half an hour. Try to let some of the tension slip away. Most probably it wasn’t going to work anyway, but Loki could try, right? Standing up Loki walked around the room to find that his luggage had already been placed next to the bed. Loki didn’t feel any need to touch it.

Now that he didn’t need to talk in front of half of Jotunheim any second, Loki had other things come back to his mind. Licking his lips Loki grabbed his phone and called Leah. His secretary answered immediately. “Your highness, what can I do for you?”

“Hello Leah, would you please the Engelen hospital and ask on my behalf for Agent Barnes? I would like how he is doing. Since I have no idea how the insurance of American DS agents works, tell them that if they’re any costs that aren’t covered, I will take care of that.”

“Of course, your highness. Would you like to leave a personal message?”

“No, that’s not necessary. I will call him myself eventually.”

“Anything else I can do for you?”
“Nothing I can think of at the moment.”

“I see, but there is something I have for you. Tony Stark called the office just a few hours ago.”

For a second Loki was confused, but then he remembered the security protocol in case of an attack on the royal family. Immediate change of all the codes and numbers. Which meant that Tony Stark, merchant of death, genius, billionaire and constant annoyance, didn’t have Loki’s phone number anymore. Which he should have never had in the first place. “What did he want?”

“Since he didn’t know how to reach you, he left a recorded message for you. If you wish to hear it, I can send it to your phone.”

“Yes, please do so. Good night, Leah. Get some sleep.”

“Good night, your highness.”

Hanging up Loki sat down on the bed and lay down, waiting for the beep. It came and with it the message that Leah had promised him. After releasing a soft sigh Loki played the message and pressed the phone to his ear.

“Hey there, your highness. Shit is going down at your place, isn’t it? Not the right time to be funny, I know. Listen, I hope your brother is doing fine. This is really… some awful shit that happened and I am not surprised that you’re trying to fix everything by yourself, because let’s face it – you’re a complete control freak. You definitely have better things to do than listening to my ramblings, but I still felt like I needed to tell you I hope you’re doing alright and although that’s a pretty rough situation… you’ll still kick some ass anyway. Oh and send me your new number, I have no idea what to do with myself if I can’t push your buttons. Anyway, take care.”

It was then that Loki realised that he was smiling. Who was he to deny that it felt good to have somebody worrying about him? Then again, Loki knew that a lot of people were worrying about him. He would have to call him eventually, let him know how Loki was doing. As soon as he knew that himself.

Struggling back up to his feet Loki opened his suitcase and got out the things he needed and then headed for the bathroom. The shower he took was very short and afterwards Loki instantly crawled into bed. The second he closed his eyes he felt more awake than before.

Tomorrow wouldn’t be any easier than today. A million times harder probably. Because Helblindi was going to dictate where they were going and what was going to happen and thinking about that made Loki’s skin crawl. He couldn’t help but think of his father’s words. No, there was no reason to worry. Loki was far from trusting anyone. At times he wondered if he trusted himself.

The night was short and Loki estimated that he had closed his eyes for about two hours. It was a couple of minutes past 6 am, but Loki slipped out of bed anyway. He took his time in the bathroom and then was confronted with an almost impossible task. Choosing what he was going to wear. There would be photos and videos and everything would be scrutinised. People would try to find secret messages and symbolism in every little detail. Loki could wear blue to show his respect for the Ymirions, but people could interpret that as him trying too hard. Nobody could fault him for wearing green, it was his colour after all. Something a bit informal since they were going to visit the city, Loki didn’t want to come off as the posh member of royalty that was here to control his subjects.

Eventually Loki slipped into a white shirt and wore a green V-neck sweater over it. Adjusting the white collar Loki inspected his appearance in the mirror and was anything but content. He looked way to pale and his hair was just wrong. Already feeling miffed Loki brushed the loose strands
behind his ears and then splashed some water onto his face. What was the point anyway? Nobody looked good if they were being photographed next to Helblindi Ymirson.

Nonetheless Loki spent the next 10 minutes in the bathroom, trying to make him somewhat presentable. He still wasn’t content when there was a knock on his door. Showtime.

The staff member was a young man with light blue eyes and pitch black hair. A light smile was playing around his lips and that was enough to startle Loki. He hadn’t expected to have many Jotun smiles coming his way. “Good morning, my Lord. Would you please follow me? Lord Helblindi is expecting you.”

Since he was speaking in Jótnar Loki answered the same way and he could see how the young man tensed up for a second. Then he quickly gestured Loki to follow him. Only now Loki actually looked at his surroundings. As to be expected the town house was gorgeous. Completely different from the palace. Much more wood, not as bright but still inviting. Loki was led to a splendid dining room. Normally the massive ebony table decorated with marvellous marquetry should be the quite the eye-catcher. Not now. Not when Helblindi was sitting at it, reading some newspaper.

“My Lord. Lord Búrison.”

Looking up from the newspaper Helblindi smiled and Loki had no idea how he was supposed to get through this day. “Thank you, Kari. Your highness, good morning. Sit down. I hope you have slept well.”

“I did, thank you.” Loki sat down and took in the fully set table. Everything that one could desire for a healthy breakfast. Too bad that Loki’s stomach was already rebelling. “Go ahead, enjoy.”

Loki took a quick look at Helblindi’s plate and wasn’t very surprised to see only vegetables and dark bread. Well, Loki wasn’t going to pretend to not love fried bacon. His stomach would have to take one for the team. “Your father and your brother will not join us for breakfast?”

“My father is in a meeting and my brother usually spends this time of the day in the gym. I am the late riser of the family.”

“That’s somewhat hard to believe.”

Helblindi shrugged, smiled and then put a slice of a green bell pepper into his mouth. Loki took a croissant and pondered what he could say to start a conversation, but Helblindi beat him to it. “Since you’ve never been in Jotunheim before I planned the usual tourist program. First a trip through the old town and then we’ll check out the library. From the roof terrace you have an amazing view over the city. By then it will be time for lunch and I know just the place.”

Checking out the old town, Loki wondered if that meant that people were off the streets finally. “That sounds good. I’m looking forward to it. I’d like to check out the news if I may.”

“Sure, I was finished anyway.” Helblindi handed him the newspaper and Loki let his eyes run over the runes, swallowing softly. What a stupid thing to forget.

“Something wrong?” Of course Helblindi wasn’t just asking. He was lurking, something similar to a smirk playing around his lips. Maybe he already knew and Loki wouldn’t be able to keep it a secret anyway. Keeping his face blank Loki folded the newspaper and laid it down on the table. “I can’t read it.”

Helblindi arched an eyebrow. “You cannot read Jótnar runes, but you are able to speak it?”
Loki shrugged nonchalantly. “My studies were focused on conversation skills.”

Letting out a soft and clearly dismissive huff Helblindi shook his head. “I so don’t believe you.”

No, he wasn’t going to do him the favour and show Helblindi that he was feeling uncomfortable. “My Lord, you will forgive me, but it doesn’t really matter if you don’t believe me.”

“Your highness, you might find out that my opinion is the only one that matters… if you really intent to realise everything that you talked about in your speech.” The smugness was unbearable and even worse so, because Helblindi might be right.

“Would you even be willing to cooperate? The last time we talked you called me the spawn of murderers and thieves. You didn’t want have anything to do with the likes of me.” Loki wasn’t going to make this easy, no way.

Laufey’s son just kept smirking. “I am probably the least stubborn member of my family. My opinions can be changed and since you’ve mentioned my in your speech… you are pretty much forcing me to cooperate with you, aren’t you? This sounds a lot like a conspiracy.”

“I don’t like that word. You said that your first priority is Jotunheim and the wellbeing of your people. Not anything else. Not the history of your families or the grudges we’ve been holding. If that’s true, then we have the same intentions, but I cannot achieve anything if you turn to your people and tell them I am full of shit. We’ve been here before. The both of us could change the way things are going. I think I proved that I am willing to go all the way by what I did yesterday. I am just hoping that you will do the same the next time you are talking to your people.” Loki didn’t take his eyes off him and finally Helblindi turned a lot more serious. “I must admit I did not expect what I’ve heard yesterday and I am mildly impressed. Anyhow, that doesn’t mean that I am completely convinced and ready to get back into the boat that I jumped off a few weeks ago. You are smart, your highness and smart people always have an ulterior motive. So you will have to give me some time to figure you out and decide if I believe in your intentions.”

Fair enough, Loki hadn’t expected to find immediate support. “You realise you just admitted having an ulterior motive yourself?”

And the smirk was back. “Lots of them… but we’re here to establish trust, aren’t we? Tell me a story, your highness. How did you learn how to speak Jǫtnar?”

Loki made a vague gesture. “It has clear political value. I got a teacher. As simply as that.”

Crossing his arms in front of his chest Helblindi leaned back. His smile was pure bite. “Isn’t that most wonderful? We are talking here about establishing trust and the first thing you do is lying to me. I don’t know if I am supposed to feel hurt or intrigued.”

Ignoring his rapidly beating heart Loki took a bite of his croissant to buy himself some time. “Why do you think that I am lying?”

“Political value. A private teacher. Your tight schedule. That’s hard to keep a secret. You’re a perfectionist. You wouldn’t have settled for anything less than a native speaker as your teacher. A Jotun. Even harder to keep a secret. Impossibly so. You can’t have been taking lessons that long. Here’s the problem. The speech yesterday. This conversation we’re having right now. You are speaking way too well.”

Now Loki was the one to offer him a smug grin. “Perhaps I am just that good. Perhaps I am a language prodigy.”
“No, no, no. You are not. I can tell, because I am.”

Of course he was. Loki was tempted to roll his eyes.

Helblindi continued, completely relaxed. “I haven’t noticed a single grammatical error despite a fairly complex syntax. Every now and then you use Old Norse words instead the Jöttnar equivalent. The main thing is your pronunciation. It’s weird. You’re off so many times. It’s like you didn’t have a lot of opportunities to talk. As if you aren’t familiar with the right rhythm. So no. No conversation courses. Try again.”

Loki closed his hand around his cup of coffee, but he didn’t dare to pick it up. Damn that man. Damn him for making everything so much more difficult. “Do you want to talk about how I acquired my language skills or should we discuss my ideas how to get the Language Act abolished and get our people to trust each other again even if our families should prefer to keep this feud going?”

Helblindi’s ice blue eyes were fixed on Loki’s face and them being distractingly beautiful didn’t make Loki feel any better. Eventually Helblindi nodded, but Loki had no illusions about him letting this go. “Alright, I’m listening. Let me in on the conspiracy and I will tell you everything that is wrong with it.”
Hello everybody,

Here we go, things develop a life on their own :/  

Have fun :D

With a faint smile on his lips Tony closed the e-mail. He hadn’t decided yet if he found it annoying or charming that the kid sent him an update on his grades without anybody having ever asked for it. Given that perfect record one would suspect that the kid wanted to show off, but Tony knew it to be otherwise. Peter probably wasn’t physically able to brag, he would be too busy blushing. Anyway, Tony eventually decided that it was cute that was being regularly updated. Mostly because Peter felt obligated to do that, although Tony had told him a couple of hundred times that it wasn’t necessary. Hell, he had told him that Tony would be prefer it if Peter enjoyed his college life and didn’t call at all.

Well, that didn’t happen. Didn’t matter, an email here and now wasn’t enough to really get on Tony’s nerves. He had the board and an army of lawyers to do that.

After shutting the laptop Tony stood up and stretched his arms. It was another long day coming to an end. For most people. It was 11:32 pm. Tony’s favourite time of the time, he preferred it when the sun wasn’t out, he just worked better under artificial light. In general.

Humming some Beyoncé song Tony made his way to the kitchen, grabbed a beer from the fridge and then made himself comfortable on his couch in front of the television. Being a billionaire payed off every single day of his life, only a liar would pretend otherwise. Nonetheless there were some occasions where Tony appreciated it more than other times. Mostly it had to do with him being a lazy bastard. That once more didn’t matter, because Tony could just sit down and enjoy the result of someone else’s work. Being in his 40s Tony had better things to do than sit down and trying to learn a new language. That would take years and he needed to understand the TV reports today and not in a far off future. So Tony definitely loved being capable of picking up the phone and telling Pepper to find him someone who was able to speak Old Norse and translate the entire news program for him. It made life so much easier.

Making himself comfortable Tony reached for the remote control and started the video. Subtitles were on. Perfect. Now Tony was finally going to find out what people were thinking about his prince charming.

“Let’s see if I get new material to piss you off.” Tony mumbled to himself, then took a sip from his beer. First mental note – the Asgardian news presenter was gorgeous. Very good choice. Her voice also sounded quite nice although she was talking in the strange language. Tony’s eyes attentively scanned over the subtitles.

“With great relief the entire country witnesses how the intense protests with have dominated Jotunheim for the last four days seem to have finally ended. As the city gets a chance to recover, the general population dares to start thinking about a possible solution of the Jotun conflict. It’s the third
day of the Duke of Glæsisvellir’s historic visit to Útgarðar and after his certainly unexpected speech that promised the abolition of the Language Act people begin putting their hopes in him. A survey among Valhallan residents showed that a majority supports the royal visit to Jotunheim and the idea of abolishing or at least altering the Language Act. Whereas Valhalla seems in favour of the prince’s endeavour, it’s going to be the average Jotun’s opinion that is going to be crucial. Amba Vollan was out on the streets of Útgarðar to present you the latest reactions.

Tony huffed. These Asgardians were taking everything so seriously. It kind of sounded weird to have a monarchy asking for people’s opinions. Even democracies had stopped doing that some time ago. Tony enjoyed having prejudices, it made everything so much more entertaining and it allowed him to get surprised once in a while.

Anyway, they were now showing a couple of interviews the before mentioned reporter had done in Jotunheim. In the city with the unpronounceable name. Talking about Tony’s favourite subject. In a way too politically related manner.

First was a middle aged lady. Her haircut made Tony wondered if all of these people kept their perfect pitch-black colour until they were 80. Possible.

“Sure, I liked what he said and I would like to believe that he means it.”

“So you have trouble believing that the prince was honest in his speech?”

“He is a Búrison. His ancestors were the ones who brought misery and injustice over this country. Why should he as one of them actually want to change anything? It may just be a good attempt to distract from what has been going on…”

“But the prince has been very outspoken before about his disdain for the Language Act.”

“May be…”

“What do you think about him speaking Jǫtnar?”

“I... have no idea. I seriously don’t know.”

Utter confusion, alright. At least Tony knew now that it was obviously okay to criticize the royal family on TV.

Cut to the next interview. “Yes, I was there at the speech. Couldn’t quite believe what I was hearing. I don’t really want to get my hopes up, but... he is a Búrison. I don’t think he would bother to learn Jǫtnar for a cheap trick.”

Yeah, yeah, Tony had got it. Speaking Jǫtnar was a big deal and obviously Loki had broken with all traditions by doing so.

Next one. “He is here. He is talking to people. He has to prove that he means it. If he does... I guess things are going to change massively…”

And the next. “If you ask me it looks like after centuries an actual human being was born into that line of thieves.”

Okay, talking shit about the royal family was definitely legal.

“It’s about time one of them addresses all that injustice that they’ve committed against Jotunheim!”
“I wasn’t convinced, but I happened to see him and the prince at the university. I guess they were showing him around. Despite about 15 bodyguards he stopped and actually talked to students. For about half an hour. That’s quite something for somebody is supposed to loathe all of us, right? I had the chance to ask some of people he talked to. They said he was respectful, answered all of their questions and didn’t shy away when being asked about the Language Act. All of that in Jötnar. They believed him. I guess I’m willing to believe him too.”

“Prince Helblindi has been seen spending a lot of time with him. I will wait to hear what he has to say about him. I trust his judgement…”

“Yes, I believe him. For 500 years they’ve treated all of Jotunheim like dirt and he said so himself. I would have never dared to hear a Búrison say that. Tell the truth. He did and I don’t think he’s going to take it back. It’s all very exciting, don’t you think? The possibilities…”

It continued like that for a little while and Tony decided that the general sentiment was timid hope. His own reaction to all of that was the real surprise. Tony liked it. He liked the fact that prince charming was responsible for that. That he had obviously achieved what he had been trying to do. He was quite the charming fella and Tony thought that they should be glad to have him around.

After the interviews the news presenter informed them about what prince charming had been up to today. “Unfortunately we haven’t been able to get a statement from the mayor, but it has been confirmed that the Duke of Glæsisvellir had breakfast with him at the town hall this morning. No details of what has been discussed have been published yet, but since the mayor is known to be a fierce critic of the royal family the topics that were discussed are of great public interest.”

Yeah, Loki knew how to keep a secret, he was good at that. Tony took a long sip from his beer while the news presenter explained how after breakfast Loki did some tourist stuff. They had photographs of him walking down a splendid promenade next to the river. One of the hotspots of Útgarðar according to the news presenter. Anything but discreet though. The photos showed Loki in a dark green coat that managed to show off his nice figure. Unfortunately not everybody was going to notice that, because right next to Loki was a dirty, exaggerated fantasy made flesh. The young Jotun lord had been punished with a ridiculously stupid name, but since he had won the genetic lottery he probably didn’t give a shit. Damn, that guy was looking good. Tony snorted at the next photograph which revealed that in front and behind them were about six security details. Nervous, much?

More talk about what Loki was actually doing in Jotunheim, but that could be quickly summed up. Checking out the sights, meeting important people and talking to locals. The royal family hadn’t commented on his little trip yet, just the usual PR phrases. Full support, important, etc.

Tony was starting to believe that he wasn’t going to learn anything new when the next program was announced. A debate, a round table, whatever you wanted to call it. Topic of the day – Prince Loki’s visit of Jotunheim. Fine, Tony was going to check this one out. There were five studio guests. A lawyer, a former minister, a journalist, a university professor and an author who happened to be Jotun.

Despite Tony’s already mediocre expectations the debate began rather dull. They all agreed the visit itself was an event of historic importance, a great possibility to build bridges and the prince showed a lot of goodwill by speaking Jötmar. Unprecedented and all that jazz.

Tony was about to doze off when a rather controversial statement was made. Not a surprise that it came from the Jotun author, a fierce critic of the Búrison dynasty. Again, what a surprise. Nevertheless, what he said made Tony’s eyes snap back open.
“I sincerely hope that Odin is not too proud to realise in what kind of situation his family has ended up. For the first time during my whole lifetime I see a chance for reconciliation that wouldn’t have a severe government crisis as a direct consequence. That chance has to be taken or the protests we have witnessed during the last days are going to repeat themselves and they’re going to be 100 times worse. The Duke Bilskirnir has shown through his heinous and repulsive remarks that he neither has the ability nor the willingness to ever rule a truly united Asgard. At this point I also don’t see any way for the Jotun population to accept him in a ruling position. The solution – no, the only way to go – is rather obvious. Odin has to alter the line of succession. The Duke of Bilskirnir is unacceptable while the Duke of Glæsisvellir might be able to cure some of the wounds that have been inflicted on our nation.”

Within a second Tony was sitting up straight and almost spilled some of his beer. At least the rest of the TV penal looked as dumbfounded as him. The host himself seemed to be caught up in disbelief, but he still did his job. “Just to avoid any possible misunderstandings – are you saying that when the King decides to step back that the crown prince should be ignored in the line of succession and instead of him Prince Loki should be made king?”

“Yeah, right. Are you saying that? Because if you’re saying that, I am pretty sure you and Loki would get along perfectly.” Tony mumbled to himself. A sign of madness, but obviously the whole world was losing it today. Or just Asgard…

The Jotun author nodded without any hesitation, his expression dry and stern. He looked like that kind of guy who could quote every German philosopher that had ever lived, but would need somebody to explain a nasty joke to him. “Precisely. All the so called crown prince has achieved so far was choosing an American fiancé and gravely insulting a member of one of Asgard’s eldest families. The Duke of Glæsisvellir sets one foot into Jotunheim and shows the people actual respect. Jotunheim is not going to negotiate with anybody else.”

And time for the lawyer to swipe in on the conversation. “Jotunheim doesn’t decide who is going to be king. The law of succession is part of the constitution. The firstborn son of the Búrison king is going to inherit the crown. Prince Thor is going to be the next Asgardian king.”

“According to the law, yes. It would be a severe mistake nonetheless.”

Eventually the lawyer shook his head. “I am sorry, but this scenario is completely out of the question and therefore not worth discussing.”

“But not without precedent.” Now the professor was adding his two cents and Tony blinked. Was this now the actual new topic of the debate?

“Would you like to explain?”

“The law of succession has been sidestepped before. There have been times when the crown prince hasn’t been considered fit enough to fulfil his duties. Mostly these reasons had to do with mental or physical health issues. None of that is the case here obviously, but the law of succession has been altered before.”

“So that means it is theoretically possible to skip the crown prince and make the Duke of Glæsisvellir first in line?”

“Absolutely. Unlikely, unorthodox and immensely troubling for sure. Nonetheless absolutely possible.”

Tony knew a kind of bitchy, black-haired guy who would love to hear that.
The conversation continued and for one minute it was mostly about ‘How did we get here?’ and ‘Why are we talking about this?’ and ‘This is totally unfair to Prince Thor who hadn’t had the chance yet to prove himself, also he had got shot not a week ago – remember that?’. Anyway when the host finally had back control over the situation, once more the word was given to the man who had started it all.

Leaning forward in his chair the author took a look around and took off his glasses, seemingly getting ready for a long talk. “I fear I might not have been clear enough, so let me try again. I sense in this room an underestimation of what the Duke of Glæsisvellir achieved during the last two days. I was present during the protests in Útgarðar. The people there are done with the way the Búrison family treats them. I don’t know if the attack on the Duke of Bilskirnir was motivated by radical Jotuns or not. It’s nonetheless a raging warning sign. Odin hasn’t been able to resolve the conflict during his reign; the American policy has made everything worse. The general population, not just the Jotuns, do not trust the Duke of Bilskirnir given his choice of consort. Earlier this year we’ve almost already had an actual rebellion that could have ended in Jotun independency and therefore civil war if Lord Ymirson hadn’t called off the plebiscite. The protests would have ended up in the same fashion. It was the Duke of Glæsisvellir who stopped that, because he showed them respect. He showed that he cared. Not the king or the crown prince. No Jotun is suddenly going to embrace nowt the Búrison family, but they might embrace him. Nobody else. The only thing that could project a bad light on him would be a complete dismissal by the Ymirson family. Which is highly unlikely…”

Tony was still listening as the debate went on, but he couldn’t stop his thoughts from wandering. So prince charming had finally made it to get his name out there. Sure, this was just one lousy debate, but sometimes you just needed to plant an idea. Damn, his father and brother would be so pissed and rightly so. Well, maybe the whole thing would stop at this lousy debate or prince charming would actually get to the place he desperately wanted to be. One could reproach the Asgardians of a lot of things, but things never got boring.

Messy. Messy indeed.

***

Helblindi was a vegetarian. For some ridiculous reason that was the thing Loki was thinking about as he collapsed on the bed, burying his face in the pillow. With a bit of luck he would suffocate.

Annoyed by his own childish ideas Loki rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. He was done for. Tired in a way that he had never experienced before. Equally drained physically and emotionally. Being on his feet all day to see all of Útgarðar and meet as many people as possible was one thing, but constantly being 100% concentrated and attentive was getting to him. An entire life of being prepared, of watching every word that he said, learning how to move to charm and not offend. Yet Loki started to feel out of his depth.

No, he was doing pretty well, but he needed a break. A good night of sleep. Today the mayor, the students and all the time Helblindi breathing down on his neck. The day had been mostly okay until dinner. Eating with all three Ymirsons had definitely been the most uncomfortable experience of Loki’s life. Especially since Laufey had direly refused to talk about politics. Which were the only reason Loki was here. So what had Loki done instead? Closely watching Helblindi and noticing that he hadn’t seen him eat a single piece of meat. Vegetarian.

“What an important piece of information…” Loki muttered to himself and ran both hands over his face. Three days now and Loki thought that he was doing fine with the general population, but he was not getting any further with the Ymirsons. They were supposed to cooperate and Loki was still
at square 1, because he had no idea what Laufey actually thought about all of this. And Helblindi… Helblindi had smiled, listened to his plans and told him that he would think about it. Nothing had happened since.

For once Loki didn’t want to think about all of that. He didn’t even want to take a shower. Closing his eyes Loki allowed himself to drift off for a little while. Until there was a knock on the door.

“Your highness?”

Just wonderful. Getting back up on his feet Loki slowly made his way to the door. The security detail apologised for disturbing him and handed him a white envelope. A message from Helblindi that guaranteed that Loki wouldn’t get any sleep during the next couple of hours.

Let’s talk conspiracy. Meet you in 30 minutes in the library. Alone

Good, they were finally making progress, but it also meant that Loki needed all of his wit and concentration now although he felt completely beat. Well, Loki would be damned if he didn’t bring his A game. Also it would be a complete lie to deny the tingle of excitement he was feeling.

Loki slipped into the bathroom to freshen up a little bit and then changed his shirt and waistcoat against a comfortable grey sweatshirt. He had no idea how long this was going to take. At least a couple of hours if Helblindi was gracious. Loki brushed his hair behind his ears and studied his appearance in the mirror. It would have to do.

Over his phone Loki informed Heimdall where he would be and that he didn’t want anybody to disturb them. Heimdall was anything but pleased and Loki was sure that he would be lingering around the library for the entire night.

Nevertheless Loki was glad that he could make his way to the library alone and without meeting anybody. Just down the hall and upstairs, Helblindi had shown him around the very first day.

Loki ignored the splendour of hundreds of books that he would love to read and instead focused on the man sitting in one of the big, comfy chairs. Helblindi’s eyes were focused on the book in his lap and Loki instantly noticed that he also had changed clothes after dinner. Black trousers, a white shirt and a long-sleeved black vest that reached down to his knees. Casual but still elegant. Everything about him was calculated.

“My Lord.”

Blue eyes darted up to look at him and a smile spread on Helblindi’s face. “Your highness. Perfectly on time. Sit down, there’s tea.”

It was an almost lush setting, clearly intentional, but Loki wouldn’t let himself be distracted. Sitting down in the chair next to Helblindi Loki reached for one of the cups on the little table between them. The tea was still hot and tasted sweet. “Thank you. You wanted to talk?”

Finally putting the book aside Helblindi crossed his legs, showing off their length. “I do, indeed. I have thought about your proposition. I think it can be done, but we would definitely upset our fathers. Oh, your brother would be furious. That alone could be reason enough for me to agree. I would love to see his stupid face.”

Loki huffed in response. “I expect you to act in favour of your people, not because of spite.”

“Oh, believe me, Jotunheim always comes first, but I am only human. I like to combine fun and work whenever it’s possible and the opportunity presents itself. I like your idea, I was merely doubtful if you had the willingness to go through with it. Then I thought again about what you did
when you held that speech. You mentioned me and the fact that we have met up without the knowledge of your family. I am sure you are not in a hurry to get home, since your father is definitely going to tear you apart for going behind his back. So I am inclined to believe that you are going to do what’s necessary. At the same time I doubt that you will be able to manipulate your brother in the near future when you are so blatantly going against him. Well, if this is going to work out, there will be no need for manipulation anyway.”

“It’s not that I’m getting tired of your monologue, I also enjoy to mellow people by talking, but I need a clear statement. Are we going to do this together or not?” Loki had no doubt that they could keep this banter going for several hours and if matters weren’t so dead serious he would definitely enjoy doing just that.

Helblindi took his time. He tilted his head and his fringe partly covered his eyes. Another calculated move, for sure. A person who looked like that had to be perfectly aware of what they could do with their body. Loki wasn’t going to grant him any kind of reaction. Not a visible one at least. Inside his chest Loki’s heart was racing and it had to be due to the importance of the issue. Because if it had anything to do with physical appearances, Loki would be the most pathetic person imaginable.

Eventually Helblindi nodded. “Unfortunately I cannot be sure that my father is going to recognize this unique chance as what it is, so I am going to seize this opportunity. Yes, we are going to do this together. No room for surprises, we’re going to talk this out, think of every single detail. Since we do not have that much time, we should start right now. Who do you have to offer?”

There. Loki had just got what he wanted and his heart still hadn’t stopped racing. For some reason Loki was sure that this wasn’t going to change for quite a while. At least half of it was the excitement about the debate with someone on a par.

Loki decided to start with a big one. “I can get the Ivaldisons. Me and Idun are on good terms. By the way I introduced her brother to his fiancé. Idun likes to stay neutral on controversial themes, but as soon as she realises that public opinion on the Language Act is changing, she will want to be a front runner. You know that she is horribly vain.”

Nodding Helblindi let out a sound that said ‘Tell me about it’. “Alright, that’s a good start. With the Ivaldisons we’d have all of Múspellheimr in the bag. I can get all the Jotun families, but that’s not going to make much of an impression since they naturally have to be against the Language Act. I have good relations with most of the families in Alfheimr. Most of them still feel more connected to Jotunheim than to the rest of Asgard. If I go there and talk to them personally, they will stand up for us.”

That sounded about right. “Good, my mother was born in Alfheimr. That should help us too.”

Helblindi continued to name several families in Svartálfar that could be convinced by him. If he only managed to get half of them, they would have all of Svartálfar and Loki didn’t doubt for a second that Helblindi would have a walk-over. Helheimr and Niflheimr would be more of a challenge. They spent about half an hour debating which families to approach and which person they should talk to directly. Eventually they could agree and there was only one region left.

“What to do about Vanaheim? I can’t offer you anything there.” There was disdain in Helblindi’s voice that Loki decided to ignore. Sure, Vanaheim would be more difficult, but Loki already had an idea. “I believe I can get the Fjörgynnsons.”

The appropriate reaction was a snort that sounded amused and offended at the same time. “There is a very thin line between arrogance and healthy self-confidence.”
“What do you mean?”

“The family of your ex-boyfriend might not be that eager to help you.”

“We both decided to end our relationship. We are on good terms. Balder is a good and reasonable person, he’ll see the value in what we’re trying to do. He’ll help us to convince his father.”

Ice blue eyes wouldn’t leave his face, drilling right through him and Loki didn’t mind. “What we are trying to do is going behind our fathers’ backs to line up most of the noble families to force the king to do as we please. That might sound a little deterrent for a lot of people.”

“It’s politics.” Loki replied drily and Helblindi smiled maliciously. “The support of the entire nobility can never hurt, right? Who knows what else you might need them for?”

“I have told you before that I am not going to comment your allusions to intentions that I do not have. Can we focus on the issue at hand?”

Graciously Helblindi bowed his head. “Of course, your highness. I would never disobey a direct order.”

Grumbling softly Loki took a sip from his tea, most to have time to collect his thoughts. “We need to talk about what is going to happen to the Language Act.”

“It goes away. As simple as that. You swore to your ancestors.”

“I am not going to break my promise, but we’ll have to go into detail. The law will be abolished and therefore we need to agree on what changes your family is going to implement in Jotunheim. I definitely do not want a 180 turn. Old Norse is still the official language of this country and it needs to be represented in Jotunheim.”

The glint in those eyes was impossible to miss as Helblindi leaned slightly forward. “So what do you suggest? Oh and before you say anything, don’t even think about asking me not to rename all the streets that are named after your despicable ancestors. They are definitely going to go.”

Loki sighed deeply. It was going to be a long night.
“Oh please, now you are just trying to wind me up!” Loki was one second away from throwing his hands up in the air and starting to yell from pure frustration. Nonetheless a not so small part of him was strangely enjoying this. While he was pacing around the library, soon he would be walking holes into the floor. At the same time Helblindi was still comfortably lounging in his chair, elegantly balancing a glass of wine in his hand. He was clearly having a fantastic time, an amused grin was playing around his lips. “Why? I do think my demand is perfectly reasonable.”

“It’s stupid. That’s what it is.”

Unbothered Helblindi shrugged. “It’s about time that a Jotun gets to be a minister.”

Letting out an exaggerated sigh Loki pinched the bridge of his nose. “Giving somebody a position because they’re Jotun is just as bad and discriminatory as not giving them the position because they are Jotun.”

“Well, normally I would totally agree with you, but this time I do not care.” Helblindi shrugged, obvious amusement written all over his face. Right, that jerk was having fun.

“You don’t care.”

“Oh, please…” Loki rolled his eyes once more and downed his glass. “You are not even funny.”

Helblindi formed a little gap between his thumb and index finger and Loki groaned loudly.

“I am being totally serious.”

“Oh, please…” Loki rolled his eyes once more and downed his glass. “You are not even funny.”

Helblindi formed a little gap between his thumb and index finger and Loki groaned loudly.

“Alright, then let’s get back to TV. Programs produces in Jotunheim are going to be in Jǫtnar. Including the news. I am not going to negotiate that.”

Relieved that they were back to the serious stuff Loki nodded. “Alright. That is only fair. Media in
Old Norse will still be available to everyone, so I don’t see any problems with that.”

“Good. Radio?”

“Same thing.”

“Excellent. All administration forms like contracts, requests, petitions and so on exclusively in Jǫtnar.” Helblindi shot him a challenging glance and Loki snorted in response. “You wish.”

“Oh, I am dying to hear you trying to talk me out of that.” Helblindi tilted his chin up, arching an eyebrow and Loki was going to make him regret saying that. “They’re official documents. Asgardian documents. They can’t be exclusively in Jǫtnar.”

“Sure they can. Especially in Jotunheim.”

“Would you please be reasonable? They are over 100 000 people living in Jotunheim that aren’t Jotun. You’d make things impossibly hard for them.”

That earned Loki the most nonchalant shrug. “If they want to live in Jotunheim, they’ll have to learn Jǫtnar. It’s not that hard, you learned it too.”

Loki was going to strangle him eventually. “You are a lawyer, aren’t you?”

“Last time I checked. Best of my class. Why? Are you in trouble? Do you need my advice? I am sorry, your highness, I don’t think that you could afford me?”

Doing his best to stop his lips from forming a smile Loki ignored Helblindi’s comments. “Old Norse is still the official language of this country. Jotunheim is a part of this country. Every citizen has the right to forms in Old Norse.”

For the first time during this conversation a shadow crept onto Helblindi’s face and the glint in his eyes had Loki at a loss for words. “Every Jotun has the right to see their mother tongue as an essential part in their life. If you try to sell me anything less I am going to make you miserable.”

“More than you’re doing right now?”

The stern look that Helblindi sent him left no doubt about what kind of situation they were in. No more room for joking. “Alright. How about bilingual forms? That should be an acceptable compromise.”

“Oh, now it’s you who decides what is acceptable?”

“It was you who proposed the bilingual street signs!”

“Yes, because that makes sense. I don’t want complete chaos in the streets, because people can’t figure out where they’re going. It’s only reasonable. People can make a bloody effort to read the forms.”

“We’re not making any progress if you are so damned stubborn.”

“I am an Ymirson. What do you expect?”

“A reasonable discussion. If we can’t agree on administration, how are we supposed to get through the education system?”

Humming in approval Helblindi nodded and indicated Loki to sit back down. “Okay, we’ve been
here for four hours. Time for a 10 minute break. Drink your wine.”

Loki complied, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t thinking about what he could offer Helblindi to make him agree on the bilingual forms. To his surprise Helblindi didn’t come up with any allusions that would annoy Loki and start another discussion. “As soon as we get this done and change the relationship between the regions forever… aren’t you going to be so incredibly bored?”

There was nothing else Loki could offer than a lazy smile. “Normally that would be true, but after the last couple of months I fancy the idea of disappearing for two weeks on a deserted island.”

Helblindi smiled. “Lying on the beach all day? Getting a tan? Sipping on colourful cocktails?”

“Exactly.”

“That sounds horrifying.” Helblindi pulled a face and of course he had to disagree with Loki now on principle. “If I were you I wouldn’t go near the beach either. You’d probably burn alive.”

“Do you think I am a vampire, your highness?” Helblindi let out a chuckle and Loki tried to remember if he had ever seen him this relaxed. For once there was nothing going on behind those ice blue eyes. No ulterior motive, no mischievous glint or knowing smirk. Right now he seemed at ease. Amused not because of a scheme or political play, no. For once Helblindi looked content, not necessarily happy, but Loki thought that it suited him anyhow.

“I think that you’re very pale and the pacific sun might probably cause you to go up in flames.” Amused by his own, rather weak joke, Loki finished his wine while Helblindi raised a condescending eyebrow at him. For a second Loki feared that he had ruined the pleasant atmosphere, but then Helblindi laughed. Bright and clear. “Fine, I’ll admit that I get sunburned very easily. Me walking down the beach is like begging for skin cancer.”

“You’ve never been on holiday in Spain, Italy or a Caribbean island?”

“Sure, but if I leave the house before 7 o’clock I wear a long-sleeved shirt and jeans. I tend to quite stand out on the beach like that.”

Loki was sure that Helblindi would stand out even more if he took his shirt off like everybody else. What a perfectly appropriate thought. “That means if you want to get out of here you go skiing in the Austrian mountains?”

“No, that feels too much like home. I am more like the kind of guy who spends an entire week in a foreign city, spend 11 hours on my feet every day and checks out all the sights and after that week I am so done that I need actual holidays.”

“That sounds wonderfully relaxing. You can send me a postcard. I’ll be lying on the beach and sipping mojitos.”

“I’ll think of that.” Helblindi finished his wine and silence settled in between them until Loki had to remind them of what they were actually doing. “Do you believe that all of this is necessary? That even after what I said your father would still rather go for escalation?”

Loki watched the content fade away and Helblindi was all serious again. “As much as I adore my father… one cannot underestimate how much he loathes your father. In all honesty I am not sure what to expect, but I’ve told you before that I am convinced that it would have to be us who have to solve this conflict. You’re going behind your father’s back, so it’s only fair that I do the same.”

Slowly Helblindi put the empty glass away, but kept tracing his thumb across the edge. “I will give an interview tomorrow. I’m going to endorse everything you’ve said. That should give us give the
support that we need. Also my father won’t be able to change course after such a public statement. At least not without losing face.”

Inside his chest Loki’s heart skipped a beat and then tried to make up for it by beating way too fast. “Are you going to mention frjáls?”

Silence was the immediate reaction and Helblindi let his eyes run over the closest bookshelf. “I would prefer not to.”

“Why not? They are partly responsible for the chaos we’re in.”

“Among frjáls I am held in very high esteem. Not necessarily for something I did. They are fierce royalists. Until there is no concrete plan on how to deal with frjáls in the near future I am not willing to jeopardize such a huge advantage.”

Loki had a hard time not to laugh in his face. “That is a despicable move. Completely amoral.”

“But politically smart.”

“Definitely. Therefore it is despicable. Alright, you don’t have to go into detail, but you have to mention that cooperation between Asgardian and Jotun forces is necessary and that you support it. That is something that I am not going to negotiate.”

“That seems fair.” Helblindi smiled and held his gaze, not saying anything. The kind of silence that wasn’t uncomfortable, but still heavy. Like there was something that was supposed to happen or Loki was supposed to say something and he had no idea what. The moment passed anyway when Helblindi rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes to cast away the upcoming sleepiness. “Alright, let’s get back to it. Administration forms. You wanted to convince me.”

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12 hours later Loki was sitting on a plane and although his body longed for all the sleep he had missed he couldn’t close his eyes. He should have stayed until Helblindi had given his interview, but the messages from home had become so much urgent.

Loki hadn’t felt like he had overstayed his welcome and nevertheless he hadn’t been able act once more against his father. Especially after what Loki had still in store for him. Now on his own on the plane, left alone with his thoughts Loki for the first time had the time to feel guilty about what he was doing. There were definitely some pretty layers in which Loki could wrap up his words, but the right one was still ‘intrigue’. Loki had teamed up with the son of the one person Odin hated the most in the entire world. It was nothing personal though, Loki only wanted their country to find back into a peaceful co-existence that everybody was missing so terribly.

Perhaps Odin was too old or he was right that there couldn’t be a solution as long as Laufey was Lord of Jotunheim. So Loki and Helblindi had decided to go around them. It was the right thing to do and yet Loki felt ashamed. What if his father called it betrayal? What if it ended up destroying their relationship?

Shaking his head Loki kept typing on his laptop to distract himself. What was a single father-son relationship against an entire nation? At home Loki would be able to explain it all to this family. It would be alright.

Still feeling uneasy Loki opened the livestream and tried to remain calm as he waited for Helblindi’s interview to begin. Over the next two minutes Loki nervously tapped his fingers against the armrest of his seat and instantly leaned forward when Helblindi’s face finally appeared on screen. Not just
his face. His entire appearance reminded Loki of last night. How he was comfortably, almost casually sitting on a big arm chair. Tight, light blue trousers, a white shirt, a grey blazer and a tie in the same colour like his trousers. He looked gorgeous. Which wasn’t anything special, because that was his normal state. Yes, four days in Jotunheim had sufficed to make Loki lose his mind.

Then Helblindi started talking and Loki concentrated on his words. It wasn’t anything new that Helblindi knew how to talk and to Loki’s immense relief when Helblindi indeed said what he was supposed to say. It was the perfect endorsement. Helblindi knew about his position and his enormous popularity. Therefore he kept his personal. Talking about the last four days and how he was convinced of Loki’s sincerity after spending time with him. It was time to heal the wounds that Jotunheim had suffered and they had to accept a piece offering if they ever wanted to be a truly united nation again. Helblindi was willing to trust and he asked his countrymen to do the same.

For Loki it was almost too good to be true. Until Helblindi’s final sentence. “After so many decades a son of Búri wants to build bridges between our people and if he should succeed I would not hesitate to call him King of Asgard.”

Brutally Loki slammed the laptop shut, snarling through gritted teeth. “Bastard!”

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“Sure, those are interesting scenarios to talk about. Quite exciting actually. We’re living in a situation that has never been here before and no matter how quickly one might like to dismiss the mere idea of the Duke of Glæsisvellir being considered for the crown, there is a discussion to be had. Within only two days several different sources have spoken in favour of Prince Loki inheriting the crown from his father although he is only the second born child of King Odin and his wife Frigga. Although there is no reason to believe that the king should in any way be inclined to ignore crown prince Thor, we should nevertheless take a closer look at Prince Loki’s political views. A conservative concerning economic issues, fierce critic of the American Policy, advocate for the death penalty, strong believer in the trúá and traditionalist when it comes to…”

All that political talk had Bucky coming up with a headache. There seemed to be no other program left on TV and therefore Bucky gave up finding some lithe entertainment. After switching of the TV Bucky placed the remote on the nightstand and instead picked up the book he was currently reading. It was rather uncomfortable to hold a book for a longer period of time with just one hand. That was also the main reason he had decided to turn on the TV. Maybe he’d try again in a couple of hours.

Bucky had turned a couple of pages when there was a knock on the door. Arnþórr had promised to visit him today, but he was one hour early. Not that Bucky minded, he was happy to see him and for God’s sake Bucky was bored. “Come in.” He exclaimed with a smile that immediately lost a bit of its spark when he saw his visitor.

“Agent Barnes, good to see you. How are you doing?”

“Sir.” Bucky made an effort to sit a little straighter in his bed, but Coulson held up one hand to indicate him to remain comfortable. “Please, you’re injured. I was very concerned when I heard about the circumstances. How is your arm?”

Judging by the way Coulson took in the sight one could be tempted to suspect that he was looking at mangled body parts every day. Not even the slightest wince or grimace. Instead Coulson came closer and took his time examining the damage.

“Better. It was a rough couple of first hours, but it’s day number 5. Things are looking good.” Bucky would be damned if he told Coulson right now that it was still too soon to tell if he could regain back
his total movability. That question would come up soon enough when the doctors of the embassy would get their hands on Bucky. Not something he was particularly looking forward to.

Nodding softly Coulson pulled up a chair and sat down next to Bucky’s bed. Instantly Bucky felt the urge to scoot to the other side of the bed. Not that he wasn’t thankful for this visit which was by no means something he could take for granted. Coulson was his boss and a very busy man, him coming to check on Bucky seemed like a personal favour. Yet Bucky would have preferred it if that meeting could have taken place on his own terms. Definitely not here and not today. Anyway, Coulson was here and only minutes Bucky had complained about being bored.

“You’re missed at work. I am stuck with Smith now and he has no idea what he is doing.” Coulson groaned and Bucky couldn’t stop himself from smiling lightly. “Is that so? I’ll do my best to be back as soon as I can.”

“Take your time, you’ve been severely hurt. It takes as long as it takes. People are treating you well?”

“Definitely. One can’t complain about the Asgardian health care system.” Something else that Bucky didn’t want to go into detail on.

Humming softly Coulson nodded. “Agent Rogers told me about how this happened. He was very concerned.”

There was no denying the warm, fluttering sensation inside his chest. “Yeah, Steve is a good guy. I am glad that I was the only one getting injured… or you would have had to close the embassy for a couple of days.”

“At the moment a rather pleasing thought.” Coulson was terrible at making jokes and Bucky didn’t think that he knew that. Work was something he didn’t really want to talk about. Asgard had other issues to worry about than negotiating whatever toll laws with the US. “It’s very nice of you to visit me, sir. I appreciate it a lot. Health care is great, but that doesn’t mean hospitals aren’t horribly boring.”

“Well hopefully they will not keep you that much longer. Any idea when you can at least return home?”

“The doctors here said that there’s a good chance I can leave during the next three days, but Doctor Strange is going to have the last word on that.” Bucky’s own eyes travelled to his arm which didn’t look like that much of mess anymore. No, he couldn’t complain, they were taking good care of him.

“Speaking of that…” Coulson crossed his legs and seemingly got more comfortable. “You are quite lucky to have the personal physician of the Duke of Glæsisvellir looking after you.”

Bucky’s entire body went rigid and he desperately hoped that Coulson hadn’t noticed. Unlikely. “Indeed a lucky coincidence.”

“Very much so.” Coulson smiled like a shark, Bucky had seen him doing it so many times before. He had never been on the receiving end though. Bucky decided that he didn’t like it. “Remind me again when you first met the prince.”

Damn, this was an interrogation and Bucky’s mind was racing to find out where Coulson wanted to go with this. It had to do with all that talk about if Loki being king were in Asgard’s favour.

Right now Bucky pretend to make an effort to remember. “About three months into my service in Asgard. Ambassador Fury was invited to court among other diplomats and I was accompanying
him. The Prince was there with the other members of his family. He introduced himself to the staff. You know that he likes doing so. Mostly to make them uncomfortable.”

“Yes, I am aware. At times I asked myself if he wanted to traumatize the new agents.” Coulson let out a dismissive sound and then continued. “You are still playing tennis with him?”

Dear god. Gesturing at his arm Bucky smiled coyly. “I don’t think I’m going to play any tennis for a while.”

“Barnes.” Coulson’s face hardened, his voice was a warning. Bucky wasn’t going to get easy treatment just because he was hurt. Alright. “Actually sir, we haven’t played in a while. He had other things on his mind and as I’ve told you before – we aren’t that close. That’s why I failed miserably when I was supposed to find out about his intentions with Tony Stark.”

Not that Bucky had ever really tried to find anything out. That wasn’t part of his job description. Fortunately.

“You see, James…” The smile was a lot nicer now, but Bucky knew better than to trust it. “You’ve told us before that you aren’t friends with the prince. Yet he has his personal physician looking after you.”

“He is a generous person and he happened to be at the hospital when I got here.” Bucky wanted to shrug, but Coulson wouldn’t like it.

“I understand this might be an uncomfortable topic to talk to me about, but your private and professional life got mixed up and due to current circumstances I have to ask certain questions. Is it possible that the prince has another understanding of the nature of your relationship than you have?”

Bucky wished for a hole to crawl into or at least a nurse that would show up to check on his vitals. Anything. Otherwise he was damned to lie here under Coulson’s intense gaze, remembering Loki’s warm mouth on his own, his hand fisted in his t-shirt. The tennis rackets forgotten on the floor.

“I don’t know what the prince is thinking. We’ve never had such a personal conversation.”

Coulson didn’t believe him although Bucky wasn’t really lying. “You see it’s a chain of… unusual gestures if you are indeed not friends with the prince. Doctor Strange being in charge of you, fine. We can write that off saying that the prince is indeed generous and fortunate circumstances. It becomes rather strange when we look at most recent events. Three days ago the prince’s secretary called the hospital and declared that all expanses for your treatment that weren’t covered by insurance would be taken care of by him personally. He definitely also wanted to know how you are doing. Very thoughtful of him, especially since he is on a diplomatic visit that might determine the future of this country.”

Bucky chose to remain silent, because there was nothing he could possibly say to that. Coulson didn’t care, he had enough questions himself. “Did the prince call you during your stay here?”

It was a delicate situation. Coulson was his boss and Bucky didn’t want to lie, but Loki wasn’t anybody. He was related to his job, Bucky couldn’t deny that. Swallowing the sigh he wanted to utter Bucky replied. “Yes, he did call.”

“Personally?”

“Yes, he asked how I was doing. Saying that he was sorry for what happened. That kind of thing. We know each other, he is despite his behaviour a caring person. That’s all, sir. I am not overstepping any lines.”
Not anymore at least.

“James, I am not here to scold you for inappropriate behaviour. Quite the opposite. I could not care less if you swing one or both ways. What I and the embassy are interested in is the prince’s interest in you.”

Oh god no

“Sir, whatever you are trying to…”

“I am not trying anything. I am telling you that you would do your country and the diplomatic relations with Asgard a huge favour if you picked back up where you have left off. I am not asking you to play tennis obviously, but if the prince happened to call you and asked you to… I don’t know… play chess, accept the invitation. And if you should feel inclined to call him yourself – go ahead. It is not going to get you into any trouble with the embassy. Quite the opposite.”

“Sir, I am very uncomfortable with this suggestion.”

Coulson offered him another smile. “Why? I am merely asking you to foster an already existing relationship. The prince has shown himself to be very generous and considerate. You should let him know that you appreciate it.”
No life without you

Chapter Notes

Damn it, this chapter is over 6000 words long... Sorry? You're welcome? I don't know...

Anyway, a long talk between brothers and Loki making decisions

Also - please try to put yourself in both of their shoes ;)

Have fun :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Although none of us has any right to criticize the decisions made by you, there are men who mourn this great opportunity that we let pass. I want to emphasize that this is no critic, merely the wish to understand. We are all ready, waiting impatiently to do whatever is necessary. For a Jotun King Frjál스

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Everything about this was familiar. The waiting, the anticipation and the dread. Thor hated all these sentiments equally. Unable to sit down he had been walking up and down the room without anybody complaining about it. Another thing that made Thor mad. He was close to trembling with rage. Which probably wasn’t fair, but he couldn’t help himself. None of this was fair to him after all.

His mother was comfortably sitting in her chair, reading a book. Or at least she was trying to. Thor could easily tell that her eyes didn’t move and whenever there was a sound behind the door she would hopefully look up. That shining in her eyes.

Nothing new. Thor had all seen it before.

Releasing a long breath Thor tried to not go back 18 years. It hadn’t been then that Thor had become aware of the biggest difference between him and his little brother, but it had been the first time he had actually felt it.

Thor shook his head. If he thought too much about Loki’s stay in London, he would not be able to keep a cool head and remember all the things he wanted to say. If he was completely honest though, Thor wasn’t too interested in keeping it together. Not when Frigga once more looked up from her book, that hopeful gaze which Thor knew so well, but which had nothing to do with him.

After turning away Thor stepped closer to the window checking out the patio. There was nothing to see and nothing to expect since it was in no way connect to one of the several entrances to the palace. Thor just needed something to do, something to look at or his memories would get the better of him.

Memories. It was the exact same situation, only worse. This time there was no way to strip Loki off the blame this time. Loki wasn’t a boy of 10 anymore. His attempts to not think about 18 years ago were foolish and pretty much in vain, Thor had to admit that much. The parallels were too evident and too present.
In this very moment Frigga was waiting as impatiently and as longingly for Loki as she had been doing back then. A hard lesson that Thor had had to learn. 18 years ago Loki had been sent to London over the summer. Three months without his parents and his brother, dedicated to intensely study the English language. Thor’s trip three years prior had been to Australia and despite enjoying it thoroughly he had been overjoyed to return back home. Completely normal behaviour of a 10 year old boy. His favourite nanny and various staff members had accompanied him and Thor had still missed his family dearly. Several tears had been shed during the nights. Tears he had never told anybody about, because he had wanted to be strong, mature. A good, little prince. It hadn’t been a bad time, just rough at times. Looking back Thor was fond of his stay in Australia and when Loki’s turn had come around Thor had told him that he was going to enjoy it. Not that Loki had any doubt about that, he had been quite eager to get out and prove that he could do very well without all of them.

Thor had been looking forward to him being gone for three months too. Not because Thor didn’t love his baby brother dearly. Thor couldn’t remember there ever being a life without Loki since he had only been three years old when his brother had been born. That had been what Thor had wanted to find out, what life would be like without Loki. Even only for one summer.

Thor liked to think that he never been craving for attention. Why should he? There was no need. When you were born the crown prince there were always enough people looking out for you. No, he hadn’t been spoiled, but there had always been attention and care. From the entire court. Not the kind of attention that Thor had been craving for.

“What are you reading?”

Thor turned around and his mother seemed confused as if she had forgotten about his presence in the room. “Nothing really. I cannot concentrate. It’s the autobiography of a nobleman during the French Revolution. Don’t ask me any details, I wouldn’t be able to tell.”

Frigga offered him a sweet smile and it felt like stitches. Unable to reply anything Thor turned back around, looking out of the window where there was nothing to see.

When Loki had left for London Thor had been eager. Finally an opportunity to have his parents all to himself. Mostly Frigga. At 13 a boy was more than old enough to understand that he was playing second fiddle. Even as the crown prince. The time Thor spent with his mother was precious to him and then he didn’t feel neglected. That would have been such a terrible word. His childhood hadn’t lacked kisses, hugs or gentle words and Thor would have been perfectly content if it hadn’t been for Loki.

13 years old had definitely been old enough, but Thor had already noticed sooner. Smaller and bigger things. How his mother’s face lit up whenever Loki entered a room. That glow which Thor knew so well, but which had nothing to do with him. It had something to do with their different personalities, Thor was perfectly aware of that. Loki preferred his books to physical activity. He had a soft spot for poetry and a lot of other things that kids his age normally weren’t interested in. Frigga loved to tutor him in all these different areas and that some a form a closeness that Thor could never achieve. One that he couldn’t fake.

So with Loki gone for three months Thor, foolish little boy, had hoped that he would now get to spend all that time with his mother. All that time which was usually Loki’s. A hope that had never been fulfilled. He couldn’t deny that all attention during family dinners had been on him, but he hadn’t missed how his mother’s eyes had darted to the chair that Loki usually had sat in. A part of Thor still liked to believe to this day that Frigga had also looked at his chair when he had been in Australia.
Every day Thor had been able to see how Frigga was longing for her child. How she clutched the telephone receiver painfully tight whenever she talked to Loki. Or that smile on her face when she heard Loki’s voice. It was something completely different. Things hadn’t changed.

Frigga was keenly waiting for her son to return home. With the same longing and the same glow in her eyes. Like a mother should. Looking at her nobody would ever suspect that the son she couldn’t wait to see had thrust a knife into his brother’s back. Thor had never seen it coming. How should he have seen it? With Loki by his side he should not have to worry about anything, because their blood was the same. They prayed to the same ancestors. Thor strongly believed that his oldest memory was putting a stuffed wolf into Loki’s cradle. There had never been a life without Loki. For Loki there had never been a life without Thor.

In this entire world with all its wonders and terrors there should be nobody else but Jane who Thor could trust as much as Loki. The two of them were supposed to walk through fields of fire for each other and Thor knew that he still would. Right now he wasn’t so sure about Loki.

Not after Loki’s actions against Thor, their father and the monarchy. Thor didn’t know what to think. He did not know what would be appropriate feelings in this situation and he knew even less if Frigga should not be so exceedingly happy to see her son again.

No, Thor didn’t know how he was supposed to feel, but what he actually felt couldn’t be mistaken. The anger was located deeply inside of his gut, causing almost physically painful sensations. Loki’s words and actions were the cause of that and this time Thor didn’t believe that there was any way Loki could give an explanation that would make his betrayal sting any less. None of this was how things were supposed to be. They were brothers. United by a bond that had to be stronger than ambition, hurt feelings or spite. Otherwise what was the point?

Thor noticed that the door was being opened, because he heard his mother hastily putting down her book. Loki looked like he always did when he entered the room. So lean in jeans and a blazer that hid his broad shoulders, but showed off his thin waist. Even his appearance could easily lead someone up the wrong path. Thor could see people making the mistake of thinking that Loki wasn’t strong. That couldn’t be further from the truth. Loki was perfectly trained and fit. Physically and mentally. Thor would never make the mistake to underestimate Loki.

“Darling.” Thor got to witness that overjoyed smile as Frigga stood up and walked the last few steps up to Loki before grabbing both of his hands. “I thank all the spirits and your fylgja that they brought you home safely.”

Thor ought to be ashamed that he felt disdain as their mother hugged Loki, but now wasn’t the time. Seeing Loki only made matters worse. Anyway Thor didn’t miss how Loki only half-heartedly returned the hug. Affection was so easy to refuse when it was offered to you without any conditions. It did nothing but make Thor angrier.

As soon as Frigga let go of him Thor spoke up. “Mother, I would like to talk to my brother alone.”

It was the first time that Thor asked something like this of his mother, but he needed this time alone with Loki. Frigga’s eyes finally settled on him, only on him and she was anything but content with him. With Loki gone for five days their mother wanted nothing more than to spend time with her son. This time Thor had to come first though.

Not she had the next words though but Loki. “Please, mother.”

Thor remembered Loki as a little boy who liked to cause mischief and then hid behind his mother who would always pet his hair and come to his defence. Sure, if Loki had done something especially
malicious like cutting off half of Fandral’s hair, he would be punished. Nonetheless Thor had never seen Frigga really angry with him. In all of his pranks and schemes she always seemed to admire his wit and determination to go through with his ideas even though he would get in trouble for it. Loki didn’t hide anymore.

Thor wasn’t sure how his mother was going to react, he thought there might be chance of her refusing to leave, but eventually Frigga nodded and offered Loki another smile. She squeezed his shoulder for silent support and then walked out with silent steps.

Now they were alone, Loki’s green eyes were on him, waiting for him to start. Since there was only one way to begin this conversation Thor slowly walked over and Loki tilted his chin up as if he was ready to receive a blow. The same second Thor stopped in front of him he used his only functioning arm to pull Loki against his body. For a moment Loki tensed up which made Thor only embrace him tighter. Finally Loki hugged him back and quite differently than he had their mother. Thor could feel ten fingers twisting in his sweater, Loki rested his chin on his shoulder and both of them refused to let go. They both knew what was going to happen then. Right now they could still pretend that everything was alright and Thor could concentrate on the undeniable joy of seeing his brother safe and sound. A little voice in the back of mind told him that there hadn’t been any reason to worry about Loki. He had been perfectly fine in Jotunheim. No. Not now. Thor closed his hand firmly around Loki’s shoulder, feeling the bone beneath his fingers. There had never been a life without Loki and there would be no life without Loki. So why was his little brother turning away from him?

They couldn’t stay in this nimbus forever, so Thor tried to take a step back, but Loki held on tight. Not letting him go. Letting out a sigh Thor remained where he was. Enjoying it how long it could last. Minutes faded away until Loki seemed to realise that they were only biding their time. Now it was Loki who took a step back. His chin was still tilted up and now there was indeed coming. Still it was not Thor who delivered the first blow. Loki had done that 4 days ago.

“Why didn’t you tell? You speaking their language could have been incredibly useful. Not just this week.”

“I wasn’t too confident in my abilities.”

The fact that they were starting off with a lie made things a little bit easier. At least Thor knew where he stood now. “Yes, I saw how little skill you have in that speech. Why keeping it from us? If you don’t tell me I will have to go with the obvious explanation.”

“And that would be?” Loki had the guts and the audacity to arch an eyebrow at him. He couldn’t help himself.

“That you decided to keep it to yourself to use it in a situation that would allow you to use it to your advantage and your advantage only.”

Loki huffed and crossed his arms in front of his chest which Thor knew better than to interpret as a defensive gesture. “My advantage only? Is that all you took away from it? I talked on your behalf. I delivered your apology and I merely did that, because that chance had been taken away from you.”

There was no chance that Loki believed that himself. “You’ve been lying to me all your life, I can tell when you are doing so. Don’t treat me like a fool, grant me that little respect.

“Thor, let’s just not do this. Okay? I learned it. I said what I needed to be said to get the situation back under control. Nobody else but me could have gone there thanks to terrible circumstances. I did what I had to do.”
Maybe Loki would have been able to pull this off in front of somebody else, but Thor knew him too well. Sometimes the mannerisms were so easy to look through. “And that’s it? You think that’s what I am reproaching you with? Taking the stage when I couldn’t and when father wouldn’t? I reproach you with acting completely on your own! Making promises that are not yours to make. You didn’t consult father. You didn’t consult me. You just went out there and decided what was going to happen! You act completely on your own and you are keeping secrets from us! The entire family!”

Then something happened that Thor hadn’t expected. Only for a moment Loki turned his head away, avoiding his eyes. A clear admission of guilt and it also showed him that Loki wasn’t as cold about this as he might have expected. He had seen Loki lie to politicians and ambassadors without even batting an eyelid, looking into their eyes while making up the most ridiculous stories. Here they were and Loki couldn’t look at his own brother. When he came back around, his green eyes were hard and unforgiving. “Spare me the lecture, Thor. Father has already given me his fair share.”

Laughing bitterly Thor shook his head. “Oh, so you only have to answer to him. I don’t matter. Well, shouldn’t come that much of a surprise.”

“Don’t be childish.”

“Childish? I am taking this absolutely serious and it’s hard to stomach to have my own brother collaborate with the enemy.”

“Enemy. That’s it. That’s the problem! How are we ever supposed to come back together as one united country when you see an entire part of the population as our enemy!?”

Thor wasn’t sure he had heard right. “What are you even talking about? I am not seeing the Jotuns as our enemies. Sure, I wish things were easier and I get frustrated with them… Maybe an understatement, but I don’t demonize an entire part of our people. I have no illusions about the Ymirsons though. We can never be allies, because they see themselves as the real royalty. Laufey hates our father, he would love to see him and us lose everything that we have and you seem to forget all of that and jump into bed with them!”

And that was something that Thor didn’t know if he had the strength to forgive. Loki walking over his own family like this.

“There had to be cooperation or eventually we would have to use weapons against each other!”

“Again, not your decision to make! Not yours alone!”

“It was the right thing and I didn’t have much of a choice. Things had to be done quickly.” Loki kept defending himself, almost sounding spiteful and Thor didn’t want to accept that his brother could be like this. “Will you stop lying to me?!”

“I am not lying!” Voices were being raised and Thor lashed out at him. “You’ve said so yourself! In your speech that we had translated, because we couldn’t understand! You and Lord Helblindi have met weeks ago! You discussed the abolishment of the Language Act! Weeks ago! You swore to him! Without anybody knowing. Without seeking advice. Did you swear on our ancestors? Do you respect all of us so little? Even mother?”

“Don’t drag mother into this!” Loki pressed the words through gritted teeth and Thor could see that he had balled both hands into fists which wouldn’t stop them from trembling. “I did what I thought was right.”

“And you didn’t tell anybody about it, because there might have been objections?”
"Yes."

"Or did you want to be the one who finally ends the 500 years of distrust and loathing? Prince Loki who defies his stubborn, narrow-minded family to change the entire country with the help of Jotun radical? Does that have a nice ring to it?" Thor hated himself for sounding like this. Jealous, spiteful, but it was Loki who had broken all the rules. The rules of the monarchy, the rules of the family and even those of the trúa. Such a horrible thing to do for someone as zealous as Loki.

Not backing down Loki shook his head, using that tone when he was lecturing reporters that he thought were stupid. "First of all, Helblindi is not a radical…"

There was no way Thor was going to let him finish that sentence. "It’s his name that frjáls write on public walls, not Laufey’s!"

"That doesn’t mean he agrees with their ideology!"

"When have you become so naïve? Of course, he is not publicly agreeing with them! They are terrorists! They want him to be king! Why on earth should he disagree with them?"

"Because they are terrorists! Because they put Jotuns lives in danger. He would never accept that."

"Right, so where did frjáls get their money from?"

"We have no proof that the Ymirsons have anything to do with it."

No, they hadn’t but it was foolish to believe otherwise. Loki was a lot of things but no fool. So what was Thor supposed to believe than him having other interests?

"I did what I had to do and that had nothing to do with arrogance or whatever you want to accuse me off."

"I accuse of being naïve and disrespectful!"

Loki was shouting, gesturing with his hands as he didn’t know what to do with them. "So what was I supposed to do?! Jotunheim was boiling over and nobody was willing to listen to me! Not you, not father! Nobody and I knew what to do!"

There. Finally. At least a hint of admittance that there was more to it. "Is that true? Tell me, brother, what did father say to you? Did he curse your name and tell you that everything that you said was wrong? That none of it was going to happen?"

Since he was unable to deny the truth Loki let his voice drop to whisper. As if that would make it less true. "No, he didn’t."

"Exactly. I was not always of the same opinion as you, but I can see that at this point… You are right about the Language Act. It does more harm than good."

Staring at him Loki snorted. "Now? When I forced your hand. Easy for you to say."

"You didn’t give me any other chance! We had the draft of your speech and you said completely different things. Without consulting anybody. You overstepped your boundaries and… you have been doing that for a long time. Obviously you are willing to trust Helblindi Ymirson more than your own blood. When he would rejoice seeing us fail and fall."

"Because he is the only one who could help!"
Now pain joined anger, creating an ugly, numbing mix. “But you didn’t tell anybody! Not because we didn’t understand or because we would have stopped you. You know that we wouldn’t have been able to stop you. If you deny that it would make you even more of a liar. You have done it anyway. You just didn’t want to tell us and that… it makes me so furious at you. For either trusting them more than us. Or for you trying to undermine my rightful place. I don’t know what to think.”

For once it seemed to be Thor who had the last word. Loki merely looked at him with grand, green eyes that were burning and what right did Loki have to be as angry with him as Thor was with him? Then Loki swallowed it down and gave Thor that look. The one he gave people when he wasn’t going to bother with them anymore, because they were too ridiculous or stupid to be dealt with. At least Loki considered them this way. “Believe whatever you think, Thor. It doesn’t matter. We have other things to do. I presented father the terms I negotiated with the Ymirsons. He said that the 500 years anniversary should have been the time to hand over the reign. Those are your decisions to make now. Nothing is going to be made official until you aren’t fully healed, but whatever is going to happen… it’s in your hands. So I have to present the propositions to you.”

Thor felt a sharp pain in his chest since the displeasure in Loki’s voice couldn’t be overheard. No, he wasn’t going to let his own brother do that to him. “Does that make you miserable? That you still have to put me into the equation?”

“Depends on if you decide to be stubborn and stupid. Even I won’t be capable of picking up the shards then.”

Closing his eyes Thor decided to not give into that cheat attack. It hurt nonetheless. “The terms. Let me see them.”

Loki picked up the bag that he had placed next to the door when he had arrived and pulled out several sheets of paper. That would take some time.

“Here…”

Thor took them and sat down in the chair that Frigga had occupied before.

“Before you start…” Loki handed him another piece of paper. It was a list. Thor recognized various names that belonged to the most important noble families of the country. “What is this?”

“All the members of nobility that are ready to publicly declare to be in favour of the abolition of the Language Act. I have verbal agreements from all of them.” Matter-of-fact, devoid of any emotion.

Thor froze as the implications became blatantly clear. “So were going to force us anyway? You had to do what you had to do and that includes force? Before I even read this? You don’t even want to hear what I actually think?”

Loki didn’t reply and Thor’s eyes quickly scanned the names and he was about to start trembling with rage. “The Dökkálfarsons? They would never utter a word about anything concerning Jotunheim without consulting the Ymirsons first. They are their lapdogs. You didn’t come up with this list alone.”

“No.” Loki answered simply and Thor wished that he could go back to a place so long before all of this. “So you sat down with an Ymirson and thought of everybody you could use to blackmail father? To blackmail me? To force us?”

The rage he felt wasn’t audible in his voice, he sounded so hurt which made the humiliation only worse.

“I only wanted to make sure that nothing goes wrong this time.” Loki replied quietly and Thor
thought of his little brother who had helped him learn his Latin vocabulary and helped him hide the shards of the vase he had broken. Thor wondered where he had gone.

He felt personally defeated and an even greater loss at the same time. “Before you got home I still tried to tell myself that things got out of hand. That there was no way for you to control it. The media likes to do as it pleases. A Jotun author on TV who would like nothing more than to create a divide inside our family. That you didn’t know how you were presenting yourself to the rest of the country when you held that speech. That you making all these promises had nothing to do with your ambitions. But you’ve had secrets talks with Helblindi even before that. You orchestrated every single thing that happened without telling anybody in our family about it. You speak a foreign language and didn’t tell us about it. You cooperate with a man that curses our ancestors. The ones who gave us life. The ones that watch over us and make us who we are. And you go to the noble families… you called them personally… knowing very well how this would look. You calling them and asking for favours on a political issue when the media likes to imagine a country where you were in my place. When they think about giving you my birth right without me even getting the chance to prove myself… and you… This is what all of them think now. That it is you who they should talk to. You who makes the decisions.” Thor gestured at the papers. “This is all you and not once you thought that we might have acceptance for it if you only let us in on it. Was it his idea or yours? Because I would like to believe that it was his and that he talked you into, but I don’t know anymore…”

Also Thor didn’t think that he wanted to know. He didn’t think he had the strength for it. Loki was still looking at him, but he could have easily been looking right though him.

“Go. Leave me alone. Go back to the Ymirsons if that makes you happy. Or to mother. Just leave me be.” No matter how much he had wanted to yell at Loki, he hadn’t shouted a single time and now Thor’s voice wasn’t more than a whisper.

Without another syllable Loki turned on his heels and left the room. Thor stayed behind with the papers and the feeling of complete rejection that hurt so much more than everything that had been said about him during the last couple of days.

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Tony raised an eyebrow when his phone beeped and the message had been sent from a number that he didn’t know. Had he got drunk in a bar again? Not that he remembered, but that didn’t mean much.

Opening the message Tony couldn’t help but smile.

*Thank you for your words. Thank you for caring. I do appreciate it.*

There he was still alive and not snarky. Tony decided that this was a good sign.

What wasn’t a good sign was the American embassy in Asgard calling him about half an hour later.

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Thor, despite being granted complete freedom of decision, asked their father for advice and eventually he declared that he was willing to accept about 85% of the suggestions made by Helblindi. The rest would have to be renegotiated. With Laufey, Thor insisted on that. Which was smart and yet Loki felt bitter about it.

The day before negotiations were about to start Loki stared out the window, watching the snow fall
as he became more and more aware of the strange melancholy that had taken a hold of him since he
had returned to Valhalla. At first he had only associated it with his discord with Thor and his
incapacity to forgive his mother. Then his thoughts kept on wandering as he talked to himself in his
big, somewhat empty bedroom. Out of a sudden he missed the taste and weight of Jótmar words on
his tongue. He missed more than that.

His thoughts drifted back to all that had been said. By his father, his brother, his mother, Laufey,
Helblindi, the students in Jotunheim, the people in the streets… 500 years of distrust and discord and
Loki believed that he could fix it all by making one single law go away. It was foolish. It needed
more than that.

After shaking his head Loki leaned his head against the window, trying to think like a politician, not
like a man. There was a good chance that he was getting all of this wrong anyway. While watching
the snowflakes Loki slowly admitted to himself that he really didn’t want to get this wrong. It seemed
so obvious. For the first time in weeks he could finally think about something else than the political
crisis and still only one thing that he couldn’t get of his mind. When he should think about Thor or
the sad look that his father had given him.

Loki would have preferred to be yelled at.

The snow kept falling and Loki repeated the phrase ‘It was a pleasure to meet you’ over and over
again in Jótmar. He had trouble hearing where exactly he screwed up the pronunciation. Getting
frustrated Loki hummed the melody of an old lullaby which he had always enjoyed.

All treetops he could see from his window were already covered with snow. Loki had always loved
the winter, the cold air against his skin and how it cleared his head. In all honesty Loki didn’t think
that he would mind harsher or longer winters. Perhaps that was exactly what he wanted.

Releasing a pent-up sigh Loki picked up his phone made a call before he changed his mind. At this
time he should really be used to his heart beating at an impossible pace inside his chest, but Loki still
tried to calm himself down a few deep breaths. The call lasted over half an hour and by the end Loki
was convinced that it was the right thing to do. He had already gone so far behind everybody’s back,
he could go a few steps further.

Loki had been halfway done with packing his bags when his mother knocked at the door. She was
less than pleased. “Loki, what are you doing?”

“I am going on holiday, mother. I think I have earned a few days… maybe a few weeks of
relaxation. Also it’ll be in everybody’s interest if I disappear during the negotiations.”

“What are you saying? It’s all your doing that after so many years there’s a…”

“Mother…” Loki shook his head as he closed his second suitcase. “Negotiations are going on and if
I am present my shadow will linger over them forever. I am not going to have that. All I want is to lie
on the beach and not have to talk about any of this for some time. Please, just grant me that.”

Frigga looked at him closely, slightly narrowing her eyes. “This isn’t very much like you, Loki. You
never run away.”

At this time Loki wanted to tear his hair. “I am not running away. I am taking a break. The media is
going crazy and the country has finally calmed down. Thor will handle it. I will head to the house in
Croatia.”

“It’s also December in Croatia. You won’t get to lie on the beach there.” Frigga pointed out the
obvious and Loki was almost ready to cry. “It’s not about the beach! I want to get out of Asgard and be for myself for a little while. I don’t think that is too much to ask for.”

“I don’t like the idea of you going anywhere all alone.”

“I’ll have security with me.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Damn it, mother! Please! Stop it!” Loki hissed and then instantly regretted it, because he had no right to talk like that to the woman who gave him life. “I am tired. I would like just a little of time for myself. I think I deserve it.”

He was not asking for permission, they both knew it. Eventually Frigga’s gaze got a lot softer and she reached out to gently touch his cheek. “You are right. I am sorry. It’s just… You’ve been gone for almost a week and now already want to leave me again. I just hope you are not feeling like you have to leave, because nothing could be further from the truth. What you achieved is beyond amazing. I am so proud of my special, little prince.”

She kissed his forehead and Loki smiled. His goodbyes were done quickly two hours later Loki was sitting in a limousine that brought him to the airport. Only a few minutes after they had left the gates of the palace behind them Loki called the crew that were getting the plane ready, telling them to prepare for another flight. They weren’t going to Zagreb but to Paris.

Almarr, the security guard who was accompanying him, raised an eyebrow at Loki. “Have you changed your mind about where we are going, your highness?”

“No, I’ve never intended to go to Zagreb. I don’t want my family to know where I am going. During the time of my stay somebody is sooner or later going to call you and ask where I am. You will tell them that I forbade you to tell anyone. Which I am officially doing right now as your prince. You can answer all other questions truthfully except for who I am spending my time with. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, your highness.”

Contently Loki nodded. It wasn’t going to be possible to keep up the charade very long, but Loki hoped that it would buy him the time that he needed.

Loki had about four hours to ponder all the possibilities until the plane landed in Paris. The stay was very short since Loki merely changed planes. The steward greeted him by bowing his head and calling him ‘your highness’. He was wearing a smile on his lips. That was all Loki could take in one day. The private plane was just as luxurious as the one his family owned. Loki didn’t pay much attention to it, his attention was completely on the man comfortably sitting in a broad seat, his legs casually crossed. He had cut his hair and showed off a designer stubble that had never been there before. His smile hadn’t changed one bit. “I swear if I go up in flames on a Brazilian beach, I will hold you accountable.”

Chapter End Notes

There, go ahead - speculate ;)


Hello everybody,

Today we find out whose plane Loki got on... although it should be super obvious ;)

Have fun

Tony had made a deal with himself. If they let him wait for only one second he would turn around on his heels and tell them they should all go and screw themselves. The government was already stealing enough of his precious time and sanity by forcing him to pay taxes and accept the road traffic relegations. Life was freaking hard sometimes. Damn, he really hoped that they were going to make him wait.

Unfortunately the gorgeous secretary immediately waved him through and offered him the most charming smile. Okay, maybe Tony was a little bit interested in what they wanted from him. The door was being opened for him and Ross was instantly there to greet him. “Mr. Stark, thank you so much for taking the time to come here. I know you are a very busy man.”

“Incredibly busy, but you know me. There is nothing that I wouldn’t do for the State Department. One has to look out for their best client after all.”

Also Tony wouldn’t refuse a meeting with the secretary of state in the early afternoon, it was a guarantee for good booze. Also Tony loved to get the old man riled up. It was immense fun to antagonize people who weren’t used to it and who couldn’t do anything about it. The government may be Tony’s best client, but he was also their number 1 choice and they wouldn’t like it if he decided to take his amazing ideas and designs to the Russians or even worse China. Tony enjoyed being a pain in the pain. It was one of the most entertaining advantages of being rich and loved to play that card.

“Can I offer you a glass of Merlot? The French ambassador gave it to me as a present about a week ago. He swears it’s the finest he’s ever tasted.”

Wine? Okay, Tony had expected something harder, but he could deal with that. “Gladly.”

As Ross went over to the bar hidden in the cupboard Tony decided that it was time to start being a jerk. “You know when I got the call that Secretary Ross wanted to talk to me I was kind of amazed, but then I remembered that I always mistake you with the Air Force guy or was it the CIA? You know, little fella, dirty blond, snarky and pretty cool overall. I was looking forward to meet him. Such a disappointment.”

Ross huffed in fake amusement as he handed Tony his glass. “Everett. You’ll have to go to Langley to catch up with him. Cheers.”

As they clinked their glasses Tony wondered if Ross actually believed that Tony was unaware of his disdain towards him. One didn’t even have to be a good observer to notice that. Ross was never dismissive or overly eager to please Tony, but the truth was still hard to deny. It made it even funnier.
“So what brings me the pleasure of this invitation?”

“A little bit of catch-up. The State Department is interested in your expertise, Mr. Stark.”

“That’s very flattering, but my fees are extraordinary.”

“Good thing then that I’m not going to ask about your weapons or technology. Nothing you have a PHD in.”

Huh. That was going to be interesting. Women? Ridiculously overprized art that wasn’t worth it? Booze? Those were all things that Tony had certain knowledge in. None of those should be discussed with the Secretary of State if the bureau wanted to keep a little bit of its credibility. “I am all ears.”

Ross was utterly relaxed as he took another sip from his wine before letting Tony in on why he was here. “I would like to hear your personal opinion on the second prince of Asgard.”

Not that much of surprise when Tony considered the circumstances, but maybe it should be a little unsettling that the American State Department was already this scared that they had to drag in the one night stand. Alright, casual fling. They didn’t know about that though. “Teddy, that’s a horribly inappropriate question. I feel so violated in my privacy.”

“Stark, you know exactly that I am in no way interested in details or any information about your love life. I want to hear your opinion on his character.”

“Well, that’s a first one, I have to admit. I don’t know what your little spies told you, but I am not immediately best friends with every guy I sleep with.”

“Again, not what I am asking you for.”

Fine, Tony was going to have some fun with this. “Personal opinion, alright. I don’t think it’s very nice to go on TV and say that I am unpleasant company after I gave him a good time. That’s not like a gentleman behaves.”

Ross didn’t even arch an eyebrow, totally disappointing. “I will never understand your tendency to try to make yourself look so much less smart.”

“It’s possible to be a genius and a childish imbecile at the same time. There are quite a lot of us.” Tony offered him a grin and Ross was still pretending that he had the patience to deal with him. Fine, why not? After all Tony enjoyed prince charming as a topic of conversation. “Alright, let’s have a little chat. I get to ask first. Do you know something that the general public doesn’t or are you just trying to be prepared for all possible circumstances? Which would be a first one for the American government.”

Now at least Ross snorted with a little bit of annoyance. “You want me to start doubting your patriotism?”

“I supply the US military with weapons. What is more patriotic than that?”

“The prince, Stark.”

“Like I said – we’re not best friends. He is not very keen on us a whole though. The US. He loathes the American Policy, but you already know that. I am not so sure what you expect from me here. Not that I care, the wine is pretty nice.”
For some reason Ross now offered him a smile without any joy or sympathy. Which wasn’t upsetting since Ross was unable to smile any other way, he was a born politician. “How familiar are you with Asgardian politics and history, Stark?”

A lot more than Tony was going to let on. “I know that they have attractive princes who are into me?”

“Let’s say our country missed out a great chance to win a great alley during the Second World War. Our soldiers had a very detailed conduct how to interact with the general German population, but unfortunately they were hardly briefed on what would expect them in Asgard. Mistakes were made, they didn’t know what to do confronted with a completely sexually liberated country and the Asgardians haven’t reacted too kindly to that. Our public image over there isn’t very good and it hasn’t been for the last 70 years.”

Tony pretended to be invested in the fakest way possible. “Yeah, that’s pretty bad. Especially if said country sits on tons of gold and oil that we want to get our hands on. Right?”

“The geopolitical location of Asgard is also nothing to sneeze at.” Ross pointed out and Tony wanted to sigh. It was always about Russia. No matter how hard the Chinese, the Vietnamese or even the North Koreans were going to try, they would never be enemy number 1. Was the Cold War ever going to end?

“Okay, so the Asgardians don’t like us very much, big deal. Most people in the world don’t like us.” Tony shrugged and for once Ross looked like he agreed with the sentiment. “The rest of the world still cooperates with us in one way or another and doesn’t have the means to close themselves off like Asgard does. That country is a complete contradiction. Their public memory is still tainted from the American mind-set of the 40s, but they’ve had intense diplomatic relations with the Russians for decades.”

“The Russians are their neighbours.”

“The Russians also have discriminating laws against the homosexual part of their population that would never fly over here and still it’s us that are ogled with distrust.”

Tony had a very long and detailed explanation to that which would be an exact quote from Loki’s paper. Sometimes reading came in handy. “I am by no means an expert, but I think they don’t like laws supporting homosexuality either. When I flew over one of the security guys told me a story. How Hollywood was so eager to release Brokeback Mountain in Asgard, because it was a guaranteed hit. Gay cowboys and all. It turned out to be a massive flop and the few guys who went and did see it hated it. Because they didn’t get the ‘we can’t be together cause we’re guys’ thing and because the cowboys cheat on their wives which immediately made them the bad guys. They are not that easy to figure out and I guess they like to stay among themselves.”

“Exactly and now that we finally have one foot in the door, we don’t want to be pushed out again.”

“Yeah, I see. Loki would rip the contract into tiny little pieces and if he has a very good guy day, he’ll maybe even close down the embassy.” That would be a sight to behold. “But I don’t see how that is even up for discussion.”

Suddenly Ross turned way too serious for Tony’s taste. “No, it isn’t, but things can change very quickly. Especially in politics.”

Sure, with right people now rooting for Loki the State Department got a little bit nervous. They probably should be, it would be a harsh mistake to underestimate Loki’s ambition. He could play
nice little prince who knew his place all the wanted, Tony knew better.

“Let’s say the situation finally looked rather bright. We have fruitful negotiations and contracts and the crown prince is engaged to an American. It would not be in the interest of our nation if the status quo was going to change.”

What a surprise, Tony should yawn just to show how totally by the numbers this was. “Aha and what do I have to do with all of this?”

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Ignoring the little remark Loki sat down opposite of him. “What happened to your hair?”

“I was getting tired of doing this.” The other one replied and made a gesture to brush his non-existent fringe out of his eyes.

Loki nodded and cocked his head, deliberately putting on a sceptic expression. “And you forgot to shave?”

“I am already regretting picking you up. You are on my plane for half a minute and all you do is complaining.” Helblindi sounded more amused than annoyed and although Loki wanted to find out who far he could push him, he wasn’t going to try that out now. “I was merely noticing the difference.”

“I feel flattered.” He clearly didn’t. “Take off is in about 20 minutes. It’s a 12 hour flight. I hope you can think of another conversation topic than my new haircut.”

Overall there were probably a thousand things that Loki wanted to talk about and he could think of nothing at the top of his head. Which was quite sad. For once in his life he felt ridiculously out of his depth and it still had been his idea all along. Loki would have to figure all of this out as they went along.

So for now all he could do was make conversation 101. Small talk. That left the weather and very obvious things. “You’ve ever been to Brazil before?”

“Uma ou duas vezes.” Helblindi smiled and it was still dazzling, so much about that.

At this time though Loki was anything but impressed. That needed a bit more than a seemingly flawless Portuguese pronunciation. “A bit early to start showing off, don’t you think?”

Helblindi shrugged. “Language prodigy. Just don’t ask me to solve an arithmetic problem. My teachers always lost patience with me.”

“You’re bad at maths?”

“Hey, I always solved the equations. I just needed more time for it than other people. A lot more time.” He sounded by no means embarrassed by it, but there was little extra note in his voice that made Loki sure that Helblindi wasn’t just telling stories.

“I see and to compensate for that you probably rubbed your language skills into everybody’s faces. The other pupils must have loved you.” Loki felt more at home with the banter, it gave him the feeling that things weren’t so serious yet.

Helblindi slowly shook his head. “I was privately tutored. There were no other pupils.”
Loki made a silent ‘Oh’ sound and immediately asked himself why he hadn’t known that. He always did his homework and it was odd that he would miss such a thing. Or had he forgotten about it? “What was that like?”

“Mostly boring, little chance of getting distracted during courses. Made it pretty hard to cheat. If it hadn’t been for dancing lessons and sports courses I would have ended up being a little awkward for the lack of social interaction with people my age.”

While Loki was already opening his mouth Helblindi quickly cut him off. “If you were about to point out that I became awkward anyway, I will kick you off my plane.”

“This is Paris, I would certainly find something to keep me busy here.”

“I thought you wanted to go to the beach.”

“France has loads of beaches.”

“It’s December.”

“That… is a very good counter-argument.”

“I am a lawyer.” Helblindi shot him another smile and Loki grimaced. “A horrible profession to choose. 9 out of 10 lawyers only make people miserable.”

“Well, that’s what you expect of me, don’t you?” Now Helblindi sounded all too serious and Loki stilled. Once more his heart did that annoying little thing. Beating too fast and making him feel like he wasn’t in control of the situation. They were here because of him. On his terms. Loki should feel more confident about this.

Like Helblindi.

The Jotun was comfortably sitting in his seat, legs crossed, one hand on his knee, his expression serious but definitely not tense. Nothing about him seemed or nervous. Loki wondered how he could do that. If he was capable of keeping his cool in any situation or if Loki just didn’t have the same intimidating effect on him as the other way round.

Maybe Helblindi was way better at hiding his nervousness than Loki.

Slowly shaking his head Loki negated. “No, I don’t expect anything… Alright, I expect you to be honest and I’ll be honest with you. The two of us could make a real difference, but only if he are able to trust each other. Therefore I have to get to know you and the same goes for you. You told me you were willing to do that.”

Blue eyes were looking into his without hesitation. “I am.”

“Why?”

“Excuse me?”

Loki made a helpless gesture since he didn’t believe words were enough to explain this dilemma. “I know your point of view and from a historian’s perspective I know where you are coming from. The disdain your family holds for mine. I am not talking about Jotuns and Asgardians. Just about our families. I know how you see what happened 500 years ago. That we stole something that was rightfully yours… which is debatable if you consider the historical context. No, let me finish. The humiliation my family brought upon yours and the following injustice is undeniable. I know about
the assumptions that my family had members of yours murdered…”

This time Helblindi didn’t let him shut him up. “Those are not assumptions but facts.”

“No, they aren’t, but this is exactly what I am talking about. I know what you think of my ancestors. So why would you think about me any differently? Why is there the chance that I might be any different?”

Perhaps Loki had opened Pandora’s Box now. What good was to come from this question? In the worst case he even might make Helblindi realise that this was insane and that they were supposed to loathe each other like the rest of their families had done. Wasn’t it arrogant to believe that it could be them who were different? Because everybody else had been too stupid or stubborn to consider that during 500 years?

For the first time now Helblindi looked away, it seemed like he needed time to think, ponder his answer. Loki felt his chest tightening with actual fear. A sensation that grew more intense with every second that Helblindi remained silent.

“I believe in the trúa. I know that our soul is shaped by our ancestors, but it is our decision what we make of the qualities and flaws that they gave us. I am the son of a Lord. One day I am going to be responsible for all of Jotunheim. Naturally I have kept a close eye on you and your family for all my life. We have to be ready whenever the Búrisons decide to throw dirt at us. I listened to your speeches, I read your papers, I watched your interviews and those of your brother. Believe me, I’ve had my trouble believing it, but it is hard not to notice that you don’t match the image I have of your family. I think that you are different. I don’t know why. Maybe it is an urge to rebel against your father, perhaps it’s an incredibly smart play to become king yourself, maybe you’re genuine or there is another reason that I haven’t thought of yet. Anyway I do not want to be the member of my family that denies a chance to bridge the chasm. Because of pride or mere stupidity. I think the same goes for you. I have to earn your trust and the same goes for you, Loki.”

So many things were said for the very first time and Loki wondered if this was also the first time that Helblindi called him by his name. He couldn’t remember him doing so before. Loki decided that he liked it. Such a simple thing. “Alright. I see… and I agree. Let’s start at the beginning. If I am ever supposed to trust you, you can never do anything like that publicity stunt from a few days ago again. You put me with my back against the wall.”

Tilting his head Helblindi raised an eyebrow. “So am I now supposed to lie to make you trust me?”

“There is also the choice not to say anything.”

Now the smile was back on Helblindi’s face. “I am very bad at remaining silent.”

Loki knew that he shouldn’t but he couldn’t help but feel a little good about that. “I don’t think that is going to be a problem, but sometimes a couple of things should be left unsaid. At least in front of a TV camera.”

“I believe we can find a solution for that.”

They shared a smile and Loki eventually closed his eyes. “I didn’t get much sleep during the last couple of days, so you’ll forgive me to spend a couple of these 12 hours fast asleep.”

“That is incredibly impolite.”

“Get used to it.”
Those few hours of sleep were a waste of time since the rest of the journey was still so long and strenuous that Loki felt completely beat when they arrived at the resort. Which was breathtakingly gorgeous and secluded. The sun was setting and Loki felt weary, jet-lagged. He couldn’t wait to put his head on a pillow and fall asleep again. Next to him Helblindi hadn’t said anything since they had left the car which probably meant he was just as tired.

Loki told himself that he would feel completely overwhelmed and impressed by their 320m² bungalow tomorrow, he didn’t have the strength for it tonight. They even told the hotel employee that they didn’t need a tour of the bungalow, they’d check it all out tomorrow morning. It was still impossible to miss that one entire side of the bungalow was made out of windows and glass, offering a view over the private beach and the ocean. Rooted to the spot Loki stared at the last bit of the golden ball of fire disappearing on the horizon. That sight alone was worth the flight.

“I’m going to take a swim first thing in the morning.”

“Have fun with that.” Helblindi waved off, either oblivious to the breath taking view or he just wasn’t impressed. “Don’t even dare to knock at my door before 9 am. I am not a real person before coffee and breakfast.”

“When we’ve had breakfast in Jotunheim it was long before 9 o’clock and you seemed perfectly fine.”

Helblindi laughed and Loki had heard that sound before. When he was at ease, relaxed. “Yeah, because I’ve had three cups of coffee before you even showed up. One minute earlier I couldn’t even see straight. Breakfast tomorrow? 9:30?”

For Loki that sounded a lot more like brunch, but he wasn’t going to say no. “Alright.”

Helblindi nodded contently. “Good night then.” With a smile on his lips Helblindi turned around and disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

After realising a long and shaky breath Loki turned to the right, heading for his own bedroom. At this time he didn’t even bother to take a shower or brush his teeth. Loki merely stripped his clothes off and fell on the bed. Now that he was alone his thoughts immediately started wandering. How long till his family noticed what was going on? Had he bitten off more than he could chew? How was he possibly going to fall asleep knowing that Helblindi was next door and why hadn’t that been a problem on the plane when Helblindi had been in front of him?

Closing his eyes Loki tried to put it all aside. That was the entire point of all of this. Ignoring their names, their families, their regions. Creating a little bubble for a couple of days to figure out if this could work.
Hello everybody,

Okay, this was pretty, right?

I hope you enjoy it :)

This was indeed the other side of the world. Yesterday Loki brushed the snowflakes out of his hair and today the blazing sun was making his skin feel warm, having him tilt his face towards the sky. Sure, Loki loved the winter. Maybe even more so because Asgardian summers were very short. Despite his preferences he couldn’t deny the almost overwhelming charm of this setting. The bungalow was surrounded by palm trees and other plants that shone in the most marvellous green. The sand of the beach was clean and bright, mingling together with a gorgeous blue ocean. Not a soul to see, no matter where Loki looked. It was perfect.

Diving into the calm water Loki let wash away his worries and insecurities. He was a good swimmer, but he didn’t dare to swim out too far. This was the definition of unknown waters. It felt heavenly though. After a while Loki stopped swimming, lay on his back and let the water carry him. He wondered how Thor was doing and how long it was going to take until his brother started to miss him. Loki had clearly lost that battle, because he was already missing Thor. Despite everything Loki had never wanted to hurt him, but he had gladly accepted that it was inevitable. Another reason why Loki had run off to the other end of the world. Half an hour later Loki left the water and made his way back up to the bungalow. He stopped on the private deck and marvelled once more at his surroundings. For a lot of people this would qualify as paradise. Loki wouldn’t quite go that far, but he could understand the sentiment. He was definitely going to try out the hammock later and the lap pool was also still waiting for him. This was definitely starting to feel like holidays. If it wasn’t for Loki’s company. Wrapping a towel around his shoulders Loki turned around to look into the living room which was very easy to do since there was nothing but glass on this side. It looked like Loki wouldn’t have to wake Helblindi up. Loki could see him walking towards the doors, clearly not dressed for the occasion. Grey Harlem pants and long sleeved, loose black shirt. The outfit looked comfortable, but way too hot for these temperatures.

Opening the door Helblindi leaned against the frame. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” Loki replied and he had to fight the urge to somehow change his position or grab his shirt that was lying on the chaise lounge and put it on. Which was stupid, because Loki was pretty content with his body and generally he had no qualms with being looked at. Helblindi wasn’t even checking him out, so Loki should have no damned reason to suddenly feel unsure about his appearance.

No reason whatsoever when he thought about what Helblindi had whispered to him months ago.

His thought process was quickly ended by Helblindi who clearly didn’t share any of his concerns. “How is the water?”

“Fantastic. How is your body temperature?”
Helblindi raised an eyebrow and Loki gestured at his outfit. “My Lord, this attire is not beach appropriate.”

“You really want me to go up in flames?” The smile on his face was genuine and Loki was pleasantly surprised since he had expected Helblindi to not be in the best mood before his first coffee. Or had he had one? Unlikely, Loki hadn’t seen any sign of room service. “I want to have breakfast with you. Can you take care of that while I take a shower?”

“Sure. Already on it.”

Loki muttered a few words of thanks before walking past Helblindi, heading for the bathroom. After a quick shower Loki put on his denim shorts and a t-shirt. He purposely forced himself to not look at himself in the mirror, then walked back out on the deck. Room service had done a little miracle during his absence since the entire table was filled with fruit, bread, cheese and even more fruit. “Wow.”

“It’s a somewhat traditional Brazilian breakfast. Just way too much. Mostly they just have coffee. Serve yourself.” As Loki sat down Helblindi handed him a cup of coffee. “Thank you. Cheese bread, corn cakes… Well, we definitely don’t need lunch today.”

While nodding in agreement Helblindi bit into a big slice of papaya and Loki remembered the little discovery he had made a couple of days ago. Perhaps a good way to begin the conversation. “You are a vegetarian, aren’t you?”

To Loki’s surprise Helblindi shook his head ever so slightly. “Almost, but not really.”

“And what is that supposed to mean? Aren’t lawyers supposed to be terribly precise?”

Laughing softly Helblindi shrugged. “I am nor a defence lawyer nor a prosecutor, you don’t have to judge every word I say. About my non-existing diet… 363 days of the year I am a vegetarian and on the two other days somebody happened to put a steak on the plate in front of me. That’s something I haven’t learned to resist yet.”

“That’s so cliché. Men and a piece of meat.”

Once more Helblindi shrugged, but the smile was still playing around his lips. Loki decided that this was nice. That he could definitely enjoy Helblindi’s presence when they weren’t fighting, talking about their families or trying to make sense out of political chaos. When Helblindi was just another person and not even bad company. About time that they started at the very beginning. “What’s your favourite colour?”

The most trivial thing brought about the most interesting reaction. Helblindi looked in equal parts confused and surprised. “Are you serious?”

“Well, we have to start somewhere. Normally people ask those things first. Political views are the last thing you want to ask somebody when you get to know them. I know all about your political views, but I have no idea about anything else. So what’s your favourite colour?”

The most trivial thing brought about the most interesting reaction. Helblindi looked in equal parts confused and surprised. “Are you serious?”

After swallowing down another big piece of papaya Helblindi shook his head. “No way. First, it’s completely boring. Second, it doesn’t tell you anything about me. Come on, get a little more creative. If you ask for my star sign, I’ll drown you in the sea.”

“See, I asked about your favourite colour and it taught me that you are prone to violence.” Loki replied with a bit more snark than necessary, but Helblindi actually laughed. It wasn’t now that Loki decided that the new haircut and the stubble on his cheeks and chin did nothing to deform his beauty
in any way, but he definitely noticed it once more. “Alright, I will come up with something better.”

Loki took his time to think about it while chewing on a delicious piece of cheese bread. It would be best to think about his own interests. Since Helblindi was going to complain if he asked him about his favourite book, Loki got a little more precise. “What’s your favourite literary character?”

Blue eyes lit up and Helblindi hummed with appreciation. “Way better. I’ve never thought about that… Iago probably.”


“Because he is evil for the sake of being evil. He deliberately destroys several lives and we don’t know anything about his motivations. Perhaps he doesn’t have any motives. I like that. Nowadays most books and films are trying to over-explain everything. Try to make everybody sympathetic. Every villain must have had a sad childhood, an abusive father or a traumatic event that struck him. Nobody can be a horrible person because they simply decide to. It’s so much scarier to imagine a person who doesn’t want anything, who can’t be negotiated him. Who is not after money, power, not even revenge. He simply enjoys what he is doing and I enjoy that way more than having to go through 50 pages of convoluted backstory that tried to make the villain more sympathetic.”

This was by far better than anything he had expected. Loki wasn’t going to say that out loud, but he was pretty sure that his face was already giving everything away anyway. “You like Shakespeare?”

“When I am in the mood. I haven’t checked one out in a very long time. At the moment I am more into the Russians.”

“Dostoevsky?”

“Tolstoy.”

Loki pulled a face. “All he writes about is death and misery.”

“That’s what every Russian author is writing about, but Tolstoy does it beautifully. It crushes your soul, but in a good way.”

So Helblindi had a fondness for an author who was famous for writing about how the lower classes suffered from injustice forced upon them by their masters. More than that, Helblindi appreciated the beauty of the written word. It seemed all too easy. Like Loki only had to take one step and he’d be completely lost. Which was the scariest thought imaginable, because Loki had no indication that Helblindi might follow him down the rabbit hole. The last thing Loki was looking for was a power imbalance. Not the right moment to think about this now. “You have the most wonderfully positive personality. Your favourite character is the prototype of the perfect villain and you like to read about people being treated unfairly by the entire world and then die tragically.”

Helblindi hid his grin behind a coffee cup. “What do you do when you’re not complaining? Tell me who is your favourite and then I’ll judge you.”

“Don Quijote.”

“Oh and that’s not tragic? The poor man is completely delirious, chasing after a time that is long gone and gets constantly beaten up by thugs. It’s tragic!” Helblindi’s voice had got a little bit louder, there was laughter and excitement in it.

“It’s comedic ally tragic. It’s written in a funny. Don’t tell me you didn’t laugh.”
“At the poor man’s misery? I was in tears.”

“For a lawyer you are a horribly liar.”

Shaking his beautiful head Helblindi raised his hands in surrender. “Alright. It is funny… but so incredibly long. I’ve never finished it. I try again every five years.”

“You should finish it. It’s great.”

Offering him a smile Helblindi accepted the advice. “Okay, I will. How much do you read? Not counting non-fiction books.”

Loki replied honestly. “Too little.”

“That’s such a non-answer. We’re trying to have conversation here. Not a debate.”

The worst part of him tempted Loki to say that every conversation with him was a debate. “I don’t have as much time as I would like to have… but it’s what I enjoy doing most in my spare time. When I make it to read three books a month, I am probably neglecting my duties. At the moment I am at one book a month. Which is very bad. I get dibs on the hammock by the way. I plan on spending the rest of the noon there with 100 years of solitude.”

“You call me to fly around the world with you so you can spend half the day reading? Ignoring me? Fantastic. I should have kicked you off the plane.”

Loki shrugged casually. “I’m nevertheless on holidays. I’m going to do what I want. I expect you to do the same.”

“Alright.” Within a second Helblindi pulled out his phone and started typing away.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking the Asgardian newspapers. If your oaf of a brother has already destroyed everything we’ve worked out.”

“If this is supposed to work you, you’ll have to stop talking about him like that.”

“You want me to lie?”

“I want you to be civil.”

“That’s a first. I’ll try…”

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“Our son has disappeared.”

Odin looked up from the file in his heads, feeling the slightest bit confused. It wasn’t like his wife to enter any room without knocking. Least of all his office. Judging by her looks Odin would have every reason to believe that something horrible had happened. The rosy colour had left her cheeks completely, her usual grace had been replaced by jerky and abrupt movements.

Calmly Odin shook his head. “Thor is taking a run in the garden. He needs some fresh air of an entire day in a stuffy room.”

“I am not talking about Thor.” Frigga came quickly closer and Odin sighed, putting the file away. It
was a cruel thing to be feel annoyed by a mother’s worry, but these days his last bit of patience had worn very thin. Which was unfair since Frigga was the very last person who deserved any negative attention.

“Loki decided to stay away from the negotiation process. A smart and sensible decision. He owed as much to Thor.”

Not a single word seemed to have reached his wife. “Loki claimed to go to Croatia. He didn’t. He flew to Paris and then disappeared.”

It was in the nature of children to make their parents desperate, no matter how old they were. Throughout his entire life Loki had given him plenty of reasons to feel angry and immensely frustrated, but Odin could hardly remember a moment of worry. “Loki has never been fond of the protocol.”

“Did you not listen to me? Loki got off the plane and now nobody knows where he is! We have no idea where our son is when only a week ago somebody tried to kill his brother!” A loss of composure was something that Odin would never associate with his wife. Always so calm and collected, analysing a situation and then wanting to talk about it. Panic and overly emotional reactions weren’t like her, but Odin assumed that if they occurred, they had to be tied to Loki. “As far as I know he took a security detail with him. Loki is a grown man and you know about his stubbornness. It is not the first time that he decided to ignore the protocol and drop off our radar. I by no means condone what he is doing, but I am absolutely sure that our son is doing perfectly fine.”

“How come you are not dying from worry?” The reproach couldn’t be any clearer and yet Odin wasn’t given the opportunity to reply. “Is it possible to be so angry with your own son that you don’t want to know where he is?”

Odin looked at her, his expression stern. “I am furious with him, yes. Is that the reason why I am not worried? No, I am not worried, because I know him. We don’t know where he went, because he doesn’t want us to know. He has done that before. I have no doubt that he will call as soon as he has calmed down.”

Frigga narrowed her eyes ever so slightly. “Does he have a reason to be upset?”

“He has reason to feel bad and guilty. Loki threw his own brother under the bus.”

“After so many years Loki gave us the opportunity to perhaps finally make peace with Jotunheim. You ought to be grateful and proud.”

The last thing Odin was interested in was another fight, especially when he had enough trouble figuring out his own feelings. In a fluke of naivety Odin had hoped by finally handing Thor the responsibility that was rightfully his, that it was going to be easier to distance himself from what was going. Of course it wasn’t. Reason and gut feeling both told him that they had to tread lightly. They should watch their every step. Nothing came without a hook a prize. Even less so with the Ymirsons.

Sure, Odin would like to be able to believe like Loki that they could actually find common ground, but an entire life of knowing Laufey Ymirson and his disdain for their family. The conviction of being the rightful monarchy was rooted so deeply inside of the Jotun, Odin had no doubt that reclaiming the throne would always be his number 1 priority. Why renegotiate the Language Act when Laufey wanted to abolish it himself. As king. During the whole day Odin had watched Laufey’s face on a screen, listening to him and Thor talking about details, getting stuck and then starting over again. The displeasure had been etching on his face and his eyes had been full of contempt. Laufey hated every second of what they were doing. Altering or abolishing the Language
Act meant nothing to him if he wasn’t the one with the actual power to do it.

Odin wished he could see inside of his head to find out what he was planning. Because there was always a plan.

“Loki did what he thought was right, he followed his believes and I respect that. I admire his courage, but I am under no illusions. I know that our son is brilliant and therefore I know that he was aware of all the implications. Loki knew what kind of attention he was going to get and how it would reflect on his brother. Not to mention how he kept secrets from all of us. Yes, I am furious with him, but it was definitely the right decision for him to stay away from the negotiations. Like this there is still a chance for Thor to save face. Loki chose to disappear and not tell us where he is going. He has done that before and he is most probably not alone.”

Ever so slightly Frigga’s features began to soften, but there was still tension in her every bone, clearly visible. “You believe he was meeting up with someone in Paris?”

Sighing softly Odin nodded. There were way more important issues at hand than Loki’s casual and inappropriate affairs. Nonetheless Frigga was a mother and she was going to worry if Odin didn’t give her a reason not to.

“A couple of weeks ago Loki ignored the protocol to go to Paris and I have reason to believe that he was meeting up with Tony Stark.”

That had Frigga sitting down. “How do you know that?”

“I don’t know it, but it’s a reasonable assumption. Loki went to Paris the day that Tony Stark attended a conference in Madrid. One day later Tony Stark flew back to the States. Not from Madrid Barajas but from Paris Charles de Gaulle. I assume that they spent the day there together. It sounds like something Loki would do.”

Shaking her head Frigga put her hand over her eyes. “Oh, my dear boy… what is he doing?”

Odin thought of the beautiful American agent that Loki used to play tennis with. “This is Loki’s way of trying to prove to himself that he can do whatever he wants. He’ll come back eventually.”

“I have warned him of that man.” Frigga muttered absently. Still worried but in a more resigned way. “Loki is almost thirty and he is still falling for the kind of man that is only going to cause him trouble. An American. A weapons manufacturer.”

“Although there are no words to describe how uncomfortable I feel discussing our son’s love life, I am perfectly sure that this is nothing serious. Like you said, Stark is American and in this point Loki is completely different from his brother.”

Frigga offered him a sad smile. “It doesn’t have to be serious to cause trouble. Our son lies to me and leaves the country without us knowing where he is. I already call that trouble.”

“I don’t believe that Tony Stark is the reason for Loki lying.”

“What?”

Again, the last thing Odin wanted was to upset Frigga, but there were some things that needed be said. “You hurt him. I know that nothing matters more to you than Loki being happy and good things happen to him. That doesn’t change though that Loki feels you overstepped a line. You wanted the very best for him and I can see why you thought that Balder could be just that. Still Loki lost some of his trust in you.”
Odin could have just as easily hit her. The result would have been the same. Frigga straightened up in her chair, her lips turning white from how tightly she pressed them together. Odin felt the urge to say something else, something comforting, but he knew there was nothing that could make her feel better. Only Loki could do that.

Turning her face away Frigga took a staggered breath before standing up. “Please… do me a favour and find our son.”

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It was seven o’clock, the sun was starting to set and Loki was lying in the hammock. Again. He loved this thing, no way to deny that. Wonderfully comfortable, gorgeous surroundings and a good book. For an hour or two Loki had actually been capable of forgetting about everything that was going on in Asgard. His responsibilities.

Lowering the book Loki took in the sight of the sky taking on different colours as dusk was nearing. It was absurdly beautiful.

Seconds later Loki was interrupted by a soft voice. “Hey.”

Twisting his head around Loki spotted Helblindi standing next to him, smiling and Loki knew that he was fighting a losing battle. “Hey. Where have you been?”

“Gym in the cellar. Do you want to get out of here for dinner? I talked to one of the concierges. He recommended me a restaurant on the beach. Mostly locals visit it. Want to check it out?”

“Do I need to dress up?”

Helblindi tilted his head and let his eyes run over Loki’s body. As an instant result Loki felt his face heating up and he desperately hoped that it wasn’t visible.

“No, you look fine. I thought we’d both like something casual. I don’t know about you, but when I’m on holiday I like to keep things low-key. I get tired of suits and ties all day.”

Obviously, the loose long-sleeved shirt and the washed out jeans were proof to that. “Okay, then let’s go.”

When they left the resort Loki expected a taxi, not a sleek BMW convertible. With only two seats of course. “Do you want to drive?” Helblindi held up the keys and gave them a soft shake.

“No thanks. That’s a terrible idea.” Determined Loki was already opening the door to the passenger seat while Helblindi started to frown. “Is his royal highness second prince of Asgard a bad driver?”

“No, his royal highness second prince of Asgard is a spoiled prince who gets driven everywhere and hasn’t sat behind the steering wheel in over two years. I think.”

The sunset had been one of the most beautiful sights Loki had ever seen. Helblindi’s mouth dropping open was one of the most hilarious. “You are kidding!”

“I am not.” Loki shrugged and Helblindi stared at him as if Loki had suggested to make Christianity Asgard’s official religion. “By all the spirits, what is all that money good for when you don’t use it to drive around in an overpriced car!”

“I am more the ‘buy overpriced clothing’ kind of guy.”
“Unacceptable.” Helblindi abruptly tossed the keys at him and Loki almost didn’t catch them. “You drive. I need you to start enjoying life a little bit. The simple things. Nobody can be that big of a snob that you don’t drive.”

Dumbfounded Loki stared at the keys in his hands. “I can be a snob, I am a prince!”

“Actually… I am the prince. You are the descendant of a Lord that stole the throne, but hey, I don’t want to start a fight. Get in the car, I’ll give you directions.”

Since there was obviously no doubt in arguing Loki took an exaggerated bow. “You wish is my command, my Lord.”

Grinning widely Helblindi slid into the passenger seat. “I could get used to that.”

“Yeah, don’t.”

Truth to be told Loki was immensely nervous to make a fool out of himself, but he managed to get them on the road without immediately killing the engine. Driving a car seemed similar to riding a bike, it was impossible to unlearn it. The charm was also undeniable, wide empty roads, the airstream was messing up his hair and Loki could smell the salt of the sea.

“I know. It’s amazing. We should do a longer tour tomorrow… well if you bring us back to the resort safely. I am not convinced yet that we are going to survive this.” Despite the biting words Helblindi was smiling sweetly, his head lazily resting against the back of his seat.

Loki screwed his face up, shaking his head. “Okay, I admit that crashing a sports car in South America sounds like a cool death at first, but I don’t want the newspapers to have a field day. What story do you think the press would make up about us two being here?”

“Probably something pretty close to the truth.” Helblindi pushed the sunglasses up into his hair as he looked at Loki. He still hadn’t shaved. “Romantic getaway?”

That description cut Loki’s breath off for a second. Glancing at Helblindi Loki saw these blue eyes still looking at him. Suddenly the odds of him crashing the car looked a lot better now. “Aren’t you skipping a few stages here? We’re here, because I want to get to know you. To find out if I can even stand you if we aren’t debating politics.”

Helblindi laughed and reached over to squeeze his shoulder. “Come on, you know that our lives would be nothing but debating politics.”

A smile made its way on Loki’s face. “Probably. Wouldn’t be that bad, right?”

“Not bad at all… with a slight risk of ending up killing each other.”

“That would be terribly counterproductive.”

“Indeed.” Loki chuckled and concentrated again on the road.

The new silence was easy, relaxed until Helblindi spoke up again with a rather hushed tone that Loki hadn’t heard yet. “You know what I said yesterday. When you asked me why I would do this… besides changing our country for the better and overcoming a feud that is so much older than us… besides all that… I wouldn’t do this if some weirdly wired part of my brain didn’t like you and I think you already know that. That makes me feel like I’m walking on eggshells and I don’t like that. So I would like to know if you still think that I’m bastard. Because the two of us getting married makes perfect sense and I am tempted to believe that you might still be willing to go through with it if
this little trip ends with both of us realising that we both hate each other’s guts… which would be stupid, but I digress. Do you think I am a bastard?”

Loki looked at him. Much shorter than he would have liked to, but he was still driving a car. “I’ve never thought that you are a bastard.”

Helblindi made a sound that was a mixture between a laugh and a snore.

“Well… I may have called you a bastard and other things. Things that weren’t nice. When I was angry, I didn’t really think that. I thought that you are brilliant.” Loki could have added a lot of other adjectives, but he didn’t. Not yet.

“Brilliant.” Helblindi repeated softly. “I think I like that.”
“Looks all fine to me. Your surgeon didn’t screw up. That’s something nobody can take for granted. I want you to show up at my office in five days for a check-up. My secretary will send you the details. Don’t be late, you won’t get another appointment and I’m a busy man. I can’t drop everything when the prince calls and asks me to do stuff that is not in my contract.”

“I’ll be on time. Thank you, Doctor Strange.” Bucky was eager to get out of the hospital and finally sleep again in his own bed.

Doctor Strange nodded indifferently. “Good. I’ll see you then.” Without further ado he walked out the door and Bucky sighed for once in utter content. The doctor was gone and Bucky was free to head home. Finally.

“Good news. We’ll go home, you’ll make yourself comfortable on the couch and I make you my most amazing scrabbling eggs” The smile on Arnþórr’s face was as bright as his eyes and it made Bucky breathe even easier. “That sounds quite nice.”

“Sure, it does.” Leaning down Arnþórr brushed his lips over Bucky’s before turning it into a real, perfectly soft kiss. When he pulled back he was still smiling, his thumb rubbing along the collar of Bucky’s shirt. “So uhm… what did he mean when he said that the prince might call? Which prince?”

Even that wasn’t going to diminish Bucky’s joy. “That’s a really long story which I am going to tell you at home.”

“Yeah, about that…” Arnþórr clicked his tongue and his smile almost turned a little bit coy. “How about you come to my place for a couple of days? You wouldn’t be alone and I could take care of you. Talking about the scrambled eggs and everything.”

Bucky couldn’t deny a warm and rather fuzzy feeling inside of his chest when he heard the offer. It has been quite a while since he had had somebody in his life who wanted to take care of him. “That sounds great, but Steve wanted to drop by at my place today.”

Arnþórr shrugged, his fingers playing with a loose strand of Bucky’s hair. Which had become way too long. He would have to get a decent cut some time soon. “Tell him to come to my place, I don’t mind. I don’t feel too good about you being alone at home. What do you say?”

“I like that idea.” Bucky agreed with a nod and Arnþórr answered with the sweetest smile, it made him look younger than he was. He was undeniably pretty.

“Fantastic. Let’s get going. I am very sick of this hospital.”
“Me too.”

So they did get out of there and for the first time since Coulson’s visit Bucky felt rather at ease, especially when as soon as they got out of the car Arnþórr grabbed Bucky’s bag and put an arm around his waist. All without saying anything. Like that they walked upstairs, running into a young woman on Arnþórr’s floor. She was all smiles the second she saw them and Bucky was glad that his arm was dressed up enough to not scare the living daylights out of her. “Arnþórr, hey. The postman left a package for you with me since you weren’t there when he was trying to drop it.”

“Thanks a lot. Oda, that’s my boyfriend James. James, my neighbour Oda. She makes sure I get my bills on time.”

Oda, who had the head full of brown curls, smiled at him and held out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

It was perfect. The utter normality. Bucky returned her smile and shook her hand, grateful that his left arm was the one that wasn’t of any use right now. “Nice to meet you too.”

Unfortunately he didn’t miss the way how Oda’s eyebrows went a little bit up when she heard Bucky talk. Of course she had noticed his accent. Her smile didn’t go away, that was a good thing.

“I’ll get the package in five minutes, alright?” Arnþórr was talking while unlocking the door and Oda told him that it was perfectly fine. Since Bucky already knew his way around the apartment he immediately made himself comfortable on the couch. He wasn’t feeling very tired, but he could admit that he wasn’t at the top of his game.

“Put your feet up. It’s your job to relax now. That’s all you gotta do.” Arnþórr was right there to kiss him before excusing himself to get the package from Oda.

While shifting around on the couch to get comfortable Bucky wrote a message to Steve, telling him that he was at Arnþórr’s place and that he could drop by any time. Much to his surprise Steve wrote back instantly.

*You sure that’s okay? It’s his place*

Bucky frowned but he felt somewhat amused at the same time. *Yes, he said so. Thought that I shouldn’t hang out by myself. I’d probably set the house on fire. That’s what people with only one arm do*

First Steve sent a smiley, but the next message wasn’t as cheerful. *Okay, but I don’t want to trouble you guys. I’ll drop by when you’re back at your place?*

A very distinct feeling of disappointment couldn’t be denied, Bucky had definitely been looking forward to see Steve. It also bothered him that Steve had only cancelled for a single reason. Arnþórr.

*Okay, but you can still drop by any time you like*

Steve sent back a thumbs-up and Bucky knew that he wasn’t going to come over. Which was kind of sad, because Bucky had been fairly convinced that Steve was okay with Bucky having a boyfriend.

The sound of the door being opened had Bucky looking up and Arnþórr was already sliding back into the apartment. “So what are we going to eat? It’s a bit late for scrambled eggs. How about we order some pizza?”

Bucky put on his best puppy dog eyes. “You are not going to cook more me? That’s the only reason
I came here.”

Smirking slightly Arnþórr sat down next to him, resting his chin on Bucky’s shoulder. “I am a very
strong feeling that you also came here for the amazing oral sex that you know that you’re going to
get.”

Unable to hold back a grin Bucky nodded. “Yeah, that sounds reasonable enough. Still doesn’t solve
the food problem though.”

“By all the spirits, what did they do to you in the hospital? I offer you sex and you still ask about
food.” Arnþórr shook his head and sighed dramatically before turning serious again. “Okay, any
wishes? Suggestions?”

One hour later they were again both sitting on the couch with two plates of pasta. Bucky was happy
to find out that Arnþórr could do more than scrambled eggs. “I am still waiting for the long story.
About you, Doctor Strange and the prince. One of the princes? The actual princes?”

There was no way that this story wasn’t going to ruin Bucky’s mood, but since Doctor Strange had
already mentioned Loki, Bucky had to explain something. Why not the truth? It was an Asgardian
ideal that you should trust the person you’re with unconditionally. Bucky was going to make an
effort. “Doctor Strange is Prince Loki’s personal physician.” He did a quick sum-up of him playing
tennis with Loki, them being sort of friends and how Loki had seen him at the hospital.

“That’s so cool. If I weren’t already into you, I’d be into you now. You are on first name basis with
the prince.”

Bucky had also made it to first base with the prince, but that was a story for another day. “At least
somebody thinks it’s cool.”

“What do you mean?” Arnþórr raised an eyebrow at him and Bucky felt his chest tightening. It
wasn’t like he didn’t want to talk about it, but he couldn’t. All of Bucky’s work was highly
confidential. Then again – what Coulson asked of him definitely wasn’t in his job description.

With a vague gesture of his hand Bucky tried to brush him off. “All I can say is this… people at the
embassy are worried about Prince Loki… gaining too much influence. You know since he isn’t too
keen on the American policy.”

It didn’t need much more to put Arnþórr in a bad mood. His features hardened with serious
annoyance. “Jerks. All of them.”

“Who exactly?”

“Your guys and our press for blowing all of this out of proportion. It’s so disrespectful towards the
crown prince. I understand why your people do it, but that Asgardians are actually going on TV and
cite reasons why Loki would be a better King than his brother is just heinous.”

Bucky couldn’t help but feel stupid as he uttered a single word. “Why?”

“Because it’s not going to happen.” Arnþórr shrugged. “I like the Prince Loki, he takes no shit from
anybody and speaks his mind in public. That’s why the people like him. But he can say all that stuff,
because he isn’t the crown prince. He doesn’t get judged as hard. It doesn’t matter anyway, their
ancestors sent him second. What people are talking about right now is denying the crown prince his
birth right. That would be a violation of the law of succession and the trúa. The last person who
would disrespect the trúa is Prince Loki. He is a zealot. Moreover this is a big country. Most of the
population doesn’t appreciate the Jotuns dictating who is going to be king…”
“But it does very much look like he single-handedly ended the Jotun crisis…”

“The Jotun crisis has been going on for over 500 years. That’s not something anybody can end or solve single-handedly. They are changing the Language Act… alright. Then we’ll see if anybody is going to accept the changes. As long as the actual Lord of Jotunheim doesn’t tell his people to accept the ruling families and their laws… I don’t see that conflict ending any time soon.” Arnþórr’s voice turned into a sigh and as he shoved a big spoon of pasta into his mouth Bucky had the distinct feeling that he wanted this conversation to be over. Something he was perfectly fine with. It would definitely be to Bucky’s advantage if Arnþórr turned out to be right and things remained as they were.

Eager to change the topic Bucky told Arnþórr that Steve wasn’t going to pay them a visit after all. That new piece of information didn’t seem to surprise Arnþórr all that much. “He’s totally into you. You know that, right?”

Bucky froze, sending an uncomfortable glance Arnþórr’s way. “Is he?”

“Young friend is a lot of things, but he isn’t subtle.”

“He is not into guys.”

“There is no such thing. That was the most Midgardian thing you’ve ever said by the way.” Arnþórr offered him a sweet smile and Bucky thought that he might be right.

***

Perhaps it was the Caipirinha or the weird sweet stuff that they had had for dessert. It had to be something that he had eaten. Rolling over Loki took a look at the clock on the nightstand. Five minutes to six in the morning. Way too early for Loki during the holidays. He was wide awake though. There was no sense in lying here and staring at the ceiling. Slowly Loki slid out of bed and put on a t-shirt. A walk on the beach before dawn didn’t sound so bad. Loki didn’t get much further than the living room.

As it turned out he wasn’t the only one who couldn’t sleep anymore. Through the huge windows it was quite easy to observe Helblindi who was on the sun deck, doing yoga. So much about not being an early riser. Perhaps they had really eaten something full of caffeine without realising it. Remaining where he was Loki tilted his head to closely watch Helblindi doing his poses with complete ease. Not that much of a surprise. Those long, lean limbs, bordering to skinny were moving with effortless grace. No matter what he did, he was easy to look at. Although Loki enjoyed watching him he really didn’t want to be caught standing here. Therefor Loki stepped outside, softly clearing his throat.

Helblindi didn’t even turn his head, but nevertheless acknowledged him. “Good morning. Can’t sleep either?”

“No. How long have you been awake?”

After bending over and pressing his palms flatly on the ground Helblindi straightened back up. “Half an hour. Which means I am five seconds away from insanity.”

Now that Helblindi was looking at him Loki could see that playful smile and he felt a little tugging inside of his chest. He was so lost.

“How about we take advantage of the early day? Have breakfast immediately and then get into the car and explore the surroundings? How often do you get to go somewhere without tons of security around you?”
“Never. That sounds great. I’ll call room service. You finish… your workout.”

Breakfast was a short affair this time and they left the hotel shortly after sunrise. Helblindi was driving and Loki decided to contemplate the scenery instead of the man next to him. “Are you really doing this back at home? Driving around yourself or leaving the house without anybody tailing you to make sure you don’t get kidnapped?”

“Kind of, yeah. Being paranoid only helps people to get stupid ideas. Then again, if I am being honest, Týr is probably always in another car right behind me without me even noticing?”

“Your bodyguard?”

“Since I was born. He is definitely going to break my legs for coming here without him.” The affection in Helblindi’s voice couldn’t be missed and Loki made a mental note that he considered members of his staff his friends.

Loki tapped his fingers against the door handle. “I guess a lot of people aren’t going to be happy with us.”

“Are you trying to tell me that your family is happy with you right now? I sincerely doubt that.”

Of course he did, Helblindi was smart after all.

Loki wasn’t going to sigh or think about it too much. They were trying to heal the wounds of an entire nation. The feelings of a few people were nothing in comparison to that. “My brother is my best friend and usually we would be talking about everything. At the moment he definitely doesn’t want to listen to me and even if he did… I wouldn’t be able to tell him about this.” Rather awkwardly Loki gestured between them and Helblindi didn’t hold back his frank reaction. A dismissive sound and a roll of his eyes.

It was enough to make Loki feel upset. “If you have something to say, then say it.”

“I have a hard time imagining you discussing anything with your brother.”

Confused Loki fixed Helblindi with his eyes, but the other kept his attention the road. “Why?”

“Because you’re clever and capable and he is an idiot. What is there to talk about?” He said it as a matter of fact, his voice so neutral he could have been talking about their tax laws. It rubbed Loki the wrong way and yet he still wondered if Helblindi was doing it intentionally or not. “Don’t talk about him like this.”

“I am calling him an idiot, because he is one. He’s had plenty opportunities to prove that.”

Nobody could be so amazingly good looking for Loki not to get furious at him because of his words. “You don’t know Thor, alright? I admit you’ve seen an ugly part of him. The worst. But that’s it. That’s where it all ends. Apart from one ugly moment he is a generous and kind person who is always trying to do his best. The world handed him cards with which he cannot win. He is a great brother, he’s always been there for me and he is going to do everything in his power to be the best possible king for Asgard. If this between us is supposed to work even for a minute, you will have to stop talking bad about my brother. I will not accept that.”

Loki wasn’t bluffing, there wouldn’t be any arrangement if Helblindi wasn’t going to stop badmouthing Thor. Only now Helblindi shot him a quick glance. “You want me to lie?”

“You don’t know him and you don’t have the right to talk about him like that. Was that clear
“Yes, your highness. Will I still be allowed to voice my opinion or am I supposed to keep everything
to myself that you might not want to hear?” Still so matter-of-fact and Loki released a shaking breath.
A dire realisation dawned on him. Closing his eyes Loki shook his head. “No. Actually I want to
hear all of your opinions. Even more so when they don’t match mine. I want it them all right in my
face.”

“Shouldn’t be that much of a problem.”

They spent the rest of the drive in silence. Helblindi brought them to a rather secluded beach which
was almost empty at such an early time. “In about an hour the entire place will be flooded with
tourists. You want to take a walk before they all show up?”

Loki nodded and let the gorgeous scenery do the trick to raise his spirits. It was hard to stay in a sour
mood when he could feel the warm sand underneath his feet and the sunlight on his face. Hard to
believe that this was the same early morning sun that Asgard also saw every day. It seemed so very
different.

Now they were walking in silence and Loki found it hard to figure out what to say. Sooner or later
they had to start discussing the really complicated things and Loki wasn’t looking forward to that. He
had a very strong feeling that he would be in the more vulnerable position then. As if it wasn’t
enough to feel out of his depth half the time. Just when Loki tried to come up with something to say
his phone was announcing a call.

Loki froze when he took a look at the display and read his mother’s name. This was a conversation
that he definitely didn’t want to have. There would be reproaches. Where are you? Why did you lie
to me? Come back. A lot of things that Loki didn’t want to hear. Not yet.

“Aren’t you going to answer the call?”

Sliding the phone back into his pocket Loki shook his head. “No. It’s my mother. I don’t want to talk
to her at the moment.”

“May I ask why?”

For some reason the words came flowing out. “She tried to control my life and decisions in a way
that’s unacceptable. I cannot talk to her now, because I haven’t forgiven her yet. If I were to talk to
her now, she would want to know where I am and I would get mad and I would say something
nasty. I want to avoid that, so I’m not talking to her at all.”

Next to him Helblindi hummed softly and it sounded like he had some very strong opinions on what
Loki had just said. “Are you interested in hearing the opinion of a man whose mother died when he
was 10 years old?”

One thing was for sure, Helblindi knew how to make Loki feel miserable. That was at least one
important requirement for a wedding. Clearing his throat Loki tried to swallow down the lump in it.
“Yes, I’ve told you that I wanted to know what you think.”

Helblindi took his time before he actually started talking. “You only have one mother. You should
make peace with her as soon as you can and feel ready to. Opportunities may dry up so much
quicker than you expect them to.”

Yes, he definitely knew how to make Loki feel terrible.
“But…” Helblindi continued. “I also understand that there are conflicts that are incredibly hard to forgive. I also believe that it’s wrong to forgive somebody just because you are supposed to be close or because you have a special relationship. When somebody hurts you, it’s you who decides when it stops hurting. Or what the other one has to do for you to feel ready to move on. Apologies are nice but they aren’t a miracle cure. If somebody betrayed you a ‘sorry’ isn’t going to cut it. They have to work for it and you decide when it’s enough. Even mothers don’t get a free pass.”

Loki stopped walking, staring at the other man who took two more steps before noticing that Loki wasn’t next to him anymore. “Did I say something wrong?”

Hastily shaking his head Loki negated. Could he finally stop feeling out of his depth? “No. No, you didn’t. You… voiced a rather unpopular opinion.”

Helblindi crossed his arms in front of his chest. Why on earth was he again wearing a long-sleeved shirt? “No, I voiced my opinion. Our ancestors and family make us who we are, but that doesn’t mean we have to close our eyes and ignore their flaws and faults. I don’t know what happened and maybe you are completely in the wrong or exaggerating things, but you seem upset. A lot of people always feel like they have to forgive for some reason. Even though they aren’t ready. I believe that is stupid.”

It was strange and exciting to hear these words leaving Helblindi’s lips when Loki felt like he could have said them. There was that tugging inside of his chest again and this time Loki thought that he might understand what it meant. That there might be someone who could actually get him. Loki didn’t dare to believe that, but he was sure there was more to what Helblindi had just said.

“Who did betray you?” Loki’s tone was soft since he was afraid to rip open an old wound.

Helblindi kept looking at him. “Your family betrayed mine as a whole.”

“That’s not what I meant and I am sure you know that.”

Then one of these rare moments happened when Helblindi was the one to look away first. “A woman that I fell in love with turned away from me when she decided that she had enough of the advantages of being with the son of a Lord.”

This one was harsh. Despite Loki not being a stranger to rough relationships, he had no idea what it felt like to have somebody walking out on him. A little, stupid and immature part of him had trouble believing Helblindi’s tale. Right now Loki was looking at him and he saw that gorgeous man. Who would ever…

“I am sorry…” Loki mumbled and when Helblindi shrugged he added something else without thinking about it. “Your ex sounds like a bitch though.”

That had Helblindi spinning his head back around to stare at him. With his mouth dropped open. Loki didn’t even have time to start worrying when the other one burst out laughing. After running one hand through his hair Helblindi rubbed the back of his hand over one eye. “Yeah, yeah, she kinda was.”

Seeing him like that had Loki smiling and his mother and other worries suddenly were far from his mind. “Come on, let’s continue before the tourists start showing up.”

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Losing track of time was something that didn’t happen to Loki. Except for today. First the beach, then the road trip, then the excursion to the city. It was fun and liberating to wander around without
anybody looking out for him or giving a damn about him. So much fun that they got back late to the resort.

“Do we order in room service or you want to head out to the hotel restaurant?”

Helblindi shook his head determinedly. “I am beat. I am not moving a muscle. Room service.”

Loki was definitely fine with that. “Okay. Any idea where we put the menu?”

“I checked it out last night. It’s in my room.”

Without giving it another thought Loki followed Helblindi and found out that their rooms were exact copies of each other. Fair enough. After picking up the menu from the table Helblindi read out their options and they quickly came to a decision.

“Good, I’ll go and make the call. I’m starving.” Loki had already turned around when Helblindi said that he was going to be right with him, he just wanted to change first. Loki would do that too. As soon as he had ordered them food, he was starving. Just as Loki was about to leave the room, he forgot all about room service and his empty stomach. The more than conveniently places mirror right next to the door offered Loki a sight that made him stop dead in his tracks.

Recognition set in and Loki watched with slightly widened eyes Helblindi taking off his shirt and reaching for a new one that was lying on the bed. How had he never seen any of it? So many public appearances and not a single glance. Loki cocked his head to change the angle, to get a better look. He needed to see more of it. All of it. A very familiar excitement and eagerness took a hold of him. The very same he had felt when he had commenced his studies or any time that he spend an entire day in the archives over old books and letters. There were little things that truly fascinated Loki and when he came across them, he couldn’t help but wanting to absorb them immediately.

Helblindi moved to put on the other shirt and Loki wasn’t done looking yet. He had barely started exploring. “No, don’t!”

Quickly spinning around Loki made his way back to Helblindi who had indeed stopped moving. Loki ignored the expression on his face, his eyes fixed on the black ink that decorated the white skin. Starting on his wrist travelling up his arm to his collarbone. Elaborate lines that seemed to have wrapped themselves around Helblindi’s arm. All of them evidently crafted by an artist. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

Instinctively Loki grabbed Helblindi’s wrist and gently traced his thumb over the runes. What would he give to be able to read them. To understand and delve into all the history they contained. For once Loki didn’t even try to play down the awe he was feeling, he wasn’t able to keep it out of his voice anyway. “I didn’t know… I had no idea that you were still doing this. I read about it. According to the books it’s an antiquate practice… abolished generations ago.”

Helblindi didn’t move, letting Loki openly admire his tattoos. To be honest Loki wasn’t sure what he had done if Helblindi had refused him this. This was a piece of living history right in front of him. Loki wanted nothing more than to take it apart. A voice was reaching his ears and Loki had to tear his eyes off the runes, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to tell what Helblindi was saying. “Not abolished, but I guess you can call it antiquate. I am a traditionalist. I insisted on having them done.”

Unwilling to look away any longer Loki again concentrated on the runes, his index finger running up Helblindi’s arm, feeling the difference between skin and tattoos. “When did you start?”

“I got the first ones when I was 15. Like the tradition demands.”
It was unbelievable. The amount of details and how the runes looked like they had become part of his body, beginning and end seemed to melt into Helblindi’s skin. “Shouldn’t they… Shouldn’t they cover all of you?”

Helblindi uttered a soft chuckle. “Yes, but obviously I am not traditionalist enough to do that. It’s enough that some of my ancestors went all the way.”

Absently Loki nodded. “Those are not regular Jǫtnar runes. They’re older… way older, right?”

“It’s ancient Jǫtnar. Asgard’s oldest language.”

A dead language and the dream of every historian. “Can you tell me what they mean? All of them?”

Loki raised his head to meet Helblindi’s eyes and they were perfectly blue.

“Alright.” The response was simple and Helblindi carefully moved Loki’s fingers out of the way and pressed his thumb against the runes that had been covered previously. “Those two are my name.”

“This means Helblindi?”

“Yes and it goes on. Helblindi, son of Laufey. Descendant of Ymir and Lopthæna. Fifth of his name, heir to all of Jotunheim and Asgard.”

Loki stared at the runes, trying to make out the meaning of some word, but it was no use. Eventually he would have to sit down and try to write them down. With his hand still on Helblindi’s wrist Loki made him turn his arm, baring the inner side. The fine and board lines continued until…

It felt like a little step out of a trance. Caused by the single blank spot on Helblindi’s arm. Slightly below his wrist. Saved for his marriage markings. A spot of flawless white skin that suddenly made Loki realise what situation they were in. He was standing so close to Helblindi, Loki had his hands on him and the other one wasn’t wearing a shirt. Now Loki became aware of the astonishing fact he hadn’t even looked at Helblindi, only at his arm. Which seemed insane.

Releasing a slow breath Loki took half a step back, his eyes now taking in the entire sight in front of him. Every part of him was beautiful. From that immaculate face over the tattoos to the rest of him. The entire day came back to him. How much fun it had been and every word that Helblindi had said. How much Loki agreed with him and how easily he could get him riled up.

The sensation that made Loki’s skin tingle was so easy to identify. He had experienced it before, he had written to his ancestors about it. Want. Ice blue eyes held his gaze with the same intensity. For the first time Loki allowed himself to believe that he could have it all. A challenge, affection, attraction, a heart that was beating too fast for all the right reasons and most importantly it could have meaning. Not just for him.

“What’s the verdict?” Helblindi was whispering, the fingers of his left hand curling around Loki’s that was still grabbing his wrist.

Loki was tempted to give him a look that said ‘are you serious?’, but then he noticed the hint of shyness in those eyes. Reminding him that beneath this intimidating and fascinating exterior was also just another person. One that could be just as easily messed up as Loki.

“Let’s find out if you are as clever as you are beautiful, son of Odin

“There is no way you don’t know what you look like.”

Helblindi exhaled loudly, sounding somewhat dismissive. Annoyed even. “Yes, so? I fail to see how
this is a guarantee for anything.”

That reasoning couldn’t be argued with. No guarantees for anything. Loki wanted him, that was for sure. It could be the solution to pretty much everything and complicate matters so much more at the same time. Then again, what was ever going to be simple in politics? Loki had never been a fan of simple anyway.

The fingers around his hand gently tugged him forward and Loki moved in, sealing Helblindi’s mouth with his own. Yes, that might just work out.
Hello everybody,

So Loki kissed Helblindi. What's going to happen now?

Have fun :D

Hands found their place on Loki’s sides, a flat chest was pressed against his own and heat was slipping through the thin fabric of his shirt. The lips touching his own opened up and Loki felt the dizziness building up and lying in wait in the back of his neck, waiting to overcome him anytime. Loki didn’t worry, there were hands to hold him up and the idea of stopping seemed so terribly alien to him. No, he wanted more of it. Tilting his head Loki changed the angle and their mouths locked so easily. Teeth grazed his lower lip and a rush of desire ran through Loki’s body, making him lift his arms and wrap them around Helblindi’s bare shoulders. His skin was pleasantly warm and the fact that Loki could feel Helblindi’s tattoos beneath his fingertips excited him in a way that was almost unfamiliar to him. Loki had missed this. Experiencing lust that threatened to overwhelm him and made him forget about all the little things that usually kept nagging him.

Helblindi’s hands moved from his waist to his cheeks. Out of a sudden his grip was a lot firmer as if Loki could try to get away. The first couple of tentative seconds had passed and the kiss got more intense, fierce even. Helblindi kissed the way he talked, aggressive, fast and so wonderfully precise. Loki wouldn’t want it any other way. Pushing against him Loki didn’t stop until he had Helblindi against the bed. It almost surprised Loki how easily Helblindi let himself be pushed down. As soon as Helblindi sat on the edge Loki slid into his lap, eager to find out how that tall, lean body was going to feel against his own. The little bit of control that Loki had had over the situation was ripped from him when Helblindi twisted his right hand in Loki’s hair, ungently pulling his head back. Loki’s breath got caught due to the rough treatment and it got only better when Helblindi’s mouth trailed down his throat.

There should be no rush, they definitely had time. Nonetheless they didn’t even try to slow down. Utterly gracelessly buttons were opened, flies pulled down as far as necessary. Loki’s hand slid inside his pants and only one second later he felt the other’s fingers curling around him. Moaning softly Loki tilted his head to bring their lips back together and the feeling was exquisite while too much to bear. It was on the rough side, quick, but when Loki came in Helblindi’s hand the intensity left him trembling and breathless. Despite it being a hardship Loki tried to keep his eyes on Helblindi’s face, to see his expression, to find out what Loki could do to him. Helblindi didn’t play his game, he was quiet, pressed his mouth back on Loki’s and even bit slightly down when he eventually spilled.

As the heat slowly slipped away Loki rested his forehead against Helblindi’s, enjoying the mess they had made. It did somewhat reflect the situation they were in, but what mattered way more to him at the moment was the simple fact that the sight of Helblindi’s slightly parted lips and rosy cheeks made Loki feel good about himself. Also there was this fierce desire to claim and to possess. Impossible to deny that it scared him since Loki had never expected to experience something like this. Especially not in a match that made so much political sense.
Helblindi’s mouth brushed over his ear, releasing a lithe chuckle. “I like that verdict.”

An honest laugh started in Loki’s chest and this felt good. So easy. “I’m still feeling hungry though.”

“Then let’s go back to the original plan and have dinner.” They untangled themselves from each other and Helblindi disappeared in the bathroom while Loki headed for the phone to call the room service. After his own shower Loki found Helblindi at the table in the dining area, wearing an actual t-shirt. Inevitably Loki’s eyes darted to the exposed tattoo and he wanted to touch Helblindi’s arms. He decided that he could.

Helblindi turned his head, a small smile on his lips when Loki’s fingers ran up to his wrist. “Did you hide it from me?”

“It’s tradition. Not body art for the sake of looking good. It isn’t meant to be showed off. I couldn’t know what kind of reaction it would provoke.”

Loki didn’t even feel a hint of embarrassment for being enraptured by the tattoos. They were beautiful and a window to the history of another culture. Also they were written on the skin of a gorgeous man. Sitting down next to him Loki started scrutinizing him. “Can you teach me how to write Jǫtnar?”

Helblindi smiled, it was a little patronizing and Loki found it as attractive as he found it annoying. “Ancient Jǫtnar or modern Jǫtnar?”

“Modern. You’ll have to read your entire arm to me anyway.”

“So demanding…” The smile turned a little softer and Loki wasn’t sure what he preferred more. “In all seriousness, sure. I can teach you, but I am a complete pain as a teacher. I have no patience whatsoever and I hate having to repeat myself.”

“Good for you then that I was always a great student. Teachers loved me… the other students didn’t.” Loki shot him a grin and Helblindi responded with lithe laughter. “I can see that. I’ll only teach you under one condition though.”

Good, that was making things a lot more interesting. “Alright, I’m listening.”

“I’ll teach you how to write Jǫtnar if you tell me how you learned it in the first place.”

Ever so slowly Loki nodded. If they were to get married Loki would have to find the trust inside of him to tell Helblindi about things that only belonged to him. At this point it was blatantly clear that it wasn’t just about getting married, but Loki was still too scared to think about the constant tugging he felt inside of his chest. “Alright, I can do that. Eventually.”

“I’ll remind you. Eventually.” His tone was teasing and bearing a promise. Loki returned his smile, not moving a muscle when Helblindi slowly moved closer. This kiss was gentle this time. More care being put into it, trying to get to know the feel of each other. A different side now that Loki also enjoyed. The soft pressure and the sweetness coming with it. It lasted until there was a knock at the door.

“Dinner. Finally.” Helblindi brushed his lips over Loki’s cheeks before standing up and heading for the door. Loki took advantage of these few seconds to release a shaky breath and lick his lips. His cheek was all warm.

The food was amazing and Loki thought that it was one of the most relaxed dinners he had ever had. They shared a bottle of wine and Loki liked to steal little carrots from Helblindi’s plate since the
other one wouldn’t touch Loki’s chicken.

After taking a long sip from his wine Helblindi changed position to sit Indian style in his chair, probably he felt more comfortable like that. “Can we go back to the trivial questions?”

“Sure. My favourite colour is green.”

“I am so not interested in your favourite colour.”

“How rude.” Loki playfully narrowed his eyes and Helblindi shrugged. “Name one guilty pleasure. One that’s terribly embarrassing.”

For that one Loki needed a moment to think, but then something came to mind and his expression obviously instantly gave him away since Helblindi started grinning. “Here we go. Let’s hear it.”

“How familiar are you with George Michael?”

“Nothing related to George Michael could ever be a guilty pleasure. That’s just great music.”

“Hear me out. With his band he had this Christmas song that gets non-stop airplay all over Europe during the winter?”

Starting to frown Helblindi offered him the correct title. “You mean Last Christmas?”

And the melody would be stuck in his head for the rest of the week. “Exactly. The song that annoys every person on the planet… I love it. I know it by heart and sing along every time. Sometimes I wish Asgard would be a Christian country, so the song would get more airplay. That’s how much I love it.”

Helblindi’s eyebrows almost met his hairline. “You are right. That is pretty bad. Now I want to hear you sing though.”

“No way. What about you?”

“My taste in music is flawless. Thank you.”

“What do you listen to?”

“Mostly boybands from the Nineties.”

Unable to stop himself from laughing Loki shook his head. “It was a great idea to home-school you. They would have killed you. Either because you’re indeed into boybands or because you are a sarcastic bastard who is unable to have a casual conversation.”

“Surprisingly a lot of people seem to like that. The sarcastic bastard part.”

Yeah, Loki wondered why. It wasn’t mind-bogglingly attractive or anything.

“If you mind if I ask a question and want an honest answer to? Just yes or no without any snark.”

Helblindi made an inviting gesture. “Go for it.”

“Let’s assume that this is going to work out. There is a physical attraction, we get married and learn to trust each other like the trúa demands of us. We work together for Asgard and let’s go for the best case scenario – we fall madly in love with each other. Is there ever going to be a chance that I or anything else is going to be more important to you than Jotunheim?”
As always Helblindi had no trouble meeting his eyes. His answer consisted of two words instead of one. “No way.”

He couldn’t have chosen a better reply. Sometimes it indeed seemed like Helblindi could slip inside Loki’s head, dig around and find the exact words that he wanted to hear. Except that those were Helblindi’s words, the ones he wanted to use, the ones true to him. Loki nodded at the same time he felt the smile spreading on his face. Perhaps it was all going too easy or this was just how things were supposed to work when it was right. Frankly, Loki had no idea, he had never been in this kind of situation.

“Good. Same with me.”

Helblindi’s mouth formed that smirk that Loki still hadn’t got used to yet. Not that he wanted to get used to it, Loki enjoyed the tingles. “Oh, the two of us… we’re going to give them hell. A lot of people are going to be so wonderfully miserable.”

For once not the wording that Loki would have used, but again, those were his very own thoughts.

“You seem awfully happy about making people miserable.”

“Look at your face. You are totally excited about it.”

Loki shrugged, not trying to hide his smile. The idea was enchanting. Together, the two of them had actual political leverage. Enough power and influence to change things, to get the ball rolling. How Loki would love to hear Helblindi saying the things he said when he was on his side. He’d like to hear that condescending tone directed at ministers and ambassadors. There was intense excitement in the idea of sitting down with Helblindi, discussing strategies, making plans, changing the criminal code of law if they wanted to. Also Loki would be able to lean over any time and kiss him if he wanted to. Not that Loki would ever do that while working on political issues.

During Loki’s little fantasy Helblindi had moved closer, he was tugging a loose strand of hair behind Loki’s ear. “Yes, that expression speaks volumes…”

Loki didn’t doubt that.

He immediately returned the kiss, moved closer and realised that he quite enjoyed the feeling of Helblindi’s hand in the back of his neck. Dinner was officially over.

Half of their clothes got lost on the way to the bedroom, leaving behind a trail that would any uninvited guest know what was going on. Now it was Loki who was pushed down on the bed, but he could easily keep up with the feverish kisses that were trying to steal his breath away. Skin rubbed against his own and Loki finally got to touch him. The way he wanted to. Or not quite, because Loki was too much in a rush, too winded up to do anything properly or to take his time. His hands slid down Helblindi’s chest, feeling hard but almost invisible muscle beneath warm skin. Everything about him was lean, almost skinny and yet he was strong. Limbs shaped by yoga or whatever else he was doing in his spare time.

Helblindi’s breath ghosted over his neck and a pleasant shiver was running down Loki’s spine. He couldn’t make it so easy for him though. Fisting one hand in Helblindi’s hair Loki pulled his head back up and then swallowed his hiss in a new kiss. For a fleeting moment Helblindi let him use his mouth as he pleased before grabbing both of Loki’s hands and trapping them against the mattress. When his neck was bit Loki arched his back, moaning in delight.

Loki thought he could hear Helblindi mumble something like ‘glad to be of service your highness’
before his mouth started to travel down Loki’s stomach. His laughter was short-lived when Helblindi hooked his hand under the back of Loki’s knee, pushing his entire leg up. Lips brushed over the inside of his thigh and Loki was trembling by how much he wanted him.

There were only so many kisses and caresses that one could stand before getting frustrated from all that lust. A feeling that was definitely mutual, given the desperate nature of the kisses.

The remaining clothes landed on the floor, their bodies wrapped themselves around each other and Loki wanted to drown in him. He wouldn’t stop kissing him. All the way through. At times Loki felt that he might be overcome with dizziness which only made him held on tighter to Helblindi. It was hard to breathe between the thrusts, but it was such a little price to pay.

They ended up in a messy, tangled pile of limbs. Clearly not wanting to let go even as the sweat dried on their skin and slowly turned cold. Loki felt like wrapped up in a cloud, his mouth lazily kissing every piece of skin in his reach. His fingers traced the runes on Helblindi’s arm which made the other one hum contently. It made Loki feel ridiculously good about himself.

“You hear that?” Helblindi mumbled sleepily as Loki brushed his lips over his jaw. “Do I hear what?”

“The sound of all of my and your ancestors turning in their graves.” His voice was lithe and clear as he laughed and Loki pulled back ever so slightly to glare at him. “Don’t joke about that?”

“Really?” Helblindi arched an eyebrow, still smiling. “You cannot be that zealous. I wear half of my family on my skin and even I can make a joke about it once in a while. What I meant is fairly obvious, isn’t it? A Búríson and an Ymirson in bed together. Almost sacrilegious.”

Rolling over onto his side Loki propped his head up on his hand and gave up on trying to fight down a smile. Forever. “Yes, that should make the headlines… My entire family is going to lose their minds.”

“You knew that when you called me.”

“Yes, but I…” Loki made a vague gesture and then decided that he would prefer it much more to run his fingers through Helblindi’s hair. Short but soft. Loki liked it. “I doubted that you would agree. Also I expected this trip to be more like… us sitting at a table and drafting extensively detailed and serious plans on how our marriage could repair Asgard’s broken bridges. I did not expect this.”

To emphasise his point Loki kissed him and Helblindi returned the kiss, shifting around to lie half on top of Loki. “Why not? You knew that I thought you were beautiful.”

“I thought you were trying to mess with my head or to manipulate me.”

“How so? I didn’t even know you spoke Jǫtnar.”

“Yes, but…” Sighing softly Loki shrugged. “I wouldn’t put it past you to think of all possibilities…”

“I feel so flattered.” Helblindi pecked him on the lips one more time before sitting up, withdrawing his body heat which had Loki instantly feeling cold. “Where are you going?”

“Shower. We’re a mess. Again. Join me?”

Loki was on his feet instantly.
One thing turned out to be very true. Helblindi wasn’t a morning person. There was no waking up with him since he remained fast asleep when Loki was ready to start the day. He was a gorgeous sight to marvel at, the only reason why Loki didn’t wake him up. Lying on his side, the sheet barely covering his hip, the black ink on his arm in hard contrast with white fabric. The stubble on his cheeks looked more brown than black in the early morning light. Loki decided that he liked that too.

While slipping out of bed Loki became more aware of the pleasant soreness in his muscles. A nice reminder of last night’s activities. In the best mood imaginable Loki slipped out the bedroom to get fresh clothes and order coffee. To enjoy the beauty of the early morning Loki made himself comfortable in one of the deckchairs and watched the small waves crashing into the beach. Wasn’t that strange? Right here and right now Loki had no worries on his mind. The Language Act was being changed right now, Helblindi and him were on the best way to maybe change two enemies into something else entirely. Loki’s heart was about to jump out of his chest when he thought about what they might be able to do as soon as Helblindi would be Lord of Jotunheim. It could all end there.

And Loki… Loki thought that he would be happy. Which was completely unimportant, but Loki could try as much as he wanted to, he wasn’t able to deny that his first association with Helblindi wasn’t a marriage of convenience.

Loki hid his smile inside the coffee cup and listened to the soothing sounds of the sea. He started to think about what they could do today. Perhaps get a boat or spend the day on the beach.

His phone was a harsh reminder that the rest of the world hadn’t ceased to exist. How rude of them. Loki was ready to ignore another message of his mother, but he was surprised to see Stark’s name on the display. It had been quite a while.

_The American government wants me to hook up with you again. First sensible idea they’ve ever had. We should do them the favour_

Either he was losing his mind or Loki had for once underestimated how sleazy politics could become.

_Untimately for you that’s not going to happen_

As always Stark was quick to reply.

_But I am so willing to do my patriotic duty. Don’t make a bad citizen out of me_

Well, he was still walking the line between funny and annoying. Loki had to cut this short. _Terribly sorry to disappoint you. Even more sorry that I let you have this number_

Another beep.

_Then why are you flirting, darling?_

Loki rolled his eyes and his fingers began typing another response. _Because you consider every form of conversation with you flirting. Thank you for the offer. I am flattered, but also practically engaged_

His finger hovered over the send button when Loki realised that he was doing something stupid. Stark would ask questions. None of this was his business and Loki couldn’t risk anybody knowing about him and Helblindi. If things were still to awfully go wrong, there would be no coming back from it. At least if the public knew about them. A royal engagement that eventually didn’t lead to a wedding but to a break-up would also break both of their necks. Loki’s more so than Helblindi’s.
Deleting the message Loki wrote a new one.

*Thanks for letting me know about the unethical practices of your government. I appreciate it. I wish you a pleasant day, Mr. Stark*

Putting the phone on the table next to him Loki breathed in the clean and salty air. Seconds later the phone vibrated softly, announcing another message, but Loki didn’t bother to pick it back up. He remained where he was until an arm slid around his chest and a kiss was pressed to his temple. Loki’s heart skipped a beat.

“Your highness drinks coffee on the terrace and doesn’t bother to serve me a cup in bed?”

“I stuck by your rules. Not allowed to wake you before 9 am.” Loki turned his head and his mouth was captured in a long, slow kiss. When it was over Helblindi rested his chin on Loki’s shoulder. “That rule doesn’t apply for the person lying next to me.”

“Good to know.” Loki wanted to kiss him some more, but instead handed Helblindi his cup of coffee. “Thank you.”

After taking a sip Helblindi indicated him to make some room before joining him on the deckchair. It was easily big enough for both of them, nevertheless Loki pretended that it wasn’t. Like this he could curl up against Helblindi’s side and use his shoulder as a pillow. “About last night. Just in case it didn’t come across… I thoroughly enjoyed all of it.”

Helblindi’s arm ran up and down Loki’s lower arm. “Yes, I believe that we are not going to have any problems with that part of married life.”

No, definitely not.

“Helblindi?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s your favourite colour?”

Chuckling softly Helblindi finally gave him an answer. “Blue. I am a walking Jotun stereotype.”

Another thing that Loki didn’t mind. He was starting to look forward to the long winters of Jotunheim.

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*All current operations on hold. No further actions until there are new orders. Further information will follow. May your ancestors protect you and grant you the gift of patience. For a Jotun king Frjáls*
Hello everybody,

Wow, another chapter over 6000 words... What can I say? :)

Have fun

“By all means, we are in a complete mess and the crown deliberately wants us to be confused about what is going on. Prince Loki was the driving force behind the changes to the Language Act. Yet he isn’t part of the negotiations. Nor is the King himself. The only person involved seems to be the crown prince. Where is Prince Loki? People are right to be bewildered when he just disappears the very moment a significant part of the country starts talking about him as a potential candidate for the throne.”

“Why are you watching this? All it does is upsetting you.” Jane stroked a hand down his arm and Thor knew that she meant well, but after this long day he didn’t have the energy to give long explanations. “I need to know what is going on.”

It was all the same though. Loud Jotun voices that Loki should be the one working out the changes to the Language Act since Thor couldn’t be trusted. Thor only wanted to betray them while Loki was the only reason that they had even got this far. At least the last part was somewhat true. Two nights of bad sleep had made very clear that Thor couldn’t paint Loki’s actions with only one brush. Nothing Loki did was ever simple. Most probably he had done their country a favour, but there was no looking past the way he had done it.

Thor had spent his entire life with Loki, he knew his different shades and ideas. Loki was wicked smart and despite being prone to lashing out in anger, Loki always thought intensely about his actions and their consequences. He definitely had taken all of this into consideration. The public reaction and the knife in Thor’s back. Everything could have been so much different, if Loki had only been honest.

Why learn Jǫtnar in secret? Why meeting up with Laufey’s sleazy son and not telling anybody about it? Thor didn’t want to believe that Loki had done this to put himself out there. To get people talking about him. They had been raised the same way, they both knew their place. Yet Thor didn’t know what to make of Loki’s ambition. Such strong opinions, so many ideas that Loki wanted to get across, that he wanted to realise. Was there even the tiniest chance that Loki desire the position that wasn’t meant for him?

Shaking his head Thor didn’t want to dwell on this thought. He didn’t want to believe that Loki had all of this planned, but he knew his brother. Way too smart to not be aware of the implications.

At least on TV one of the participants of the debate expressed her annoyance with the entire subject. It was a new form of propaganda. A nice way to distract from the real issues. The laws were very clear and popularity among a certain group of the population didn’t give anybody legitimation to change his status or rank.
That would have been the perfect time to switch off, but of course he didn’t do that.

What if the Jotun situation escalated again, because Thor and Laufey wouldn’t be able to come to an agreement? What if there was another incident like a few weeks ago and what if Thor couldn’t come back from it this time? Then maybe one should consider...

“Thor, what are you doing?”

“I can’t close my eyes to this, Jane. This is a real thing. This is really going on.”

“This isn’t your fault. You did nothing wrong.”

“That can’t be quite true. If I had done nothing wrong, nobody would be talking about this. The conversation would long be over. They wouldn’t be showing old interviews of Loki where he talks about how our criminal law code needs to be completely changed… or try to pierce together his opinions on every subject imaginable. This isn’t just about him, but also about me.” It was probably the first time that Thor wished that Jane wasn’t Midgardian. Or the first time he was aware of his wish. Right now there was no possible way to make Jane understand what was happening. She had grown up in a completely different environment. A place where political leaders were chosen and then switched out. Often rather randomly. Thor didn’t doubt that someday Jane would be perfectly familiar with their customs and ways of thinking. That day hadn’t come yet.

Jane didn’t understand that the debate on TV wasn’t just talk that one could forget immediately after changing the channel. The crown wasn’t something that could be earned or bought. It was a responsibility that was inherited, passed on from father to son. So they’d have half a life to prepare for this role, to be ready and worthy. Suddenly talking about someone else taking over that responsibility was... inconceivable. Nonetheless they were doing it and Thor couldn’t make Jane understand what that meant. How it was so much worse if Loki had caused all of this willingly.

“I will get some fresh air, love.” As Thor kissed her brow he knew that he had done nothing to ease her worries. At the moment that he felt completely out of his depth and since he hadn’t quite figured out how to deal with the situation himself, he had no idea how to make it easier for Jane.

Thor slipped on a blazer before stepping out on the balcony. Snow was still falling and the cold was instantly gnawing on Thor’s limbs. He wasn’t made for the winter, it was his least favourite time of the year. Very unfortunately when you lived in a Northern country. Loki was different in this regard. His little brother had always enjoyed long walks in the snow and when he had come back their mother had scolded him for not taking care of himself.

Frigga… She was walking up and down in her quarters all day. Thor was perfectly aware of that although he pretended not to know. Her involvement in politics had always been minor, but Thor had assumed that she would show more interest in the changes of the Language Act. After all she had always hoped for reconciliation between Jotunheim and Valhalla. Now she was too lost in her concern for Loki to even care. It wasn’t even the first time they didn’t know his whereabouts. If he wanted to Loki could drop completely off their radar, he had had proven that much.

A bit surprised Thor noticed that he was smiling as he thought of the week that Loki had slipped through his security’s fingers to spend a long weekend in Helheim with the singer of a horrible punk band. Odin hadn’t even yelled at Loki when he had come back, he had merely shaken his head while Loki had grinned from ear to ear. His neck covered in hickeys. Thor and Loki had spent the entire night talking and laughing together.

The knot in his throat made it hard to breathe and the cold didn’t make it any better. After closing his eyes Thor had come to a decision without even really thinking about it. As he pressed the phone to
his ear a part of him hoped that Loki would continue to play dead like he had done with their mother. If she had any idea how much she had hurt him by going behind his back? Especially since Loki had that close relationship with her that Thor was never going to have. Actually, he still had trouble believing that Loki kept ignoring her. That seemed so…

“Thor?”

There. Loki’s voice and Thor missed him terribly. Which didn’t mean it hurt any less. “I hope I didn’t wake you up. I have no idea what time it is wherever you are.”

“Actually I am having lunch.”

So he wasn’t even in Europe anymore. Fleeing the spotlight completely. How desperately Thor wanted to believe that Loki had done that as a peace offering. To let Thor add his own chapter to the story.

There was somebody else talking. Far away enough from the phone for Thor not to make out what he was saying. A man. Definitely a man though.

“Be quiet.” Whoever it was, Loki shushed him and Thor almost grinned. Almost.

“I just wanted to make sure that you are alright. Nobody heard a single word from you in over two days. Mother is going up the walls. Perhaps you should… answer her calls.” Way to talk around the actual subject.

Loki remained silent for a moment. “You can tell her that I am fine. I am lying on the beach like I wanted to.”

“Tell her yourself. She’s worried.”

Silence again.

“Are you only calling because of her?”

What was Thor supposed to say? He had no idea why he had called and he felt horrible for urging Loki to talk to their mother when he himself hadn’t found it in him yet to forgive Loki. When Thor didn’t answer Loki asked something else. “How are the negotiations going?”

Wrong question to ask, Thor felt the anger rising. “I am sure you read the newspapers. Wherever you are.”

“Yes, they say that you are in negotiations. He is giving you a hard time, am I right?”

“He lets me feel that he thinks he should not be talking to me if it’s that what you mean.” Bitterness didn’t suit him, Thor was aware of that. Loki and him were a terrible combination when they both weren’t willing to take a step back.

“I’ve already explained my reasoning to you, Thor. I am not going to do it again.”

They were only making matters worse and that was the last thing that Thor wanted. “I don’t know why I called. Probably because I should yell at you, but I don’t feel any inclination to. So I guess it’s because I miss you. You should come home. You running off to the other end of the world doesn’t help anyone. People are speculating anyway. My feelings on the matter aren’t going to change. Nor are yours. Come home and we will talk about it.”
Once more Loki took his time and the worst part of Thor suspected him of doing so to upset him. Loki’s soft and almost timid tone was almost completely unfamiliar. “I cannot leave yet. There are still things that I need to take care of.”

“Nothing can be as important as what is happening here.”

“I am not so sure about that.”

Thor was tempted to hang up on him. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“I am sorry. It’s just… I don’t want to come home yet.”

Thor was freezing and it wasn’t just because of the snow keeping falling down on him. “Then I guess you’ll have to stay where you are.”

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“Thor?” No, Loki hadn’t heard wrong. His big brother had hung up on him. Sighing loudly in defeat Loki put the phone on the table. He was pondering what had just happened and what had gone wrong once again when Helblindi once more decided to talk when Loki definitely didn’t need him to. “Idiot…”

“Stop that.” The frustration made Loki sound a little harsher than he intended to, but Helblindi seemed unbothered anyway. Perfectly content to chew on a piece of cheese bread. “I am calling it like it is and you know I am right.”

“He has every reason to be upset.”

After swallowing down his food Helblindi huffed with indignation. “He has every reason to thank you on his knees. You achieved something that he is incapable of doing and for some reason you decided not to take the glory for it. What should he get upset over?”

“We went behind everybody’s back.”

“Yes, because everybody else was either too stupid or too stubborn to do anything. Your brother is in front row.”

Finally Loki had found something that made Helblindi a little bit less attractive. “Let’s make this perfectly clear. I will not accept you talking about my brother that way.”

A dangerous glint entered into those blue eyes. “I will not accept you trying to tell me what I can and cannot say. You wanted to hear my opinions, you also have to deal with them.”

Normally Loki didn’t mind a good fight, even less when he was involved with the other person. He didn’t see the point in any relationship when you only agreed with each other or ignored obvious problems. This was an entirely different league. “Why are you trying to make this about me telling you what you are allowed to say?”

“Because that’s what’s happening.” Helblindi replied almost casually. “It’s not new information that I loathe your family and I have an almost divine right to do so. You are aware of that. Your father and your brother represent everything that’s wrong with this country and I am not going to smile and nod to make you feel better.”

Wasn’t that strange? Getting exactly what he wanted, a challenge, somebody who didn’t take any of
his crap and who wouldn’t back down. Here was Helblindi, doing all that and it made Loki furious. Because it was about Thor.

Taking a breath Loki swore to himself that they could have a normal conversation and that nobody was starting to yell. “I understand, I really do and we’ll have to work through a lot given the history of our families, but you will also have to try and see that Thor is also my brother. Not just a member of the Búrison family. You are able to differentiate, I know that. You’re doing it right now and especially five minutes ago when you kissed me.”

Evidently Helblindi appreciated a good comeback. A smile flickered across his face. “It’s not the same. I told you that you are different. He is not and it makes my skin crawl that he is going to be king.”

The historian in Loki understood the statement, he got it. Given Helblindi’s background and his beliefs he had to feel utter contempt for every member of the royal family. His disdain for Thor made sense. Yet there was also Loki. Sure, him and Thor were in certain points as different as they could be, but they were still brothers. Shared the same blood and had been raised the same way by the same parents.

Helblindi told him that Thor was a horrible person for being born in this family and he clearly hadn’t any problem kissing Loki or sleeping with him. There was this not so subtle voice inside his head that told him that it was indeed different, because Helblindi liked him. Maybe even was in love with him.

And that voice was definitely only telling Loki what he wanted to hear and therefore it couldn’t be trusted.

“Okay, okay…” Loki took a sip from his coffee before even daring to continue this conversation. “Can we try to move forward slowly? I know you have your idea of who Thor is and I am not demanding anything of you… except for using more neutral terms around me when you talk about Thor. I am not asking you to love my family or to even like them. I don’t know if I am ever going to like your brother, he is a pain. But you would be making all of our lives unnecessarily hard in the future with that kind of animosity. One day you are going to be Lord of Jotunheim and Thor is going to be king. It would be so much easier to achieve things if you didn’t hate each other.”

Loki expected protest from Helblindi or a snarky remark. Instead Helblindi tapped his fingers against the table top, making a pensive sound. “Do you expect us to warm up to each other just because I might end up being his brother-in-law? I think the opposite is going to be the case.”

“Despite your claims Thor isn’t stupid. He knows about the worth of a political marriage.”

There was that smirk again and although he was still angry Loki felt that warmth spreading inside his chest. He was so lost. “A political marriage, right. You don’t like me at all on a personal level?”

The mischievous glint in those blue eyes was a confirmation that Loki had never needed in the first place. How was Helblindi supposed to not notice when he could so easily voice the thoughts running through Loki’s head. How was he supposed to miss Loki’s slight infatuation. Fine, if it was time to lie the cards on the table Loki could do that. “Okay, you want to play that game? Fine. I think you are amazing. Despite your looks not being a guarantee for anything they clearly work on me. Sure, we’ve already established that there is a physical connection, but maybe I should make it clear that I think you are absolutely gorgeous… and a bit of a jerk. Yes, I do like you and therefore I would prefer it if you stopped saying ugly things about people I love.”

No, that hadn’t been hard. Mostly probably because the risk of rejection right now was non-existent.
For political reasons. Helblindi smiled softly and Loki was so lost. “Alright. I’ll try to be more
diplomatic.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I like you too by the way. So why don’t stop talking about our families and finish
lunch. Something that’s a lot more pleasant.”

There was nothing that Loki wanted more and it made matter allthemore worse. “Fine.
Lunch is ruined anyway.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Helblindi grabbed his hand, brushed his lips over Loki’s knuckles and it
shouldn’t be so easy for him. Or at least Loki shouldn’t let him know that it was this easy. “Be
careful. I am still angry and I am not going to be emotionally manipulated.”

“Then what’s the point of marriage?”

Despite himself Loki laughed and then continued to eat. Lunch didn’t taste as good as it had before
Thor’s call, but there was nothing to be done about that. Perhaps he shouldn’t have accepted the call
at all. Too late to whine about that now.

After lunch they got in the car to head for the next landing stage where the yacht they had hired for
the day was waiting for them. Loki was a little bit surprised that Helblindi had chosen such a small
boat, but then again why would they need more space if it was just the two of them and the crew.
Loki made himself comfortable on the chaise lounge, slipped his sunglasses on and began his
sunbath. He almost drifted off into a soft slumber and only opened his eyes again when somebody
sat down next to him. Cold drops of water were hitting his face. “Stop that.”

Helblindi grinned and then took his hand away. “You should try the water, it’s pretty amazing.”

What really was amazing was the sight of Helblindi soaking wet and in swimming trunks. Good
thing that Loki had a healthy self-confidence. “I will. Eventually. You look stunning.”

The grin on Helblindi’s face got a little wider. “Thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.” Helblindi
pressed an open-mouthed kiss on Loki’s lips before making himself comfortable next to him,
wrapping a big towel around himself. “Now tell me about Tony Stark.”

Loki’s eyebrows shot up as he clearly hadn’t expected that question. “Where is that coming from?”

“I am curious. I’ve always been curious about that. Or perhaps I am just trying to find out your type.”

It wasn’t like Loki had any trouble talking about his former affairs, but if he was to do so, Helblindi
would have to do the same. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything. Tell me a story of your life.”

“You’ll tell me one of yours too?”

“Sure.” Helblindi made an inviting gesture and rested his head on one of the cushions.

“Alright. I’ve first met him during the negotiations for the arms deal. He was insolent, unpleasant,
immediately started flirting with me, and made remarks that were clearly inappropriate. He was
immensely entertaining… and attractive.”

Next to him Helblindi chuckled in honest amusement. “Did you like the idea that your parents would
be upset about you hooking up with him?"

“I don’t tend to think about my family when I am interested in someone. My father wasn’t thrilled, but he knew me well enough to know that I was merely having fun. That’s what it was. He was very clear about what he wanted and I liked that. I also liked it that he…” Loki licked his lips, hesitating for a moment. “…lacked respect at times. It was intriguing and entertaining. Exciting even. We still text from time to time. He can be a surprisingly decent person when he is not trying to get you into bed.”

“The merchant of death a nice person? Yeah, I didn’t see that one coming.”

“Oh, he can be terribly annoying and persisted which makes him even more annoying. He likes the idea of having a prince on booty call.”

“You were with him more than once?”

“I spent another night with him after breaking up with Balder. This time spiting my mother had definitely something to do with it. I wanted to do something reckless and stupid. Naturally I went to the eccentric American billionaire.” Loki shrugged and Helblindi hummed pensively. “That’s very telling actually.”

“How so?”

“You obviously are into extremely wealthy men.”

“I am not exactly broke myself.”

“In comparison to me you are.” Helblindi pointed out matter-of-factly and Loki rolled his eyes. “You are right. This is all just a huge scheme of mine to get your money.”

“There we go. Honesty is so important in a relationship.” Leaning over Helblindi kissed him and Loki let himself enjoy that for a few seconds before pushing him away. “Your turn. Tell me something about yourself.”

Pulling back Helblindi took a moment to think and Loki was sure whatever he was going to tell him, he was going to be interested. For the simple reason that it was Helblindi.

“When I was 15 I snuck out of the town house to go to a concert. Previously I had asked my father for his permission, but he had told me no. Honestly I don’t even remember his reasoning anymore, because all I heard at the time was ‘I do not want my son to have fun’. Anyway, I climbed out of my window, then climbed over a fence. A friend picked me up and we drove to the concert. Which was amazing by the way. I met a young man there. Emphasis on man, he was in his early twenties. We made out against the wall outside of the concert hall and by the end of the concert I didn’t bother to look for my friend and went home with the handsome stranger. I spent the night at his place and I got to do a lot of things for the first time. Most importantly smoking weed and having sex. I was completely out of my depth and I still completely loved it. The next morning when I switched on my phone… Well, you can imagine. Since I was in deep trouble anyway I called Týr to pick me up. At least I was smart enough to give him an address two blocks down the road. Just by looking at me everybody seemed to know what had been going on. It was the first and only time that my father laid a hand on me. Slapped me so hard across the face that I fell to the ground. I got the entire speech. Disobeying my father and Lord. Putting my life in danger when I don’t have any right to do that since my life belongs to Jotunheim. If I was insane to join a stranger and if I had any idea if I had violated the trúa or not… I wasn’t allowed to leave the town house for the next three months.”
Completely fascinated Loki listened and tried to imagine a 15 year-old version of Helblindi. Seemingly a bit of a rebellious teen. “Do you regret any of it?”

“Not really. I can see now that I was acting stupid and careless, but I was 15. There is no other time to be stupid and careless. I don’t remember any sign of another person in the apartment. No second toothbrush, so I like to believe that I didn’t help somebody violate the trúa.”

Loki shuddered at the thought of a grown man in a relationship using a young Helblindi to destroy his own soul. He would do the same as Helblindi and believe that this hadn’t been the case. “Do you think he recognized you?” Hard to imagine the opposite. First born son of the Lord, completely stunning… every Jotun had had to recognize him.

“I have no idea. Not in the dark concert hall. Outside… maybe. I didn’t care then and I don’t care now.” Helblindi shrugged and Loki smiled in response. Reaching out he touched Helblindi’s cheek, feeling the nicely trimmed beard beneath his fingers. “Did you do anything stupid after that?”

The neutral expression on his face faded away and Helblindi’s eyes were lit up by his smile. Loki tried to pretend that his heart wasn’t speeding up when Helblindi leaned over him, his still wet fingers running through Loki’s hair. Their chests were touching, Helblindi’s skin was cool and Loki wanted to pull him close to warm him up. „I don’t know. I might be doing something very stupid right now.”

Loki agreed with that, because despite his racing heart and how comfortable all of this felt, they still had to be careful around each other. Very willingly Loki let these thoughts drift away as they kissed, his hands settling on the small of Helblindi’s back.

They spent the next couple of hours on the yacht and in the water, Loki was once more shocked by how much he enjoyed spending time with him. This was the definition of irony. Should the person that it made politically sense for Loki to be with, be the one actually wanted to be with? Just that thought alone reminded Loki to keep his guard up. Back on the mainland they got into the car, Helblindi in the driver’s seat. Before they reached the resort, Helblindi pulled over to buy some fruit from a little stand next to the road. Loki wanted to roll his eyes when Helblindi with astonishing ease conversed with the salesman in Portuguese. “Você tem laranjas? Preciso de maçãs também.”

Instead of being dismissive Loki smiled as Helblindi got back into the car with a little bag full of fruit. “The ones I am actually fluent in or the ones I am good enough in to order breakfast?”

“Fluent.”

“Four. Jötnar, Old Norse, English and Russian. My French is pretty decent, but my vocabulary isn’t big enough. I can steer my way through a conversation in Spanish and Portuguese.”

“You must have a lot of spare time.”

“It’s just something that has always come very easy to me. Also my father made sure that I got in contact with a lot of diplomats to have lots of opportunities to train my language skills.”

A nasty thought came to Loki’s mind and his tongue was rather sharp when he uttered it. “Did you have the opportunity to work on your Russian with Natasha Romanoff?”

Helblindi smirked so knowingly and so satisfied at the same time it gave Loki goose bumps. “She is a very pleasant partner to converse with, indeed.”
Jealousy wasn’t an unknown feeling for Loki, but he had rarely experienced it in this context. It was easy to identify though, since he immediately thought about how he could withdraw Romanoff’s visa. “No matter how pleasant your conversations were, you’re done with them. You’ll have to stick with the Russian ambassador.”

Instead of arguing Helblindi laughed and Loki felt stupid. He wasn’t going to change his opinion though.

In their bungalow they made themselves comfortable on the big couch with two plates full of cut fruit. Loki had wanted to ask Helblindi about his studies and other things, but then they were kissing and it was easy to forget.

Eventually Helblindi pulled away, slightly licking his lips which made Loki groan inwardly. Helblindi’s hand was closed around his wrist, his thumb rubbing soothing circles over Loki’s skin. “Since we’ve already been talking about the subject of languages… how about I give you your first lesson? Grab a sheet of paper and we’ll get started.”

Loki went back to school for the next hour and Helblindi had presented himself in a rather unflattering light when it turned out he was a pretty good teacher. Jǫtnar runes turned out to be a bitch though. There were no similarities with Old Norse and Loki’s hand seemed to twist in a strange way as he tried to write it down. The cultural differences were once more astonishing. Two people that were living so close by and with each other. Two different sides of a coin. If everything went right Loki and Helblindi could help them to put all of this aside. Perhaps the country would finally heal and be as happy as Loki thought all of them would be. When had he become that much of a sentimental fool?

Helblindi laughed at Loki’s attempt to write his own name in Jǫtnar, but it wasn’t patronizing or mean. Lithe, amused and somewhat charmed. The tingling sensation of hope underneath Loki’s skin got more intense. He couldn’t be the only one completely lost. With a cheeky smile on his lips Loki snatched the sheet from Helblindi’s hand and stop him from laughing by kissing him. Over the sweetness of Helblindi’s mouth the writing lessons were completely forgotten. They kissed for a while until Loki made himself comfortable with his head in Helblindi’s lap.

It was nice. His legs stretched out on the couch and let Helblindi run his fingers through his hair. Gazing up at him Loki marvelled at the runes that were wrapped around his lower arm. If he didn’t feel so cosy and sleepy right now, he would ask Helblindi to read them to him. Unfortunately Loki was well aware that a lot of what was written on Helblindi’s skin was directed against his family and therefore against Loki. He wasn’t going to ruin the moment.

“Did you know that your name has a Jǫtnar equivalent?”

Helblindi’s voice pulled him out of his deep thoughts and as Loki’s eyes darted to his face he got to see a gentle smile. “Hmm? Sorry, I didn’t listen.”

“Your name. Loki. There is a Jǫtnar version of it. Lots of Old Norse names have that, but not all of them. Yours does.”

A soft melody started playing in Loki’s mind and he returned Helblindi’s smile. “Yes, I know. If I remember right it’s a word impossible to pronounce.”

Helblindi loosely wrapped on of Loki’s strands around his index finger. “Loptr.”

It sounded good the way Helblindi said it. Thinking back it had always sounded good. “Loptr.” Loki gave it a try and Helblindi grimaced before smiling again. Definitely charmed. “We definitely have to
work on your ‘r’s. We’ll get there.”

Loki closed his eyes, enjoying the moment. Helblindi wouldn’t grant him the silence for long though. “Mind telling me now? How you can speak fluently and still sound like you don’t know how the words are supposed to be pronounced?”

There was no actual tension in Loki’s body, but it would be stupid to try to deny that the atmosphere wasn’t as lithe as a few seconds ago. Loki’s fault obviously. He just hadn’t told anybody. Not because it was supposed to be a secret, those were memories he was reluctant to share. They only belonged to him.

On the other hand there was the trúa and what it clearly demanded of him. If he were to marry Helblindi. Not only did the trúa demand it, Loki wanted it. Fiercely. The first step was always the hardest. Loki just needed jumped of the edge and the freefall would do the rest. Falling or flying. All the same.

Reaching for Helblindi’s free hand Loki linked their fingers. His skin was warm, nothing cold about him.

“When I was a small child I had this nanny, Ragna. She was assigned to take care of me right after my birth. She was the sweetest person I ever knew. I loved her dearly and if there is one thing that I am sure of… then it’s that she also loved me.” There was that hint of sadness again, which appeared so often when Loki thought about her. “My memories are blurry, I was so young, but what I remember are sensations. Me being always happy around her. Her stroking my hair like you’re doing right now. How she always knew when to take my hand to make me feel better. My mother put me to bed every night, but lots of times Ragna would stay afterwards and sing me a lullaby. I still remember the words and melody.”

Loki softly hummed a tune and Helblindi’s hand in his hair stilled. “That’s an old Jotun lullaby.”

“She sang it to me almost every night. Not just that. We had our own language that we talked in. She told me that it was our little secret. Something special between the two of us. Only for us. I only should talk to her like that. I was too young to realise that it was actually another language. It was funny to me since she always talked to me in said language when we were alone and we were alone a lot of time. Whenever someone else was around or when she would bring me to my parents, she would talk in Old Norse. I loved sharing that secret. When I was seven Ragna was suddenly gone. She brought me to bed one day and was gone the next. She never came back. I cried and screamed, demanded her to come back, but my father simply said that she wouldn’t come back.”

Helblindi didn’t say anything as Loki paused for a moment.

“I remember my mother trying to calm me down, holding me close and telling me it would be okay. I didn’t believe her, but life goes on. I had another nanny after Ragna and that I got too old anyway. I began to understand what had happened mostly through gossip and in my teenage years I did my own investigation. Ragna had applied for her position under false information. She was Jotun, born and raised in the high north and failed to mention that. She also had had her surname changed years ago and according to her passport she was from Vanaheim. After six years of service the security finally stumbled over it. She was fired. Given what I’ve found nobody could find any ties between her and any radical group. I have no idea why she did what she did and I am not naïve enough to completely rule out that she was some kind of spy or radical or whatever… Still, she made my early childhood a wonderful time and I want to believe that she lied because she knew a Jotun nanny would never be picked.”

Loki remembered her smile when she had tucked him in at night and he had to clear his throat to
“In my early teens I also realised that our secret language had been Jǫtnar. It took me a bit of time, but I listened to music and checked out videos online… It all came instantly back to me. Like riding a bike. I understood everything people were saying, but I obviously didn’t get much chance to talk after I turned seven years old. I didn’t tell anybody. My mother knew though… after Ragna had left and she tried to comfort me and I yelled at her to leave me alone and bring back Ragna. In Jǫtnar. It must have hurt her so bad and she was still trying to look out for me and Ragna. She told me I had to keep this a secret or there would be trouble. For Ragna. Unimaginable. A Jotun nanny sneaking her way into the court and raising one of the princes bilingual… There would probably have been an investigation, a questioning and my mother didn’t want to put me through all of this. So that’s it. You were right, I didn’t learn it.”

“Wow…” Helblindi muttered. “I gotta admit that’s not what I expected… do you know what happened to her? After she had to leave the court?”

“No, I didn’t want to do any investigations. I am kind of scared that what I might find could tarnish my childhood memories. I prefer things as they are now. I am always happy when I think of that woman and I don’t want that to change.”

“I see…” Helblindi’s fingers drifted a little lower, brushed over his cheek. “Did she call you Loptr?”

“I think so… which is a little bit weird.”

Laughing Helblindi leaned down and pressed a kiss onto Loki’s hair. “Then I’ll stick with Loki.”
Engagement

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

It's Monday and I'm sick, so let's brighten the situation up a little bit ;)

Something unexpected happened. Loki woke up and Helblindi wasn’t there which meant that the other was already awake. Definitely a first one. Rolling over Loki decided to sprawl and enjoy having the bed for himself. The entire mattress was still warm, so Helblindi better came back right away with a cup of coffee.

That didn’t happen and Loki even dozed off for another couple of minutes before eventually rolling out of bed. At least Helblindi was easy to find, sitting comfortably on the sofa in the living room, browsing through his phone.

“Good morning.” Sliding his arms around his shoulders from behind Loki brushed his lips over Helblindi’s cheek. “Good? Have you looked out the window?”

Actually Loki had already heard the rain when he had still been lying in bed. “Even Brazil can’t be all sunshine.”

“What’s the point of flying all the way here if it’s not perfect beach weather?”

“Interesting. Who would have thought that you get annoyed to easily?” Amused Loki climbed over the back of the couch and joined Helblindi who put his phone away. “I can deal with sun and snow, but not with rain. It makes me moody.”

Loki thought it was kind of cute. “You know what? Let’s order the biggest breakfast they have and spend the day inside. I’m sure we can find a way to make most of it.”

Just to avoid any possible misunderstanding Loki put his hand on Helblindi’s thigh, letting it travel upwards. Helblindi made an appreciative sound, turning his head to capture Loki’s mouth in a lazy kiss. “Although I like your plan, I might have another one.”

“Then it better be good.”

“We get on a plane and fly back home.”

That had to be the last thing that Loki would have expected. By clearing his throat Loki tried to cover the fact that he didn’t know what to say. “Does… does that mean you think that we’re done here? Because I am not so sure…”

“I am not suggesting that you go back to Valhalla or that we make an announcement. I hereby invite you to come with me to Gras-geilar. Maybe spend another week, because that’s probably all the time that we can still hide away. It’s the most gorgeous place in Jotunheim, remote and you’d get to see a place that I actually live in. What do you say?”

It was too early to be constantly rendered speechless. That couldn’t be what was happening right
now. “You… you want me to come to Gras-geilar with you?”

Grinning amusedly Helblindi nodded. “Very good job at repeating what I have just said, Loki. Perfect.”

In response Loki made a face and softly punched Helblindi’s shoulder. “You know what I mean. You’re not just asking me to come to your weekend home. Didn’t one of your ancestors say that no Búrison would ever again set a foot in Gras-geilar?”

Helblindi laughed and kissed Loki. “I think they would be much more upset about that kiss or me considering marrying you than you spending time at Gras-geilar. Forget that. I want you to come there. As my guest. Boyfriend. Probably-soon-going-to-be-fiancé. Whatever we are at the moment.”

“There’s staff. Security. Somebody would see me.”

“Minimal staff and I can make sure that everybody who would be there is completely trustworthy.”

“Okay… It’s not that I’m afraid to take risks, but… if there are pictures of us or any rumour that we’re together… then things have to work out. We’d destroy all goodwill with a separation.” Loki needed to keep all options open. If they were still to decide that they could never work out together and that a union would bring more mad than good, then nobody could ever know about their little adventure. There was no way to explain this to the public.

Helblindi brushed a strand of hair behind Loki’s ear and that was just a nasty trick. “To me it looks like there is a good chance that things are going to work out. Don’t you think?”

Damn him and his blue eyes. “I’d like things to work out, but it’s too soon for that. Most of the time when I look at you I have no idea what you’re thinking. I’d like that to change.”

“I can tell you what I’m thinking right now. I want to show you a place that’s dear to me. One that I call home. I’d like you to see my room and see what you think of it. If you are willing to change the beach for snow.”

That made so much sense. It would definitely help Loki to understand him better and he was more than curious to see a place that Helblindi called home. Also Brazil was pretty much kicking them out by letting it rain. “Alright, then let’s go to Gras-geilar…”

Loki felt an excited flutter and Helblindi’s mouth on his only made it better. Little doubts quickly turning into thin air.

As they were both people with limitless funds and possibilities they were on a plane two hours later. Once more they landed on the small airport outside of Jotunheim’s capital and then got into a sleek black car. Helblindi greeted the driver by name and Loki decided that it was better not to show any sign of affection.

Jotunheim was completely covered in snow and Loki loved the sight of it, he spent the entire drive looking out the window. Gras-geilar definitely lived up to his expectations, it was even more breathtaking than on the photographs Loki had seen before. With awe Loki marvelled at the architecture as they crossed the bridge and then the large wooden gate.

The car had just stopped moving when the door on Helblindi’s side was instantly opened. “Welcome to Gras-geilar, my prince. You’ve been severely missed.”

Prince. That wasn’t Loki.
Helblindi greeted the man with a bright smile and a warm handshake. “Týr, how have you been doing without me?”

“Unemployed.”

Out of the car Loki took in Týr’s appearance. A hunch of a man, all muscle. Hard features behind a slightly grey beard that didn’t betray his age. If Loki had to guess, he would have said early 50s. Loki immediately felt uneasy around him. Those eyes were cold, especially when they landed on Loki. It wasn’t Loki’s duty to introduce himself as he was this man’s sovereign. Nonetheless Týr remained silent. At least Helblindi quickly noticed this potential source of conflict. Perfectly casual Helblindi took a hold of Loki’s hand. “I guess we are in need of a formal introduction. Loki, this is Týr, my personal security. Týr, Loki Búrison. He will be my guest for the next couple of days.”

Finally Týr hinted at bowing his head. “My Lord.”

The dislike was still quite obvious, but Loki was going to ignore it. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Before the situation could get awkward again Helblindi was already pulling him along, towards one of the doors that would get them out of the patio. “Come, I’ll show you the rooms and then we’ll grab something to eat.”

They didn’t meet soul inside the castle and Loki was stunned by the rustic beauty of this place. Being here he could easily understand why his ancestors had wanted this place. Not just to humiliate the Ymirsons. Helblindi led him into the east wing and finally into his private rooms. Which were also marvellous. A vast salon with a chimney, the most beautiful escritoire was standing by the window.

“This is nice. I really like it.”

“Naturally.” Helblindi smirked as he wrapped an arm around Loki’s waist. “So… you took my hand in front of your bodyguard?”

“It’s Týr. He sees everything and doesn’t say anything. Also I don’t want him to accidentally kill you if he should see you in my bedroom and thinks you’re an intruder.”

“Does that mean that I’m not going to get my own room?” Loki put his arms around Helblindi’s neck, offering him a teasing smile. “No, you’re going to have to share with me.”

Very content Loki pecked him on the lips. “Show me the bathroom? I’d like to take a shower before dinner?”

The shower didn’t make him feel any less sleepy, but helped him realise a minor problem. Most of the clothes he had brought where meant for the Brazilian beach. Fortunately Helblindi had a quick solution as he opened his wardrobe. “Everything I have should fit you just right.”

Loki chose a long-sleeved shirt and black trousers which all heavenly smelled like Helblindi. Afterwards got the tour of the main rooms of the castle which didn’t fail to put their charm on him. Not to mention the historical significance of the castle. Loki would love to go through the archive.

“Any chance I can get a sneak peek at the chronicles?”

“I don’t know. Are you going to let me check the palace archives in Valhalla?”

“Quid pro quo? Always the lawyer. I’ll think about it…”

They eventually took a leisure walk around the castle, right at the edge of the sea which almost seemed black. Every step got a bit more strenuous due to the snow and Loki eventually stopped to marvel at the surroundings. “It’s breath-taking.”
“Yes, it has always had an undeniable attraction on the Búrisons.”

Loki turned his head to look at Helblindi. “It was a great wrongdoing that it was taken from your family, but that all happened long before both of us were born.”

Obviously his firm tone didn’t miss its mark. Helblindi’s features turned a lot softer and he reached for Loki’s hand. “I am sorry. I didn’t want to insinuate that… It is kind of hard for me to… At times I forget that you are one of them.”

“You have a gift for making me feel happy and sad at the same time.”

“I didn’t intent to…” Helblindi sighed and then pulled Loki close. “Those who come before us makes us who we are and I’ve always wondered how much we can decide for ourselves. What is lineage and what is our luonto? Here you are. Descendent of a long line of thieves and murderers…”

“No member of my family has ever killed one of yours.”

“That’s not true and you know it… but it’s beside the point anyway. You are here and although I am completely distrustful by nature I believe that you are sincere. So maybe we are a lot less determined by our ancestors than I thought.”

“Or my ancestry isn’t all that bad.” Loki pointed out which made Helblindi smile. “I prefer the idea that you are special.”

A part of Loki did that too. The effect of Helblindi’s words was immediate though. A fierce realisation that should be scary, but instead Loki welcomed it. Loki wanted him and he’d even want him if he wasn’t the heir to Jotunheim. Helblindi was just that and therefore Loki could actually have him. After kissing Helblindi shortly Loki tugged at his hand. “Come, let’s go back inside. It’s cold. I’m freezing.”

Helblindi put an arm around his shoulders as they walked back into the castle and Loki knew there wasn’t much missing for him to make a final decision. They had dinner in a beautiful dining room, but took dessert with them upstairs to Helblindi’s rooms. Chocolate mousse which was wonderfully delicious. Also Helblindi had set a fire in the chimney and it was about as cosy and perfect as things could get.

The second Helblindi had finished his glass, Loki put it away and then rolled up the sleeve of Helblindi’s sweater. “Tell me what they mean. All of them. Especially the things I am not going to like.”

Slowly Helblindi slid his arm around Loki’s waist, letting him trace the exposed tattoos with his fingers. “Most of it is my family tree. Full titles only for Ymir, Lopthæna and my father. The part here…” Helblindi gestured at the inside of his lower arm. “… it’s a traditional oath. The one every Jotun king had to swear during his coronation. Protecting Jotunheim and every soul that is living within its borders. Treasuring its beauty and riches. Keeping its culture, traditions and values alive. Always remembering that you are born to serve this country and its people.”

Fascinated Loki brushed his thumb over Helblindi’s wrist. “And here?”

“The names of my parents and of my brother. The last runes form a French proverb. Il n’y a pas de sage qui n’a pas peur d’un fou. There is no wise man who isn’t afraid of a fool. I chose it, because stupidity might be the scariest thing imaginable.”

Loki was tempted to agree with that. “So you can add your own… ideas to the traditional tattoos?”
“You get to choose a saying that you can add. That one was mine.”

“I like it.”

Helblindi smiled and Loki felt a tingle of excitement that he definitely wasn’t going to ignore. With one hand in the back of Helblindi’s neck Loki firmly pulled him into a passionate kiss. The other one responded eagerly, his fingers sliding into Loki’s hair. A little bit rougher than necessary, but Loki didn’t mind that.

They were quick to pull each other’s clothes off and Loki fell right into the dizzying sensation of Helblindi’s warm skin on his own. A mouth that could be wonderfully pliant or maddeningly demanding. Firm hands that weren’t afraid and that didn’t unnecessarily wait to ask for permission. Once more Loki wondered if he was ever going to be able to take his time with him, to properly explore that immaculate body in every way possible. Not right now.

After a high of most pleasant sensations they shared a shower before heading back to the couch, wrapping them up in a comfy blanket. Of course without bothering to put clothes back on. Loki loved the relaxed and utterly satisfied expression on Helblindi’s face. Especially since Loki had thought him to be a man who was always chasing after something and couldn’t find satisfaction for a long time.

“You really like the tattoos, don’t you?” Definitely amused Helblindi let the tips of his fingers run along Loki’s collarbone. He was teasing, thinking of the first time they had kissed and once more Loki didn’t mind. “Yes, I do. There is hardly a part of that body that I don’t like. I’m not sure about your feet yet, but the rest…”

“I think I’m starting to understand this. All of this talk about marriage and reunited the country is just a big scheme to get me into bed. I admire the effort.”

“Worked, didn’t it?”

In response Helblindi took a hold of Loki’s chin and smirked at him. “Obviously.” One kiss later Helblindi suddenly untangled himself from the blanket and got up from the couch. If it wasn’t for the gorgeous sight that he offered like this Loki would have complained. He watched as Helblindi strode over to the escritoire and opened one of the drawers. Then he came right back with a black felt pen in his hand. “You got to check out my tattoo. Now it’s my turn and since you don’t have any…”

Helblindi grabbed his wrist, slightly turned his arm around and started drawing something on the inside. Loki remained silent, but watched with clear interest the evolving pattern, then Helblindi’s concentrated face.

“I am not that much of an artist, so you’ll have to bear with me.”

“I would try if I knew what you were doing.”

Not looking up Helblindi kept creating lines. “Take a good guess.”

That wasn’t necessary since it clicked for Loki only a few seconds later. The position should have made it clear from the very beginning. “Are you designing a marriage marking?”

“I am making a suggestion.” Helblindi muttered and Loki’s heart definitely skipped more than one beat. “I hope you haven’t done this with anyone else, because it would be incredibly creepy.”

“Other people would say charming, but don’t worry I haven’t done this before.”
Taking a closer look Loki started to recognize some of the runes that Helblindi had tried to teach him. One of them definitely was his name. “Okay, explain it to me.”

“Just a second. I am almost done.” A few more lines and then Helblindi actually said “Tada!”

Smiling softly Loki looked again and the marking resembled more some new kind of runes than a sign or picture. “It looks good. Now explain it.”

“Sure, your highness.” Helblindi bowed his head in an exaggerated way. “It’s a combination of Jǫtnar and Old Norse runes. Right now it’s just our names. There could be other words to make it look better. I just want to know what you think.”

“I think it looks good. It’s a great idea… and I’m still kind of surprised that you’re already thinking of markings?”

Helblindi shrugged and his smile turned a little coy. “It was just something I happened to think about when I tried to explain the runes to you. I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“I do. I definitely do.” Loki felt a little stupid since he couldn’t think of anything else to say about it. He was so far down that road, it became obvious that he wouldn’t be able to get back.

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Helblindi’s arm was around him when Loki woke up, but it turned out surprisingly easy to slip out without waking him up. Maybe it was due to jetlag, the time difference or for whatever reason. Loki was starving. There was nothing edible in Helblindi’s rooms, so Loki would have to head for the kitchen. In the middle of the night, in a castle that he wasn’t familiar with. Well, on his way back he could check out the library, so no reason to wake Helblindi up. After putting on some sweatpants and a t-shirt Loki started his tour.

It was rather easy to find the kitchen since all structures of this kind more or less followed the same construction plan. The fridge was huge, so Loki was sure he’d find something he’d like. There was some leftover chicken and bread, just perfect.

As Loki closed the fridge’s door he suddenly became aware of somebody standing next to him. Gasping in surprise Loki took a step back and only then recognition set in. Týr was still giving him the same cold stare as when they had met. “By all the spirits, you scared me.”

“To avoid that you should not wander around the castle at this hour, my Lord.”

The urge to correct him, having him call Loki a prince was almost overwhelming. This was hardly the right time to get into a confrontation and Loki knew that this man was dear to Helblindi. He should at least try to get off to a good start with him. A bodyguard of the Ymirson family, naturally he wouldn’t have a soft spot for Loki. Anything but. Loki’s speech probably made no difference to him.

Still Loki wasn’t going to pretend that he was anything less. Anything less than the son of the king of this country and Helblindi’s… boyfriend. Loki would settle for that for now. “I was hungry and I didn’t want to wake up Helblindi.”

“Even at this time the staff would have been available to prepare something for you.” The hostility wasn’t served blatantly. It was more a subtle undertone while Týr’s face stayed completely blank. Or rather stern.

“I am merely a guest. I wouldn’t feel comfortable making such a request and I am sorry if I alerted
“I don’t see a problem with you checking out the kitchen, my Lord.” The way he pronounced the word kitchen was strange and Loki would have almost missed it, because hearing the wrong title over and over again was exhausting. Prince. Loki was a prince. Loki couldn’t help but wondering what Týr would call him when him and Helblindi were to get married. Even when Helblindi would be made Lord of Jotunheim, Loki would still outrank him. Not in Týr’s eyes. Would that make Loki a king’s consort?

Ignoring all of that Loki put the food down on the counter and then looked around a bit helplessly since he had no idea where to look for the cutlery. Without saying a word Týr opened a drawer, took out a knife and a fork and then even got Loki a plate. The entire time Loki watched him, not really sure what to say or do. The other man made him feel uneasy how barely anyone had ever done before. Perhaps it was the contempt for Loki and knowing that he was dear to Helblindi. Or the knowledge that Loki was going to meet so many more people exactly like that.

“Is there anything else you need?”

“No, thank you. You’re very kind for helping me out.”

Týr said nothing and Loki realised that he wasn’t going anywhere, determined to stay here and watch Loki eat. Definitely to hinder him from checking out the castle by himself. Fine, this was going to be awkward anyway, so Loki could at least try to make conversation and try to show the other one that he was more than his family name.

Sitting down Loki took a bite from the bread before his first attempt at a real conversation. “Helblindi told me that you have been in his service since his birth.”

Týr nodded without the slightest change of expression. “Indeed. I was honoured to be chosen by his father to dedicate my life to protect the prince.”

No, Loki wasn’t going to be able to do that. He was being challenged, quite openly so. Trying to look casual Loki ate a bit of the chicken before searching Týr’s eyes. “If Helblindi is your rightful prince – what does that make me?”

Even the bold question let Týr unfazed. “You are the son of a lord who is falsely regarded as a king.”

The way he said it was remarkable. So perfectly matter-of-fact without anger or anything else.

“I see. I am sure you have heard my speech. What do you think of it?”

“I believe that you are a good talker and that you know what to say to please the people. What you said was true. What you promised was too little and not your decision to make. None of it means anything as long as nothing has changed.”

Loki opened his mouth to say that the negotiations were already going on, but then decided to go down a different road. “Helblindi appreciated it.”

“The prince is a brilliant man, hard to impress and not gullible. He knows better than to judge people solely on their words.”

Was that his way of trying to tell Loki that he shouldn’t feel so sure about having Helblindi wrapped around his little finger? Not that Loki believed that for even one second.
“I am perfectly willing to support my words with actions.”

“I guess we will have to wait to see that and all of Jotunheim is going to be judge of it.” At least now there was some open hostility that Loki could deal with.

Týr eventually brought him back to Helblindi’s rooms and Loki was more than glad to close the door behind him. So much about checking out the library. Instead he had had a most uncomfortable conversation. Stripping off his shirt Loki slipped back into the bedroom where Helblindi was now lying in the middle of the bed. Hardly possible to not wake him up this time.

Helblindi indeed stirred as soon as Loki slid under the blanket. “What time is it”

“Still in the middle of the night. Go back to sleep.”

Grumbling Helblindi pulled Loki close, burying his face in his hair. “Are you insane? Why would you wake me? That’s beyond cruel…”

Loki’s annoyance melted away instantly. “If you stopped talking, you’d probably be already asleep.”

“No point in that anymore…” Helblindi brushed his lips over Loki’s cheek. “Where did you go?”

“Kitchen. I was hungry. I met Týr…”

Humming softly Helblindi nodded. “How bad was it?”

“Awkward. I’m clearly in no way good enough for you and definitely up to something, but that doesn’t matter since you are going to look right through me…”

Helblindi chuckled. “That sounds just like him.”

“He’s not going to be the only one with this opinion. It’s going to come from both sides.”

“Yeah, so? We aren’t naïve or pretending. Both of us are going to use this relationship to our political advantage… which is also going to cause conflict. I wouldn’t be able to trust you if you had told me that you thought about me first and then about the country, because I wouldn’t have believe it. We know what we are about. And…” Only now Helblindi opened his eyes and Loki lamented the fact that he couldn’t see in the darkness how blue they were. “… I decide myself what I think about you on a personal level.”

Sliding closer Loki slid his arm around Helblindi’s naked hip. “And what do you think?”

“When you’re not waking me up in the middle of the night… you are quite alright.” That line was supposed to be said with a playful smile and the matching tone. Helblindi’s face remained serious, his thumb caressing Loki’s cheek. The words were completely average and yet they easily went under Loki’s skin. Since there was nothing he could see without going way too far Loki closed the small distance and kissed him with a gentleness that surprised himself. Helblindi responded the same way, his fingers sliding further into Loki’s hair.

There were the soft tingles and the undeniable desire for him that Loki still wasn’t completely familiar with. Something that wasn’t entirely physical and that seemed to take a fold of him. What should be scary, but was now almost soothing. Loki pulled him closer, moving his hand to Helblindi’s front. Slowly Loki moved his fingers along the muscles of Helblindi’s chest, enjoying the feel of it. Helblindi gasped ever so lightly into his mouth as Loki’s fingers brushed over his nipple. Somehow they made it to keep the kiss slow and almost sweet, even as Helblindi’s fingers slid beneath the waistband of Loki’s sweatpants and started to pull them down. There was some shifting
around, but the sensations caused by their skin sliding and rubbing against each other were most wonderful. Pleasant shivers were running down Loki’s back as Helblindi trailed small kisses over his throat. Hard to tell where he wanted that mouth more., where he was right now or on his own. Loki chose the latter and they kept kissing, only stopping for the short moments they needed to get the condom and the lube.

Loki tightened his arms around him, trying to pull him closer as Helblindi entered him, both of them moaning into the kiss. It was of a magnificent intensity and despite the sensation being overwhelming Loki wanted more of it. To find out if there could be too much of it and then Loki wanted to continue falling.

The fingers in his hair tugged a little too hard, riding right on the edge between pleasure and pain and Loki wished that he wouldn’t stop. Words were passing his lips and at times Loki himself didn’t know what he was saying. It didn’t matter that much, because a smile ghosted over Helblindi’s face. He was beautiful.

Like all the previous times they moved together so perfectly easily and every thought, even distant doubts faded out of existence. Loki knew that this was going to work out. He felt Helblindi’s breath on his face and whispered words against his cheek.

Yes, this was going to work.

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After breakfast Helblindi kissed him and told him that he had that he would be gone for an hour. When Loki wanted to know where he’d be going, Helblindi showed his typical smirk and said that it was going to be a surprise. That alone should be enough to have all of Loki’s attention.

Nevertheless he didn’t wonder about any of that as soon as Helblindi was gone, since he now had the possibility to check out Helblindi’s rooms. Which meant his books. Lots of literature about Asgardian law. Not that much of a surprise. History. Asgardian. Jotun. A few titles had Loki grimacing. Sure, he was familiar with all of them, even those which ignored all proper research and only presented one side of the Búrison reign. Not a very favourable side. Honestly, it was trash, but widely published. A little bit annoyed Loki kept looking and was pleasantly surprised that the history books weren’t only focused on Asgard. General European history. Cuba. South America. Seemingly Helblindi wasn’t very interested in Asia. Except for Russia. Books on Russia in Russian. At least that’s what Loki thought they were. Books on language training.

Eventually Loki realised that all the novels were in another bookshelf. More Russian. French. Spanish. It took Loki almost a minute to find a book that was in Old Norse. When Loki opened a novel by Stendhal he couldn’t help but smile. So Helblindi was the type of guy who underlined words in books and wrote their meaning next to them. Loki wondered if he sat down in the evening to revise the new vocabulary. Perhaps Loki should do that with Jǫtnar.

Eventually Loki settled on the couch with an anthology of English poetry. The index was full of little stars, probably marking Helblindi’s favourites. He had good taste.

Loki was still reading in the book when Helblindi came back. “I’ve got somebody here who wants to meet you.”

Instantly the alarm was going off. Family? Jotun nobility? No, Helblindi held a puppy in his arms. Loki was no expert on dogs, he could tell if they were cute which was definitely the case here. The puppy looked like a husky with big blue eyes. How fitting. Completely charmed Loki got up stroked the puppy’s neck. It responded with the cutest sounds, rubbing his head against Loki’s head. “He’s
adorable…”

“Right? It’s a special breed, native to Jotunheim. Our little friend is about 12 weeks old and needs a new home.”

Loki’s hand, which had still been petting the puppy’s head, stilled. It seemed to be Helblindi’s unique talent to render him speechless. Did he mean that? Was Loki misinterpreting… No, he wasn’t, the tradition was perfectly clear on this. Helblindi’s smile did the rest. He meant that.

“With a new home you mean the both of us.” Loki stated softly, still partly expecting him to negate that.

“Yes.” Helblindi smiled coyly. “Us talking on the phone about the political advantages of getting married is not very romantic… I thought we could at least honour one part of a traditional proposal. The little guy needs a name. We should give him one… if you want to.”

There it was again, the sensation that threatened to overwhelm Loki. The prospect that he could have it all. Everything he wanted.

Carefully Loki took the puppy from Helblindi, softly stroking its beautiful fur. “Yes, I want to give him a name. What do you think about Fenris?”

Helblindi nodded, tickled the puppy behind the ears and leaned forward to gently kiss Loki. “I think that sounds perfect.”

Utterly content Loki smiled as he held Fenris, not looking at his fiancé when he said “It’s you who will have to tell our parents, just so you know.”

“Oh, we’ll see about that.”
Acceptance and permission

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Here we go, vacation is over ;)

Have fun

Heill skaltu for-eldra,

To those you were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,

I still haven’t found the strength to stop wanting, but maybe that won’t matter. At least I start to hope so.

Partly I still refuse to believe that things could ever fall so perfectly in place. An entire life I was prepared to and wanted to marry for political reasons. A marriage that would be beneficial to Asgard. Sometimes I played the thought that it would be nice if that marriage could also contain romance. It could never be the main focus. Not in this life. So how am I now to believe that my political motivated marriage is going to involve a man that has the ability to make me forget completely about politics? Even if those are just fleeting moments.

I feel like I should start looking for the catch, but I don’t want to. Everyone who is dear to us is going to reject this relationship anyway. Nothing could be further from being perfect.

Still I want to thank you for sending him to me. The opportunities that our union offers the country seem endless. There are going to be so many fights, with someone as stubborn as I am. At times I am afraid that he will never be able to overcome the repugnance he feels for my family and that the inevitable fights will make him feel the same for me.

And there is that part of me that cannot help wonder. His contempt of my ancestors is evident, but they made me who I am. How can he believe that I am different?

I don’t hate his father, but I can’t find inside myself the tiniest bit of willingness to try and trust him. Not after the recent past. So how can I ask that of him? It’s been a long time since I’ve been eager to go ahead, to let life surprise me.

I am not scared of my parents’ reaction. Maybe a bit of the look on Thor’s face. I know what he thinks about Helblindi and Helblindi loathes him even more. I doubt that they will ever have actual fondness for each other. Which is going to make matters even harder.

Good thing that we’re terrible at backing down.

I might end up making things necessarily harder for us if I cannot keep my calm. I will try. Definitely. Unfortunately that’s something else I am not very good at.

This is something I have never asked for. Give me the strength to keep myself in check. At least for most of the time.
Please, strengthen my luonto and send me my fylgja to guide me

Your son Loki

Putting the pen away Loki looked at the lines he had just created, feeling relieved and still tense at the same time. Which was completely normal. Once he had placed the letter in the shrine of his ancestors it would take effect and then Loki would know that he would have their protection and support. Once the letter was in the envelope Loki smiled lightly at the absurdity of the setting. A son of Búri writing a letter to his ancestors in a house of the Ymirsons. Sure, it happened before, but definitely not under these circumstances.

Just as Loki put the toy away he heard a new sound that he knew he would get very familiar with soon. Fenris chewing on the table-leg of Helblindi’s antic escritoire. Perfect. An invaluable piece of furniture full of history.

“Fenris, no! Not the table.” Picking up one of the chew toys Loki made it to interest Fenris in it. Content Loki watched the puppy gnawing on it. Too bad they’d have to get him to stop using his teeth on the furniture entirely, Loki wouldn’t mind him using his teeth on some of Thor’s furniture.

Thinking of home reminded Loki of the phone calls he had to make. Not that he was particularly looking forward to it. Nevertheless his bad conscience had finally caught up with him. There was only so long that he could ignore his mother’s calls without feeling like a horrible person. Loki tried to think of Helblindi’s words, about not having to forgive for the sake of forgiving, which perfectly correspondent with the trúa. Still, it was kind of cruel not to give your mother a sign of life. Then again, Loki had talked to Thor, they knew that he was fine.

Loki’s phone rang and he smiled. “Hey, where are you?”

“The small gallery. Trying to work out the details of what’s going to happen next. Come to join me?”

“On my way.”

After stranding up Loki put the letter to his ancestors in the drawer of the escritoire and then bent down to pet Fenris’ head. “Come with me, little one?”

Fenris was perfectly happy with being picked up as long as the chew toy came with them. When Loki entered the gallery he found Helblindi sitting on the only but huge table in the room. Loki put Fenris down, then kissed Helblindi before grabbing himself a chair. “Where are we at?”

“I’m writing down the main points of the marriage contract. I thought you might have something to add.”

“How wonderfully romantic.”

“I know, don’t start swooning.” Smirking softly Helblindi slid a sheet of paper across the table. “Here, tell me everything that you can’t live with and then learn to live with it, because I am not negotiating anything.”

“Completely unwilling to compromise. I love that in a relationship.” Feeling amused Loki grabbed the sheet and wasn’t confronted with many surprises. “Jotunheim stays impartible and can only be inherited within the Ymirson bloodline. Now that is horribly predictable. There goes my plan to poison you during the wedding night.”
“A man with a little bit of decency would have at least waited till after the honeymoon and grant me a little bit of fun.” Helblindi said it so drily that Loki almost laughed out loud. “In all seriousness, I have no doubts that you already knew that this would be a condition. The Lordship will be passed on to the firstborn child of my blood.”

So much about being predictable. Loki raised both of his eyebrows. “Firstborn child?”

“Yes.” Helblindi raised his chin a little bit in a challenging way. “That would be the next condition. Valhalla and the crown are going to accept a female successor to Jotunheim.”

“This is 2017, there is more than one family that is controlled by a woman.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know where I am going with this. I was so looking forward to a fight.”

It was too early for this, Loki needed some coffee. “I have no qualms whatsoever with one of our daughters being the heir to Jotunheim. As long as you don’t take that as a reason to restart the debate about Lopthæna.”

“What would be so bad about that?”

Way too early for this. “Because, my love, you are waiting for an apology that you are not going to get.”

That hard and unyielding expression was back in Helblindi’s eyes. “Why not? It is long overdue.”

This was a game they both could only use, but perhaps Helblindi was trying to test him. Or see how far he could go. “I am sure there could be an apology for how things happened 500 years, but not for what. That would imply an admission of guilt and give radicals the possibility and reason to doubt the legitimation of the Búrison reign.”

Loki started an inner countdown, there was no way they wouldn’t start a serious fight over this. Something they definitely had to go through. Against his expectations Helblindi took his time, but his face which could be gentle and caring was stone-cold. “And what would be bad about that?”

After hesitating for a second Loki met the most beautiful eyes. “Do you really want to do that?”

“I believe that we have to.”

“Alright. What happened 500 years ago would hardly be acceptable nowadays. But it happened 500 years ago. It was anything but uncommon. 1328 Charles IV of France died, leaving behind only daughters and a pregnant widow. The nobles elected Philipp de Valois the next king. The Lex Salica stated that women can neither inherit nor pass on a right to the throne. 400 years later Maria Theresia became the head of the House of Habsburg since her father had no sons. She managed to keep her position, but at a huge cost. Her reign wasn’t accepted by Prussia and in the following wars Austria lost much of its influence and territory. Looking back it would be extremely naïve to assume something similar wouldn’t have happened to Asgard or Jotunheim. Other nations would have taken advantage of the instability caused by the lack of a male, legitimate leader. The law of succession at the time ignored women and Lopthæna’s reign would have been put into question anyway. The conflict happened within our own borders and if that hadn’t been the case, the aggression would have come from the outside. Yes, from today’s standards it’s hardly understandable, but 500 years ago it was a dangerous situation for the entire country. We don’t know what would have happened if Búri hadn’t taken the throne for himself, but you have to try and see the events from their perspective. You cannot force our modern point of view on them. A woman on the throne was unimaginable according to the law and the situation could have offered other nations the opportunity
to make demands or try to claim the throne themselves.” Loki released a breath, hoping that he made himself as clear as possible. After so many years studying the history of their country Loki always tried to distance himself from the fact that he was blood related with the people who had dictated the past.

Helblindi was a good listener, that couldn’t be denied. He was attentive and didn’t interrupt Loki until he was finished. That didn’t mean he agreed though. “Our modern, illuminated point of view you say? We’ve called it treason 500 years ago and we call it that today. The Jotun nobles had already spoken out loudly in acceptance of Lopthæna, your family started a rebellion. You talked about people from the outside seizing an opportunity when it was your family that did just that. It wasn’t a fight for stability. If it had been, your family wouldn’t have done everything in their power to keep Jotunheim and my family down. They knew exactly who the legitimate ruler was.”

Sometimes Loki wished that things were as simple as Helblindi made them out to be. 500 years were a long time. In the eyes of the overwhelming majority of the country it was more than enough to establish yourself as the legitimate ruler. “I don’t know what you want to hear from me. Do I believe that Thor’s claim on the throne is illegitimate? No, I don’t. Do I believe that my family did wrong on yours and all of Jotunheim? Yes, I do. Will I absolutely support you if you decide to make our future daughter the heir to Jotunheim? Yes, I will. I am not going to fight you on this, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to just back down whenever this topic comes up.”

Again, Helblindi took his time and Loki had the distinct feeling that the conversation would have headed into another direction if Fenris hadn’t interrupted them with a soft bark. As soon as they looked at him the little fellow concentrated on his toy again. Helblindi’s mouth twitched. Forming an almost smile. “Alright, I guess everything else would be too much to ask. For now.”

“How gracious.”

“Don’t be sarcastic. Not about this. Not with me. I need to be able to talk about this with you. Which we just did and it was perfectly alright. Just don’t be sarcastic about it.”

“I guess I can do that.” Nodding Loki softly looked back at the list. It was nevertheless a relief to see that they wouldn’t argue about the next point. “I would have insisted on a bilingual education for the kids anyway.”

Now there was an actual smile on Helblindi’s face. “It’s nice to agree on something, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. You mind hearing a few of my points now?”

“Go ahead.”

Those were the really lovely subjects to talk about. Death and inheritance. It shouldn’t be that difficult or hard since it was obvious from the very first second what they both would ask for. Both of them wouldn’t get anything. No right to the other’s money. Whatevsoever. Should one of them die their titles and ranks would pass on to the closest blood relative. Then came the unpleasant details. Should Helblindi die, leaving behind an heir, the child should be raised in Jotunheim among his family. This was going to be the least romantic wedding contract ever.

It was remarkable though how easily they got through these points. No debate, no nothing. Eventually Loki took a look at their handwritten list and almost laughed. “Looks to me that we’re marrying for love after all. We’re getting nothing else out of it.”

“I wouldn’t say that. We get someone to fight with, someone who has to listen to your complaints and don’t forget the sex.” Helblindi smiled and his expression was so much different from before.
The one Loki always wanted to see. “Right. How could I forget that?”

Seemingly content Helblindi leaned over and kissed him before standing up to play with Fenris. It was quite a sight to see, Helblindi playfully trying to take the toy away from Fenris who wasn’t having any of that. Loki watched him for a little bit before sitting down on the floor next to him. “I will adore our kids. All of them. No matter whose blood is running through their veins. Thor and Býleistr are both going to be their uncles. I will not let my children be raised to hate my own family. They’ll love their grandparents and their uncle. I hope you know that.”

Stopping his little fight with Fenris Helblindi started to pet him, his fingers running through the fur. For once his eyes weren’t burning as he nodded. “I know.”

Two words and those were enough. Almost.

“There is something else what I need you to do for me.”

Helblindi’s hand was still petting Fenris as he looked at him. “Go ahead.”

“After our wedding I’ll live with you in Jotunheim and then I want a change of politics regarding Frjáls. No more silent tolerance and looking away. It’s not enough to condemn actions when they get violent. No more illegal gatherings or propaganda. I don’t ever want to have to be afraid for my family anymore. I believe that you are the only person who can make sure of that.”

A variety of emotions ghosted over Helblindi’s face and Loki found it hard to name them. They were raw though, beautiful and real. Something Loki had said had touched him and Helblindi didn’t want him to see it. “I understand how you feel. I do, but that matter is not as easy as it might seem at first glance. What happened to your brother was an isolated incident. Something horrible that should have never happened, but there is no way that all of Frjáls is involved in it. Hundreds of young people associate themselves with Frjáls because of their ideals and the way they see our country. They would never use violence though. It’s not just a terrorist group.”

“That’s the problem. Jotun politic has been way too vague on them. No condemnation, no clear statement. You failed to ever call them out on their terrorist actions. People look up to your family and trust you. By staying silent you blurred all the lines. It allows Frjáls to be somewhat in-between. Terrorism and a cultural association all at once. I visited the university, remember? There are Frjáls fraternities. I am sure it’s not all a dark swamp filled with radicals, but at least one fraction within Frjáls has gone down the deep end and I need you to stop that.” Loki noticed that this was the tone he usually used with the ministers or diplomates. When he knew that he was asking too much of them, but wouldn’t accept any opposition.”

This wasn’t a minister or a diplomate though. Helblindi, son of Laufey, future Lord of Jotunheim, with a tongue and wit so sharp they rivalled Loki’s. They had to clash horribly sooner or later. Right now could be that moment. Helblindi’s beauty even shone through the seriousness he was putting on display. The pursed lips and his frown didn’t promise Loki anything positive. “I told you that I am not willing to risk all that influence and prestige I have within Frjáls. I would make my position as the future Lord very complicated. That’s not something I am keen on doing that.”

“I have a little bit of an idea what is going on in my own country. People in Jotunheim would walk on broken glass for you, even in Valhalla they admire you. I am perfectly sure you can find a way to pull it off. I am not asking by the way. I am demanding. I helped you to fix several things that go wrong in our country. Now I want you to do the same.” Loki held Helblindi’s stern gaze, unwilling to even blink.

Helblindi let him wait though, little wrinkles appeared around his eyes as he thought about what to
answer. Too occupied by the ultimatum he had just received he had stopped caressing Fenris. The puppy complained by nudging his snout against Helblindi’s knee, but he didn’t seem to realise that.

“I don’t think you realise how deeply rooted Frjáls is in Jotun culture…”

Loki smiled, only half trying to manipulate him. “History has proven us over and over again a great monarch is able to redefine and to reinvent the culture of his country. You are intelligent and noble, absolutely able to do that. I am also there to help you which I will. We’ve already shown that we’re a good team.”

The sound that escaped Helblindi’s throat sounded suspiciously like suppressed laughter. “I liked things better when you got so distracted by me taking my shirt off.”

“You can still do that, but it won’t change my stand on this.”

“Alright.” Helblindi didn’t try to hide his sigh. “I cannot do anything right now, but I guess after we got married and to underline the policy… I will look at the structures of the association and make sure that it cannot go on existing in its present state. You will get the public damnation.”

Once more there was this tingle of excitement, caused by the prospect of what they would be able to do together. Tear everything apart or create something entirely new. Just like that.

“Thank you.” Loki kissed him because he wanted to, not as a reward. “I guess it’s time we talk about going back home. Although I’d like to see Thor’s face if I brought you home if me, I don’t think the direct approach is the best idea.”

Helblindi finally smiled back and picked up Fenris. “Yeah, my brother also wouldn’t’ be thrilled. It’s better to talk to them alone. Time to go home then.”

Alone. Loki wasn’t keen on that, but it was clearly the better idea. “Okay, new plan. I’ll tell my family, you tell yours and if both of us are still alive after that, you’ll join me in Valhalla. Official meeting and everything.”

“Sounds fair.”

“I expect you to be nice.”

“Sounds hard to do.” Helblindi smirked and Loki was once more tempted to smack him. Instead he kissed him and since he didn’t stop Helblindi had to let go of Fenris because Loki pressed him on the floor. It was odd to have Helblindi yielding like this, letting Loki do as he pleased. Unfamiliar but Loki liked it. He liked everything about this. Everything about him. Pulling back slightly Loki let his fingertips trail over the hair behind Helblindi’s ear, then slid them down his jawline, enjoying the feel of the scruff there. Thanks to the beard his eyes seemed to be even bluer. Helblindi’s ancestors had definitely decided to bestow him with all their gifts. To Loki’s benefit. Just looking at him Loki experienced this powerful sensation of content and anticipation. “We’re going to make a lot of people lose their minds, aren’t we? And some of them we’ll make very miserable.”

“Most definitely.” Helblindi smiled, his hand moving from Loki’s thigh to his waist. His voice was soft and sweet. “You know that together we could rule the world, right?”

Oddly enough Loki thought so too.

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For a week it hadn’t stopped snowing. Not unusual for Valhalla during December. The snow itself
didn’t weigh on Odin’s mood. The lack of a smile on his wife’s face. For most of his life Odin had tried to stay out of conflicts between his sons and their mother. Not because of disinterest, but he believed that a relationship could only stay healthy if two people were capable to fight and reconcile on their own.

Certainly it had been a lot harder when they had been kids and Odin had always made sure to spend more time with Thor whenever there was some sort of conflict with Frigga. Something like that had never been necessary with Loki, Odin couldn’t remember a single instance when Frigga hadn’t showered him with affection. It seemed impossible for him to upset her and vice-versa.

Sure, Loki had become a complicated adult who liked to cross borders. There was bound to be friction. Nothing like this though. Which was odd. After the vile attack on Thor Odin had hoped that Loki’s hurt pride would have healed and that his humiliation would have faded away. None of that seemed to be the case. Perhaps it had even got worse. Odin couldn’t tell, he could easily read Loki’s expressions and it wasn’t hard to tell when his actions were motivated by spite. At least partly that seemed to be the case here. Running away, leaving the country and ignoring phone calls. Probably in the company of man that his mother approved of even less than Odin himself.

Apart from all that Loki was once more showing great disregard for the protocol that was supposed to keep every member of this family safe. Which was unacceptable, especially at this time. On the other hand Odin was well aware that Loki was most definitely safe and sound. He had run away so spontaneously. Moreover Loki had at least answered Thor’s call. Which had confirmed Odin’s suspicion that he was indeed spending his getaway with another man.

Odin would grant his son another day, then he would have to track him down eventually. Loki was a prince, he could not run away as he pleased. Also, Odin couldn’t stand seeing Frigga torturing herself during Loki’s absence. During breakfast Frigga remained silent, her eyes scanning over the paper with much interest. Perhaps a part of her hoped and feared at the same time that she would find a photograph of her son, wandering around Paris with a certain American business man.

No, Loki wouldn’t be that careless. Especially since he was one the greatest critics of Thor’s relationship. Odin’s eyes darted back to his wife who definitely wasn’t reading the newspaper. There had to be something to take her mind off Loki. Even it was just for a few hours.

“The new pointillism exposition that you talked about opens its doors today. Would you like to visit it tonight?” It wouldn’t be that difficult to have the doors being opened for after official opening hours.

Without looking up Frigga declined. “Thank you, I am not interested.”

“Only two weeks ago you were so passionate about the exposition.”

“Two weeks ago my son hadn’t disappeared yet and you didn’t refuse to even look for him.” The bitterness was as honest as a slap and Odin wanted to comfort her, yet he couldn’t accept her talking to him like this. “Frigga, Loki did not disappear. He left home and he is going to come back. He talked to Thor.”

“How is this supposed to be any consolation?”

They were going to fight. All other scenarios were unlikely. There was hardly anything that Odin appreciated less than martial disputes.

Fortunately they were saved from this by the only thing that could have made a difference for Frigga. Odin didn’t know that yet when he answered the ringing phone. “Heimdall?”
“Your grace, about five minutes ago the Duke of Glæsisvellir called his security and ordered them to pick him up at the airport. He will arrive at the palace in half an hour. He wishes to speak to the entire family as soon as he gets back.”

A feeling of relief filled Odin’s chest, mixed with anticipation to see his son again. It could not last long though since Odin was strongly aware that Loki’s behaviour had to have consequences. For now though they should give Frigga the chance to be happy about Loki coming back.

“I understand. Thank you, Heimdall.” Hanging up Odin turned to his wife. “Loki is on his way back to the Valhalla. He will be here within the hour.”

Finally Frigga looked up at him, her eyes lightening up and with them her entire being. “He’s coming home?”

“Yes.”

“Where has he been?”

“I do not know. You will get to ask him though. He wants to talk to all of us.” Another moment and Odin had made his decision. “I would very much welcome it if you could make peace with him. Today. His absence has been tormenting you and I am sure he feels the same. The boy adores you just as much as you love him. It is time.”

Instead of answering Frigga nodded slowly and Odin hoped that they could indeed leave this all behind. Start over and concentrate on the matters at hand, give Thor the chance to become the king that he could be, arrange matters with Jotunheim. Sit his two sons down at a table and have them talk about what Loki had done what had happened afterwards. Odin needed to tell them that one day they would only have each other. Despite the trúa’s demands and Thor’s engagement, Odin knew that Thor’s future wife would never be able to give him the support that he needed. It was impossible for her to ever fully understand what he was going through. But there would always be Loki.

It was one hour later that Odin got a first look at his youngest son in over a week. Loki was sitting on the sofa in the salon, his legs elegantly crossed, his face closed off. He looked good, like he always did and immediately stood up when his family entered the room. Frigga forced him to ignore the protocol by approaching him first. “Loki, where have you been? I was worried sick…”

“I am sorry about that, mother, but your worries were unnecessary. I am perfectly fine.” No smile, no real warmth in Loki’s words. He was nervous and trying to hide it which gave Odin an uneasy feeling.

Loki’s eyes fell on him and he stepped past his mother to greet Odin by bowing his head. “Father, I apologize for ignoring the protocol.”

That had never happened before. “It feels good to have you back, Loki, but I do not believe that your apology is the reason for this meeting.”

Nodding lightly Loki indicated them to sit down after shortly greeting his brother and Jane. Odin would have preferred her to be not present, but he knew when a battle was lost.

As soon as everybody had sat down Frigga gave Loki her first smile in over a week. “What is it that you have to tell us, Loki?”

“I know that I disappointed most of you before I left. Thor, it was never my intention to hurt you, but I admit that I was willing to accept that possibility. I also admit that I kept information to myself. I did not keep especially keep it from you, but from anybody, because those were things that I didn’t want
to share. I only decided to reveal them in the way I did, because… I wish for this country to change. To come back together as one. I don’t want Thor to have to carry the same burden as all the kings before him. The changes to the Language Act are a start, but I am convinced that it needs more to overcome everything that separates us from Jotunheim. I have kept secrets before and I regret the way they’ve hurt you. That’s why I am not keeping secrets any longer.”

Loki’s eyes wandered between them and eventually he focused on Odin. He talked like he always did, with a firm voice, without hesitation. Perhaps a little bit softer than usual. Without the playful tone.

“I did not spend last week alone. Two days ago a man made me a gift to show me his devotion and care for me, just like his willingness to take care of another being with me. I accepted. Therefore I came here before you, father. To ask for your blessing and to announce my engagement to Helblindi Ymirson, future Lord of Jotunheim.”

It wasn’t the exact same sentiment. In over 40 years of ruling a wonderful, proud nation that had always been suffering from big, open wounds that refused to heal Odin had experienced horror. The feeling that something was wrong with him, of letting his country down and that horrific emptiness. The prospect of not having a son, of never having children. Trying not to blame his wife for it, doing it anyway and then starting to hate himself as soon as she became sick. Watching her slowly wither away and die.

The flooding in Helheim. Seeing the desperation on people’s faces as the water slowly invaded their homes which they had built up and cherished over the years. Finding out that there were some powers that you couldn’t fight, you simply had to sit down and wait for them pass while suffering.

Then there had been three weeks ago. If Odin closed his eyes right now he would still hear the shot. He had seen the blood on the floor, the security dragging his oldest son away. Odin hadn’t been able to go with him and he had known exactly why. Protocol, it had made perfect sense and Odin had never been so afraid. A taste of unknown, overwhelming fear. Of losing his son. Or letting Thor die alone without a member of his family, without somebody with him who loved him.

Thor was alive and well, Odin could see him right now, next to the woman he had chosen and yet Odin still remembered the feeling. Of losing the most precious thing in his life, because he had failed to protect it. Now it was happening again and the very same power was responsible for it. But this one could be stopped.

“What are you talking about?! Have you lost your mind?! How can you…”

“Thor.” Odin made him fall silent through the mere mentioning of his name in the sharpest manner that he was capable of. Reluctantly Thor pressed his lips together and Odin looked at Loki. Who was sitting there with his head held high, green eyes wide and challenging while he was waiting for the inevitable blow.

“No. I will not grant you my blessing nor accept this union. I know you will say that you did not ask for my acceptance, but this does not matter. I can see your motivations and your intent honours you. It does not change anything though. Despite any political advantages you will not marry Laufey Ymirson’s son.”

As expected Loki only held his head a little bit higher. “You are right, father. I do not ask for acceptance. Nor did I ask for permission. Me and my fiancée have already agreed on a rather long engagement. It will give both of our families time to get used to the idea.”

“Loki, this is not one of your duels to see who will back down first.” Odin didn’t try to keep his
voice down and he wouldn’t have been capable of doing so anyway. Loki, for all his intelligence, once more fell victim to his own stubbornness and spite. “There is no engagement and there will be no wedding.”

Before answering Loki audibly gritted his teeth. “That is not your decision to make, father.”

“It is only mine to make! Since you are clearly unable to see that a member of the Ymirson finally would never willingly agree to this union! You come here before me and state you want to marry a man that was raised to despise you who is adored and worshipped by the men who tried to kill your brother. I don’t know if it is your ambition or his manipulation that will not let you see the obvious. You talked me into letting you risk your own life once, I will not let you do that another time. I will not let my son throw himself into the fangs of a wolf that is only waiting to devour him.”

“Father…”

“I said no!” Odin stood up, shaking his head. “There will be no more talk about this.”
Hello everybody,

It’s in the middle of the night and I’m dropping a new chapter. More family reactions :)

Have fun

Their faces could be used for the haunted house in an amusement park. A wide variety of emotions and none of them positive. His mother and Thor were in utter shock, his father was being torn apart by anger and Jane was just confused. Loki had expected a lot worse. Helblindi was probably going through a lot worse right now.

“There is no more need to talk about it. I told you because that’s what tradition demands and because I wanted to share this news with my family. It is my right to choose my husband and I did just that. I thank our ancestors for sending him to me.”

“Don’t even dare to mention him and your ancestors in the same sentence. He would spit on them if he could.”

Loki remained silent after his father’s outburst, only because he knew his words to be partly true. There was no point in keeping the conversation going now, they were too angry. It was probably for the best to let everyone cool down before insisting on how serious he was.

“I am sorry that I upset you with the news of my engagement. That doesn’t make it go away though. I am tired after the journey, I am going to get some rest. It’s nice to be back home.” Standing up Loki offered Jane a little smile since she was the only one who wasn’t looking at him like he was threatening them with a gun. “I will see you tonight at dinner.”

Loki wouldn’t deny the feeling of relief as he left the room. Combined with the immediate urge to call Helblindi. To ask how things had worked out for him and to hear him say something inappropriate. Something to make Loki smile.

Walking down the hall Loki thought of his own rooms and how he wanted to lie down on his couch and think of nothing for a couple of hours. Which wasn’t going to happen.

Behind him somebody was calling his name, so Loki stopped, sighing silently. As he turned around he faced his mother. She was pale as a sheet. Not entirely unexpected. Loki had wondered if he was going to feel satisfaction about that. It wasn’t the case. His mother had lost control over him and if she accepted that, they would probably be capable of starting over again.

“Can we talk in private, please? It couldn’t be more important.”

Frankly, Loki was burning to know what she had to say. As far as he could remember Frigga had always spoken highly respectful of the Jotuns and the Ymirsons. For her the peaceful union between Asgard and Jotunheim was a necessity, something worth fighting for. Loki was doing exactly that. “Of course, mother.”
Frigga nodded, the weakest smile ghosted over her face. They made their way to Frigga’s salon in complete silence. When she closed the door behind him Loki could hear her taking a deep breath. It should not be a surprise, his engagement was even putting Frigga on the edge. “What is it that you want to talk about?”

“What are you doing, Loki? Is this a form of rebellion against your father? Or one of your schemes? Help me to understand.” The usual softness hadn’t left her voice, but Loki could hear a hint of pleading. Perhaps his refusal to talk to her had hurt her worse than Loki had expected. It had never been Loki’s intention to do that, he had been looking out for himself.

“It is nothing of that sort. It is an engagement. With the man I have chosen to be with.” Loki answered matter-of-factly and he could see Frigga nervously kneading her fingers. A habit that Loki had witnessed before, but not often.

“The heir to Jotunheim? A man that you hardly know? Help me to understand, Loki.” Frigga took a step towards him and Loki was tempted to shrug. “Helblindi and I both agreed that it would be the best way to reunite Asgard. To overcome prejudice and contempt.”

“Loki…” Reaching out Frigga gently touched his arm, but it seemed strangely awkward. “I know I hurt you and until now I haven’t been able to actually apologize. It took me some time to realise that I overstepped my boundaries. It was so hard for me to understand, because I always have only your very best interest in mind. Even the very best is hardly good enough for you. I understand now that you wish to maintain the freedom of your own choice. Therefore I want you to think about what you are doing. You deserve more than a marriage for political benefit. I am aware that you always put Asgard first, but you have already done more than one could ever ask of you. You don’t have to do this.”

“I know, but I want to.” For Loki it had always been clear that he would marry for politics. Sure, that wasn’t any mother’s dream for her child, but it couldn’t come as a surprise. What was Loki supposed to say? Tell his mother the truth to make her feel better? When he was still in midst of figuring everything out for himself. For now it had to be enough that Loki wanted this marriage. He wanted it, because it would show everybody in this country that Ymirsons and Búrisons were ready and willing to start over.

And it was so easy to want it because it was Helblindi.

Loki thought about saying all of that. Helblindi being that rare kind of beautiful that people could find pleasure in only looking at him. Only so long before pleasure became torture. Now it seemed so odd that there had been a time when he hadn’t been able to touch Helblindi. A gorgeous man who was actually challenging him by being smart, sarcastic and completely unwilling to back down. A sharp and mostly dry wit that made Loki laugh. Then he was intelligent, educated, strong-willed and could keep an interesting conversation going. Loki immensely enjoyed talking to him. Also there was the very obvious, more sensual part of him. Loki felt attracted to Helblindi in a way that he hadn’t experienced before. Being drawn to such a beautiful man perhaps wasn’t that surprising or special. Their sexual compatibility was exceptional though. Thinking about how much they enjoyed each other’s bodies once their clothes were off had Loki almost blushing. Helblindi seemed to know that Loki liked strong, firm hands that weren’t afraid to take what they wanted. Nonetheless he had a playful side about him and Loki enjoyed the thought of simply putting his head on Helblindi’s thigh and let him stroke his hair.

Those were all things that Loki could say, but for now they were only for him. Also, his mother’s and anybody else’s answer seemed obvious. He didn’t know him well enough. Loki’s feelings could easily be explained with infatuation. A fleeting sensation that would pass with time. The version of
Helblindi that Loki believed to know was merely an idolisation.

All of that might be true, but Loki’s decision didn’t falter. A whole life still lay ahead of him, plenty of time to discover all of Helblindi’s shades. He would do the same and Loki was looking forward to it. He wanted it.

“Loki… my dear boy.” Frigga smiled at him, but her face lacked joy. “When is the day going to come that you put yourself before the country?”

The answer to that was very easy. “For any member of a royal family that day should never come.”

Gently Frigga took his hand, her gaze asking for permission. “I see and believe me, my soul is not capable to feel any prouder. But I am a mother and therefore I see what you tend to forget and what you forget is of great importance. Every time you look into the mirror you see Loki, Prince of Asgard. That’s only one part of you. You are also a man. Made of flesh and blood. That man has the right to be happy. To make choices for himself.”

“Mother, this is my choice. My choice and his.”

“A choice forced upon you by circumstances. By the stubbornness of others. This is not fair to either of you.” Frigga was shaking her head and at this point Loki started to feel a lump in his throat. She was severely upset. In a very different way than Odin. Not Helblindi was causing her trouble, but the idea of Loki sacrificing himself. Giving up the idea of ever marrying for love.

Which wasn’t exactly true.

Nonetheless Frigga was talking as a mother who worried about her son. Loki still was of the fierce opinion that these sentiments should never come first, but she was partly right. He couldn’t ignore that he was also a person with wants and needs. In this very moment Loki needed to make his mother feel better. Cure her of the disbelief that Loki was doing this with contempt. “Mother, you don’t have to worry or feel bad for me. I have thought about this intensely and I discussed the implications thoroughly with Helblindi. We both want this. It was my idea.”

Not a single one of his words seemed to put his mother at ease. The lines on her forehead were unknown to him, deep concern that Loki had never seen before and which for the first time made him feel the reach of his undertaking. They were never going to get a divorce. Loki would spend his life married to the Lord in Jotunheim. Live in Jotunheim and despite the sympathy he had won there, he would always be somewhat of a stranger. Or way worse. The son of a line of murderers and thieves never good enough for their gorgeous prince. It wasn’t going to be easy and it shouldn’t be, but Loki wasn’t going to start feel scared of Jotunheim now.

If he should ever be afraid of someone, it should be Helblindi and how easy it was for him to make Loki lose his mind.

“My special prince.” Frigga kissed the back of his hand. “How am I supposed to let you do this? When it’s so unfair. Your brother got to choose the woman he loves. Despite her being Midgardian and American. She doesn’t believe in the trúa, is unfamiliar with our customs and the people have a hard time accepting her. Yet nobody is standing in your brother’s way, because he loves her. It is not fair that you shouldn’t get that chance. Unfortunately I know what I am talking about, because once I’ve almost ended up trying to get you to do what you are doing right now. I am so sorry about that, Loki. You deserve to fall in love and to have that love messing with your head. You should not have to make that sacrifice.”

It was hard for Loki not to swallow. He had definitely underestimated how sorry his mother was.
Almost desperate at the idea that now Loki was choosing a man with his head and not with his heart. Perhaps Loki should tell her after all. That this engagement wasn’t just an alliance of convenience. That Loki’s heart ever so often skipped a beat in Helblindi’s presence.

“Mother, this has nothing to do with Thor. I am happy that he is with Jane. He is going to be king, he needs someone at his side that he cherishes and the other way around.”

A fierce spark entered his mother’s eyes and her anguish was partly replaced by anger. “And you don’t? You deserve the very same thing. Someone to love and cherish you. I know what you want to achieve and your heart is so big that you only have Asgard’s best interest in mind, but please… just once think about yourself first.”

“I do… I do. I guess you have to trust me that I know what I am doing. Helblindi is smart, ambitious man and he is beautiful. We have the same opinion on this issue and I believe this is the right thing to do. I didn’t get engaged with a man that I despise. Quite the opposite.”

That simple comment threw Loki’s mother for a loop. He couldn’t grasp why, but Frigga stared at him with her lips slightly parted, seemingly unable to understand what Loki had just told her. Obviously the idea had never crossed her mind that Loki could have a second, much more personal motive. “You… like him?”

Feeling a little bit sheepish Loki shrugged helplessly. “He is the most beautiful person I’ve ever laid my eyes on. I like talking to him and…” No, Loki wasn’t going to mention to his mother that him and Helblindi had already gone all the way. “… he wants the best for Jotunheim. Most importantly he is willing to compromise and to start over. I might not get a passionate proposal after three years of relationship, but I get an engagement that actually means something and that is more important to me.”

“Do you really understand the implications? Helblindi is going to be Lord of Jotunheim and you would have to go with him. Live there with him. Loki, I can’t believe that you thought this through.”

Now he was almost laughing. “Are you scared for me now? The last time it was more or less your idea that I should go to Jotunheim.”

Fiercely Frigga started shaking her head. “That is not the same. Nobody else would go there and I knew that you were the only one who could make a difference. Thor doesn’t have the same words as you nor the same set of mind. I also knew that you would win them over by speaking their language. There was security around you all the time… this is entirely different. The crisis is far from over and although the general Jotun population has come to respect you, they hardly will accept you as their prince’s spouse. Whoever hurt your brother still hasn’t been found. Please, Loki… This is an immensely dangerous game. I spent a week not knowing where you were and it was torment. I cannot go through this, you knowingly putting yourself into a situation where you cannot trust anybody and where you’d be in constant danger.”

“I will trust my husband like the trúa demands of me. Completely.”

Frigga tugged at his hand, a little too hard and Loki had never heard her sigh in frustration. “By all the spirits, Loki… you cannot expect everybody else to honour the trúa as much as you do!”

“I expect my husband to do the same. Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to marry him.”

“Do you know him well enough to be sure of that?”

“Yes.” That was a lie. A very bad one, but Loki had no intention to announce their engagement to
the world tomorrow or next week. He would get to know Helblindi better and his mother, despite all her care and best intentions, couldn’t talk him out of it.

“Please…” Frigga whispered, raising Loki’s hand to her lips to kiss it. “I am scared for you. I am not sure if you know what you are doing. Please, don’t. Just don’t. The negotiations have already started and the country has finally the chance to stop the injustice. There is no need for you to sacrifice your personal life and safety. I am urging you to not do this.”

Her voice was pleading and Loki couldn’t let her go through this desperation and fear. He couldn’t tell her that it was completely unwarranted, but of course it was too much. “Mother.” Loki squeezed her hand and smiled at her. “It’s okay. You are right about the negotiations, but there is so much more we could. It’s time for a sign, to start over. Helblindi and I are willing to do that. I cannot let such an opportunity pass because of fear for how people might react to me. I am not going let Frjiáls dictate my life in any way. I am going to be alright and I am sure about this.”

To reassure her Loki kissed her on the cheek and for him this conversation was over. The encounter with both of his parents had already drained him of so much energy. Still, Loki could only turn around before Frigga spoke up again with a trembling voice. “What about Tony Stark?”

That had Loki stopping abruptly. A detail and a name that had nothing to do with any of this. “I fear I don’t understand.”

“Loki, I know you went to him after you ended your relationship with Balder. You were talking to him on the phone repeatedly. I thought he might be a reason why…” Frigga stopped probably because she could see on Loki’s face that she was losing his goodwill. Not when she hinted at Stark playing a role in his break-up with Balder.

“Tony Stark is not a factor that I include in my decision-making. Especially not in the decision who I am going to marry. I am confused by what you are trying to say.”

“I am sorry, Loki… I am just…” Frigga made a helpless gesture. “You disappear for a week and come back, telling me that you are going to marry a man that you don’t even really know. Who has every reason in the world to despise you and your ancestors… and not so long before that you met with that man who you showed interest in…”

Loki couldn’t stand where this was going. “You are talking about an American who would be even less acceptable than Jane and you made clear that you don’t like him. You’ve only ever talked in the highest esteem about Helblindi. I don’t understand what you are trying to do here, mother, but I don’t like it.”

Instantly Frigga grabbed his arm, a little too firm and she loosened her grip. “Loki, please. I don’t want you to marry someone who you don’t love and who doesn’t love you out of obligation. Not when Thor gets to have everything and you are left with nothing. I will not accept that, Loki. I cannot accept that.”

A sad smile was all that Loki could offer her. “Like I’ve already told father, I am not asking for permission. And who knows… I might end up falling for the Jotun lord after all.”

The way Frigga stared at him in disbelief was almost funny and Loki kissed her forehead before actually leaving the room this time. Despite his fatigue he couldn’t enjoy the thought of lying down anymore. Mostly because somebody was going to seek him out and try to talk to him about his engagement. The only person that he wanted to talk to at this moment was Helblindi. Who didn’t pick up his phone as Loki had to find out one minute later. The feeling of disappointment inside his chest was so present that Loki knew he needed some form of distraction.
After a quick call to the security Loki sat in the limousine and closed his eyes. Actually it could have been a lot worse. Loki was a bit surprised by his mother’s reaction, but his father had more or less reacted in a more calm manner than Loki had expected. Part of him had been ready to receive the second slap of his life. That hadn’t happened. Instead Loki had suffered Thor’s gaze which had been as betrayed as the last time. Even worse this time Loki had seen disgust. It seemed like he would have to dedicate the rest of his life to reconcile their families. Helblindi would help him if he wanted to or not.

None of that was going to be easy, but once more he was overwhelmed by how much he wanted it.

40 minutes later Loki finally arrived at the stud and was greeted by the equerry. It felt good being teased a little bit about not having been here for quite a while, how it was wrong to neglect a wonderful horse like this. All of that was true and Loki was happy to hear that Sleipnir was ready for a ride. A stable-boy led Loki’s stallion by his harness and Loki smiled, realising that he had missed home after all.

“Hello, big guy. How about I take you for a ride? I just need to get changed and then we can get started.” After petting Sleipnir’s head and a short greeting Loki went inside to put on his boots.

Sleipnir was obviously happy to gallop over the snowy hills with Loki on his back. The view was marvellous and the feeling of being carried by his horse was wonderfully liberating. Loki was definitely going to miss this about his home. Sure, Sleipnir would come with him to Jotunheim, no discussion about it. Yes, Loki still believed that he could become happy in Jotunheim, but he hadn’t thought very much about what he might leave behind. How rarely he would see his family, especially Thor. Loki would miss him like mad, although it would take a lot of time for him to talk normally again. Thor might forgive him the secrets, but it would be hard for him to accept Helblindi. And vice-versa.

A part of Loki wanted to whine and to complain, but on the other hand he doubted that he would be content with a completely easy life. He was definitely fucked up in some ways.

After an hour Sleipnir brought Loki back to the main house and the stud. The equerry was waiting for them. When Loki had dismounted from the horse the equerry gave Loki back his phone that he had left behind. A habit that Frigga and Odin had always hated and they had even forbidden him to do so, but Loki enjoyed to have one single place on earth where he couldn’t be reached by anyone. Except if they actually started looking for him.

Patting Sleipnir’s neck Loki rested his head against him for a little bit before letting the equerry lead him away. Instead of calling the car Loki walked a few steps in the snow, glancing at the screen of his phone. One missed call. Leah. The disappointment came so quickly that Loki had never been able to feel anticipation in the first place.

He had to have talked to Laufey by now.

Swallowing a sigh Loki called his secretary back to ask why she had tried to reach him. Probably his family wanted to talk to him. Telling him once more that Loki had lost his mind and he was playing a dangerous game.

None of that, Leah told him that Agent Barnes wished to talk to the second prince of Asgard. Barnes. Another American, but strangely nobody was worried about him causing trouble. Loki liked him and he was pretty sure that Barnes merely wanted to thank him once more. At least that would be a conversation without reproaches and asking about his sanity.

Suddenly Loki missed the warmth of the Brazilian sun, the softness of the lounge chair and
Helblindi’s hand on his back.

Loki’s call was answered after the second ringing. “Hello?”

“Hello James, I heard you were trying to reach me.”

“Oh, yes… Good day, your highness.”

“I thought we were past your highness.”

Embarrassed James corrected himself. “Right, Loki. Thank you for calling back. I appreciate it, I am sure you are quite busy.”

No, Loki was only trying to pass time, waiting for his family to try keep the conversation going or for his fiancé to tell him how his talk had gone down. Loki had all the time in the world. “It’s nothing. Why did you want me to call you?”

“It’s uhm…” James paused and Loki could tell by his voice that he was feeling uncomfortable. “… a bit of a complicated matter. I would like to talk to you about something and I would prefer to do that personally.”

To be honest, that sounded rather intriguing.

“Sounds rather important.”

“It is. Is there a chance for us to meet up? I mean… is there a possibility that I could get an appointment?”

To Loki’s ears all of this sounded rather weird, not the quick ‘thank you’ that Loki had expected. It was still James though and Loki liked him, if there was anything that he could help him with, Loki would gladly do it. He hoped it had nothing to do with his injury, according to what Loki had been told the surgery had worked out greatly.

“But course. My schedule isn’t very tight at the moment. How about tomorrow? At the Southern Palais. Three o’clock?”

James was clearly surprised that Loki had agreed so quickly. “That… That’s perfect. Thank you. See you tomorrow then?”

“Exactly. Nice to hear from you, James. Until tomorrow.”

Loki wouldn’t deny his confusion after they had ended the call, but he was looking forward to talk to someone who wasn’t involved in politics or royalty.

Thinking of royalty… Loki tried to call Helblindi once more, but he was left with the fierce feeling of disappointment. And a hint of worry. He was the only person that Loki wanted to talk to and for some reason he couldn’t reach him.

It was only hours later, shortly before the dreaded dinner with his family when Loki’s phone finally buzzed. Thankfully nobody was watching him, otherwise they would see how embarrassingly quickly Loki’s fingers pressed the right buttons to read the message.

_That was awful. I am not sure, but I just might have been disowned_

Closing his eyes Loki sighed deeply. Seemed like somebody was having an even worse day than him.
Reactions

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Yes, I know, that took some time ;)

Thor’s hand was almost shaking as he raised it to knock on the door. It took all of his strength to not give into temptation and tear it down. Nothing would come from that, but Thor felt like all of his senses were heightened. The rage which had such a firm grip on him made him want to scream or destroy something. Just to get it out. A short-term solution. The problem would continue to exist. Thinking about it now had Thor actually shaking.

Nobody answered, so Thor eventually pushed the door open and entered the salon. Scanning the room with his eyes Thor spotted his father sitting on the sofa opposite of the burning chimney. The fingers of his right hand curled around a glass of wine. The stone Thor felt inside of his chest got a bit heavier. His father didn’t drink during the day. Not without a meal or company.

All because of Loki.

Biting down on his lower lip Thor forced himself to be reasonable, although it was too much to ask. After what Loki had done today.

“Father, we need to talk about Loki.”

“As I’ve said before, there is nothing more to talk about.” Odin’s voice was strained and Thor wanted to sit down, anything to stop his body from shaking with anger.

“Father, you know Loki as well as I do. Nothing anybody says to him stops him from doing what he wants.”

Odin turned his head towards Thor in a short movement and Thor could see the strain. “I forbid him to continue with his engagement with the young Ymirsons. As his father and his king. The matter has been dealt with.”

The simple word engagement had Thor almost overwhelmed with sickness. How could Loki be so smart and then be doing something like this? Either he had completely lost his mind or the young Ymirson was an even better manipulator than Thor’s little brother. The third possibility was something that Thor didn’t want to think about. “Loki didn’t look like he was going to accept that. It’s not just that. It’s the mere fact that he… has come up with this idea.”

“Your brother has always been fascinated with history and of course the idea of marriage as a solution to a national conflict appeals to him. He has made the Jotun issue his personal mission. Combined with his stubbornness… I wish I could pretend I was more surprised by his doing than I actually am.”

“Does that make it any better?! How can he even… Do you believe that there is the slightest chance that Helblindi Ymirson…” Thor stopped himself for a moment, because to simply say that name wasn’t enough. “… the figurehead of Frjál, fiercest critic of the crown would ever see anything else
in Loki than a member of the family that took away what he thinks is rightfully his? We all heard him talk and he is going to put this behind him to find a peaceful solution by marrying my little brother?! He is an Ymirson! He would never soil his hands on Loki…”

At least Thor desperately hoped so. The thought of the heir to Jotunheim, that vicious snake touching his brother was almost too much to take. No, this was an arrangement, a spiteful idea. On the other hand and this was the part where Thor got really scared, he would be a fool if he tried to deny for only a second that Helblindi’s physical appearance could easily tempt anybody. Then again, Loki had never been fooled by good looks. Thor hated this, that he didn’t know what to think. That he suddenly couldn’t be sure what his little brother had his mind or who was responsible for his actions.

“There were members of house of Ymirson that refused to be in the same room as our family. For them, breathing the same air as us was an insult. That attitude didn’t get them anywhere. I can imagine Helblindi Ymirson going for something else entirely. With enough conviction there is hardly anything that the right people wouldn’t be willing to do. I don’t dare to give a description of his character.”

Thor didn’t have that scruple. “He is intelligent, ruthless and manipulative.”

“Your brother or Helblindi Ymirson.”

That had Thor wincing and he ran one hand through his hair. The last weeks seemed more and more like something that wasn’t entirely real. Loki was slipping through their fingers and it tore Thor apart that he slowly losing that unconditional trust. Something that he had grown up with, something that you didn’t think about. Just knowing. Every thought that Thor had given to the future had contained Loki. Always close to him, with his sharp, unforgiving tongue and so many fights. Yet that would be Loki and him, having each other’s backs even if they disagreed.

Loki would and should always be there. To protect Thor and to be protected by him. Not a single time in his entire life Thor had had the feeling that he couldn’t talk to Loki. Even if they had fought.

Now? Now Thor suddenly didn’t know anymore what was going in Loki’s head. Or who was pulling his strings when Loki himself enjoyed nothing more to be the puppet master. All of this was wrong.

“I am scared for him, father.” Thor pressed the words through gritted teeth, almost unwilling to voice them. Talking about things made them real and then it got so much harder to hide. “I don’t know if he is planning something, if he genuinely thinks this could end the Jotun conflict, if the Ymirson has poisoned his thoughts or if… they turned to each other against all of us. I just don’t know. He is my little brother, I should know. I should understand what he is doing.”

Thor flinched as he felt the unexpected touch of his father. Gently squeezing his shoulder. “That’s exactly what you should tell him. Without yelling or screaming. Without talking about Helblindi.”

Confused Thor looked at his father who had once more turned so old. A part of him got heated with rage. Why did Loki have to do this to Odin when their father had clearly more than enough on his plate? The weight of the world was already on his shoulders and now Loki had to add to it on such a personally level.

“You are telling me to stay calm with him when you lost your composure with him only a few hours ago?”

“I am his father and for now still his king. He confronted me with something that was nothing else but provocation. He expects me to be against his plans and he knows that I have to be against them.
When he mentioned him and our ancestors in the same sentence… I couldn’t. A man born from a family that would take everything away from us if they could. Even more so, they would destroy us. This is what happening right now. Somebody is trying to destroy my son and I cannot stand by and keep my calm… when Loki is talking about willingly giving into that.” Odin shook his head, he looked pained and Thor wished that there was something he could say or do to get them out of this miserable situation.

Only Loki could do that and at the moment it looked like he had lost reason. Or if someone else was pushing the right buttons. “What are we going to do? Do you think that it would make any difference if I told him that I am scared for him. That he is walking right into a trap? When somebody is as stubborn as Loki…”

“Young brother is not going to marry the heir of Jotunheim. He is not going to receive permission. Neither from his father nor from his king. I am not going to let the wolves devour my child. Also I want you to stop questioning your brother’s motives. You will need each other. I will and cannot deny that Loki doesn’t always share your opinions and he will definitely try to realise his own agendas. Whatever he does, he will not purposely act against you. He will do it, because he thinks it’s best for Asgard.”

Thor understood well enough what his father was trying to tell him, but it didn’t change anything at the moment. Not the way he felt. Not his suspicions. Loki had been keeping secrets before, he had been conspiring with Helblindi and Thor was praying to his ancestors that this liaison was merely a means to an end for Loki.

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*Heill skaltu for-eldra,*

*To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,*

*How could you let that happen? You were supposed to protect him from all harm*

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Resting his head against the glass Loki stretched out his legs on the window bench, his fingers loosely curling around his phone. “You are so obviously trying to avoid telling me what happened?”

There was laughter in Helblindi’s voice. It sounded forced which was bad enough and it worried Loki even more. He had no doubt that Helblindi would be able to easily make it sound natural in any other situation. Whatever his father’s reaction had been like, it had upset Helblindi so much that he was still dealing with the aftershocks. “I am sure you will forgive me that I am not very eager to immediately relive that unpleasant experience.”

“Yes, I get that.” Loki sighed, watching the snowflakes falling while he concentrated on Helblindi’s voice. It was odd that Loki missed him after having seen him just yesterday. “Was it worse than you expected?”

“Definitely.” Helblindi sighed. “I was convinced that I could talk him into it. Slowly, maybe it would take a couple of days, but… I didn’t get to voice a single word. I got yelled at and… I really don’t want to talk about it. All I can say is… I don’t ever have my father looking at me like that.”

“And your brother?”

“Loki, I really don’t want to think about that right now. I had the feeling Býleistr wanted to kill me.”
“These are the things that you should talk to me about. It’s not just that I want to know how things went. I want to know how you feel about it.” The words were soft as they rolled off Loki’s tongue and he fiercely hoped that Helblindi could hear that he meant it.

Before answering Helblindi sighed and Loki wondered what he was doing right now. Sitting in a chair, lying on his bed. Loki wanted to picture it when he couldn’t be there with him. “I know. I get it. Awful. I feel awful. This shouldn’t be so hard. It’s not that hard to understand what we’re trying to do. But everybody is too proud or too caught up in their own ideas that they don’t seem to get it.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand them at all.” Loki muttered while closing his eyes. “You can’t tell me that you would be thrilled if your little brother told you that he was going to marry Thor.”

“Loki, that’s not the same and you know that. Your brother has nothing but contempt for my family.”

Right, that almost had Loki laughing. If the situation wasn’t so serious. “Really? That’s you saying that? Hypocrisy doesn’t work well with you. What are your thoughts about Thor or my father? My grandfather? My great-grandfather? There is no way you can tell me for even one second that there is no contempt. That would be laughable. Downright ridiculous. How is it that much different when it’s your contempt or his? My brother has his flaws, I am not going to deny that, but he doesn’t hate somebody he has never met. He doesn’t hate somebody who has been long dead.”

That dose of harsh truth was rewarded with silence and despite Loki’s wish to have Helblindi next to him, to be able to touch him, he couldn’t deny a spark of anger. Helblindi liked to do that, to take his time when he was clearly in the wrong. It never looked like defeat, because all he needed was a couple of moments to come up with a way to turn it all around. A sleazy character trait that Loki enjoyed and at the same time it got under his skin in the completely wrong way.

“Say something. The ball is in your corner.”

“I know. I… you might have a point. It doesn’t change the facts though. Our families are against our plans and that was to be expected. Now we should figure out how we’re going to deal with it.”

Loki would let him get away with changing the topic since they definitely had more important things to discuss. “Alright. Do you have any suggestions? I am listening.”

“Well, there is the obvious. We could behind all of their backs and make a public announcement. Forcing them to accept the engagement and risk at the same time that people will take sides since our own families are against it and like that we’re probably going to make the conflict worse than it’s ever been.”

“Yes, that sounds good. We should definitely do that. Or we try something else. Like giving them a few more days to come to terms with what we’ve told them. Then try to talk to them. Together, eventually. It’s not like we’re going to leave them much of a choice anyway.” Loki couldn’t fight the smile that made its way on his lips. Sure, it was going to be nasty at first, but Loki knew that he could convince his mother and then eventually his father. They were never going to like it, but they had to tolerate and its benefits since Loki and Helblindi weren’t going to back down.

“You are right. I am not looking forward to it though… Today was a really bad day.”

“You are sure that you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Yes… another time. I have to go. I have a long list of appointments since I am officially back at home.”
Loki licked his lips and he didn’t know why he couldn’t just open his mouth and tell him that he missed him. It wasn’t that much of a big confession. Helblindi probably knew anyway. Still Loki couldn’t voice that very prominent thought. “Okay. We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“Definitely. And Loki?”

“Yes?”

“I’d rather do all of this with you. Bye.”

“Bye.” Hanging up Loki was still smiling. At times like these all of it suddenly seemed so easy, even though Loki knew that reality looked entirely different. Who but them would be able to work all of this out?

Putting the phone away Loki kept looking out the window. By now the garden was all white, the paths and little bushes had become invisible. Suddenly Loki was filled with an almost childish desire to go out and create a snow angel. He had liked to do that when he had still been a little boy. Nothing had ever been more fun than playing in the snow.

There was no knock, the door was being opened without asking for permission. Loki’s eyes followed Thor’s slow movements as he came inside the room. His head was hanging low between his shoulders and Loki was searching for definite signs of anger. Only two hours ago Thor had instantly yelled at him, Loki had seen the disgust and the disbelief. They couldn’t be gone. Loki knew his brother well enough and Helblindi wasn’t completely wrong with his perception of Thor. So they were going to fight now. Loki had hoped he would still have some peace before dinner. Too much to ask.

“I am here. Explain it to me.” Thor raised both of his hands in a defensive gesture. “I am not going to interrupt or yell. I just want you to explain it to me.”

Loki’s mouth went dry as he watched his brother in this totally unexpected move. Sure, Loki had spent a lot of time thinking about this confrontation, but he hadn’t seen this coming. The opportunity to explain himself? Thor wasn’t losing his mind over Loki’s engagement. An explanation was only fair and Loki didn’t want much more. Sitting up straight and putting his feet on the floor Loki cleared his throat. “The best way to overcome the feud between two families is to unite them. With those two families, we reunite the country.”

“Politics and renegotiations are going to reunite the country. Not an arranged marriage that’s completely fake.”

Two sentences into this conversation and they had already touched the most dangerous and sorest spot. Loki could tell him. Right now.

_Dear brother of mine, I am falling in love with a man that you despise. Will I get your blessing as the future king?_

“It’s not fake. We both believe in what this engagement could accomplish. We are serious about it.”

Thor didn’t hesitate to meet Loki’s eyes and he could already see them burning. There was still a good chance that they might start yelling. “Whose idea was it? I know that he proposed, but whose idea was it?”

Yes, they were going to fight. “Mine. I called him and told him that I didn’t believe the new policy was going to be enough. In a couple of years things might change around again and we’re right back where we started. Because the people can see and feel that our families still don’t trust each other, so
how can we expect the people to overcome their prejudices? What other way than a marriage to show that we do not hate each other?"

“These are not the Middle Ages! You don’t have to marry anyone to make a point. We show the people that we’re willing to work with each other by doing just that. Treaties, agreements…”

“People don’t believe in those things. They’ve been disappointed way too often. Anybody can write down words on paper that future politicians will ignore and rip apart. This is Asgard. Marriage still means something to our people.” Loki made an effort to keep his voice calm and even. He was trying to make all of this sound like an entirely political affair. Like this he could maybe earn Thor’s understanding. It was way too soon to admit that he actually liked Helblindi.

Already overcome by frustration and cold fury that he obviously didn’t want to release Thor shortly covered his face with his hands and then feverishly shook his head. “By all our ancestors, Loki… why are making this so hard for me? You cannot be this naïve. I know that you aren’t. And if you aren’t, then I have to believe that you have a plan. One that includes Helblindi Ymirson. The person you seem to be conspiring with and who would throw you in front of a bus if he had the opportunity.”

Not a word of what he said could make Loki angry. “I am not conspiring with him. We are willing to overcome our differences…”

“Loki! What are you even talking about?! He is Laufey’s eldest son! He’s a Frjáls icon! Laufey raised him with the belief that he is the rightful future king of this country. That’s what Helblindi wants and he is even more dangerous, because he believes he’s right. You are smart, Loki, smarter than I am. So you have to see that he would never be content with less. You’re becoming the pawn in someone else’s game.”

Perhaps Loki had been too fast in his judgement. He felt the blood pulsing in his veins and there was the clear desire to tell Thor that he was so horribly wrong about all of this. Not once in his life had he had an actual conversation with Helblindi. Unlike Loki. Instead Loki told himself to remain calm, he couldn’t take this personally. “Why are you refusing so hard the possibility that a member of Ymirson family could want something more than the crown? Helblindi wants what is best for the country and I firmly believe that.”

A desperate sound escaped Thor’s throat. “Loki, please… you never trust anyone and now you can’t see… Did he look at you with his blue eyes and you forgot that you are smarter than this?”

There was a flash of white and Loki’s voice turned into a hiss. “Don’t you dare.”

To his surprise Thor took a breath and seemingly tried to regain a bit of his composure. “Okay… I am sorry, but… I don’t understand how you can’t see it. Are you even aware of the kind of situation that you are in? How dangerous this is? Are you going to Jotunheim with him? The people who tried to kill me are the people who adore him. You cannot seriously take that risk. That bastard is ruthless and smart. Do you really believe that he doesn’t have a plan? One that he doesn’t share with you? You are a prince, Loki and right now you are putting your head on the scaffold and wait for him to… Don’t you understand that I am scared for you?”

No, Loki didn’t understand. He was a lot of things but he definitely wasn’t scared of Helblindi. “You don’t have to be scared. Not for me. Rather of what is going to happen to this country if we can’t overcome this distrust.”

***
Heill skaltu for-eldra,

To those who were born before me, the creators and keepers of my soul,

I beg all of you to speak to my brother’s soul as he has lost his mind
Bucky was strangely reminded of having an exam at school. The nervousness throbbing in his veins, he was feeling horribly uncomfortable. That shouldn’t be the case, the meeting had been his idea. Normally this wasn’t the kind of thing that James liked doing, asking for help wasn’t really in his nature. Especially if he was merely trying to avoid the normal way of doing things. Unfortunately Bucky needed to speed up the procedures and he had opportunities that other people didn’t have. That didn’t change the fact that James felt horribly uncomfortable. He didn’t want to have to ask for anything.

After paying the taxi Bucky got out, staring at the palais in front of him. It was a marvellous building with a façade that was a bit unusual for Valhalla. Very Middle-European, inspired by French or German baroque. If there was any doubt who this house belonged to, the high security around the door would gladly dispel them.

Bucky worked in the very same business, so he was aware that they had already noticed and were now watching him. In those situations he liked to smile since in his opinion it put the people at ease.

The heavily armed soldier nodded at him. “Can we help you?”

“Hi, my name is James Barnes. I have an appointment with the Duke of Glæsisvellir.”

Without showing that much of a reaction the soldier nodded and turned away to talk into his radio.

Half a minute later Bucky was led into the palais which was also jaw-droopingly beautiful inside. Their meeting took place in a salon on the second floor. The prince was still on the phone although the valet had knocked and waited before opening the door.

Loki made a gesture that was definitely supposed to say that he would be there for Bucky in a second. Still, the entire situation was a bit of a problem since Loki was sitting on the chaise-lounge and according to protocol Bucky wasn’t allowed to sit down without a clear invitation. The valet bowed his head before he left and Bucky was standing awkwardly in the middle of the room.

Luckily Loki ended the call only moments later. “Thank you, minister. I will go over the names as soon as you’ve sent me the list.” Standing up Loki walked over to him and the smile on his lips was bright and honest. As if he was actually happy to see Bucky which would be nice. “James. Sorry about the phone call, unfortunately it was rather important, but now I am all yours.”

It felt good to hear the familiar flirtation. Why should it be any different? For Loki nothing had changed. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, your…”

He didn’t get further, because the prince narrowed his eyes. “James.”

“Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, Loki.”
“Way better.” All smiles again Loki indicated Bucky to sit down. His heart started racing again, but Bucky told himself that it was going to be fine. He was pretty sure that the prince considered him his friend and a friend was allowed to ask for a favour, right?

“First of all I want to thank you again for helping me out at the hospital. I don’t like to think about too much how things would have turned out if you hadn’t been there. I am not making any reproaches, the hospital had their hands full and I wasn’t a priority. Nonetheless I am incredibly grateful.”

Loki’s smile was gentle and perfectly content. “I am merely glad that I could help. How are you doing? You’re still wearing a sling.”

Right to it, no matter how much Bucky would like things to be different. Shifting around Bucky let his eyes drift to the floor before settling back on Loki’s face who was already looking worried. “Not that good, I fear.”

“I am sorry. What does that mean?”

A bit helpless Bucky shrugged as if he could play down what he was going to tell Loki. “Yesterday I had an appointment with the doctor. My arm is not healing as well as they hoped it would.”

The other one’s face wasn’t hiding anything. Eyes that got a little wider and a mouth that formed a straight, sad line. He was clearly feeling bad for Bucky and that was nice, a bit comforting even.

“Are we talking about how much movability you are going to gain back?”

Bullseye. First try. That was pretty good.

Nodding softly Bucky gestured with his left hand at the one that was fucked up. “I try to look at this way. I could have lost the arm. So I am grateful that this isn’t the case. Now it’s like… The doctor told me that I am going to be able to do all daily tasks. Some of them a bit slower. Writing is going to be a pain. Not that much of a problem in my job. Handling a gun is going to be more of a problem.”

Loki nodded softly in understanding and Bucky thought that he didn’t know what to say. “Have you talked to Doctor Strange? His opinion might be…”

“I went to see him the same day. He took a look at my file, at the pictures and he confirmed the prognosis. Evidently it’s still a pretty good result. Considering the damage and how long it has taken to… My regular life will not be much affected by the nerve damage, but I will not be able to continue in my line of work.”

“I am very sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay I guess. Like I said, I am happy that I can keep my arm and that I can still live a totally normal life. Unfortunately I don’t meet the requirements for my job anymore.”

Loki nodded once more and the way he tilted his head showed that he was wondering how he fitted into this story. “So what is going to happen now?”

Now it was time to sigh and to hope. “Eventually I am going to be send back home to work office duty. Not something that I am particularly keen on. Especially since I wasn’t on best terms with my bosses in the last time.”

Loki arched an eyebrow and Bucky absolutely didn’t want to go into detail. What he really wanted was to forget about the political mess that he was being pulled into. People could accuse him of what
they wanted. Not being patriotic enough or refusing to do his duty. None of that was true. Bucky had the problem that he knew nothing about intrigue and that he didn’t want to know. That wasn’t his world.

“I am sorry to hear that. When you called, you told me that you needed my help. I don’t quite see how I could help you with any of that.” Loki was soft-spoken and seemingly upset that there was nothing he could do.

Except there was something and Bucky should finally open his mouth despite his discomfort. “The reason I called you… I don’t really feel at ease asking a favour, but I figured that there isn’t anything else that I can do. Time to spill. I’ve been thinking about this for a while and of course I thought I would have more time to think about it a bit longer, but I am pretty much forced to rush things. I want to stay in Asgard.”

Loki’s right eyebrow went up. “Permanently?”

He caught on quick, that was for sure.

“Yes. I deeply enjoy the life I have built around myself here and I… I fit in here. Better than back at home. Because this here feels like home. I want to apply for the Asgardian citizenship, but the US government is going to send me home in one or two weeks and then it’s going to get even harder since… you know…” Bucky tried an awkward smile, hoping that Loki wouldn’t get it wrong.

“Because Asgardian immigration politics are vicious or at least people say so. I can’t help to think it’s sound that you’re coming to me with this since I am clearly in favour of the vetting process as it is now.”

“I know and I am not asking for special treatment or for you to speed up things. I am familiar with the process and I know I would have a way better shot if I applied while still living in Valhalla. What I’m asking you is… could you help me to get the papers out before I have to get back to the US? I don’t want you to wave my application through or any of that. I merely don’t want to use an advantage that I would have had if it wasn’t for the accident. Believe me, asking for this isn’t easy since you’ve already done so much for me and I really don’t want to seem demanding or arrogant. I just want to be able to say that I tried everything that I could.”

The following silence was hard to stomach and Bucky asked himself if he hadn’t gone too far. The man right in front of him was still a prince and not some guy working for the administration that Bucky had befriended. Just because they had used to play tennis and had kissed once didn’t mean that…

“I guess I can make a couple of calls to make sure that you get a few appointments this week. I cannot stand between a fine man and his wish to become part of this wonderful country.”

Bucky felt like half a person, such a big weight was falling off his shoulder. “Thank you.”

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“What is it that he is trying to do now? I was desperately hoping that he would still turn around and tell us that he wasn’t serious…” Thor was muttering under his breath although he had the distinct feeling that his father wasn’t even listening to him. Lost in his own thoughts concerning Loki’s madness. One day had passed which was no time at all and Thor had nonetheless wished for him to come around. To think about all the consequences that his plan contained and how he was putting his fate and life into the hands on an individual who could only mean him harm.
Thor thought about the metaphors including roses. Something beautiful that stung when you touched it. That wasn’t enough. Helblindi wasn’t just going to slightly slit Loki’s fingers. He was capable of slaughtering him if he wanted to. Why wouldn’t Loki see that? They were his family, his blood. All of them had been born to nourish and protect him. So how could he willingly turn to someone who had to ultimately betray him if he wanted to honour his own family?

Loki was still holding on to his plan. Now he had asked their father and Thor to join him in one of the conference rooms. To discuss his engagement. Thor’s stomach threatened to revolt.

His brother wasn’t waiting for them alone. Next to him were sitting the minister of justice and another man that Thor had never seen before. Not a good sign.

“What is the meaning of this, Loki?”

“Thanks to the both of you for coming here.” Loki didn’t smile, but his face still looked friendly enough. “You already know Minister Hagen. This is Asger Troelsen. One of Valhalla’s finest lawyers.”

They exchanged the necessary pleasantries, but Odin seemed eager to cut this farce short. “I am sorry that the prince has wasted your time, gentlemen. I understand your intentions, Loki, but I have already told you that…”

“Father, I beg you not to embarrass me in front of member of the government.” Loki replied drily. “I admit that I probably went all wrong about this, but I deserve a chance to lie out my plans in front of you. I don’t know what you accuse me of. Naivety or madness. Neither is the case. I cannot take away the fear you feel for me. Only Helblindi can do that. What I can do is reassure you about the state and safety of our country and the rights of our family. The future Lord of Jotunheim and me agreed on the terms of our marriage. I presented them to Minister Hagen and Doctor Troelsen. They reviewed them and are willing to go through every point with you and then I am ready to answer every question you still might have. I am not asking for that chance, I am demanding it. My brother got the chance to speak for his own engagement. To defend it. I want the same.”

The last words stung. Thor thought that they even pierced his chest. Betrayals weren’t something that people could get used to. At least not Thor. So many times Thor and Loki had sat together and talked about Jane. His little brother had been the first person he had told about her. Thor could clearly remember it. Lying on that bed in an American hotel, mumbling with a stupid smile into his phone that he had met that pretty, soft-spoken and all in all wonderful woman.

He remembered Loki’s laughter. Slightly amused by Thor’s infatuation, but not taking it quite seriously. A few days later they had had the same conversation again and Thor had been able to convince Loki that it was something different. That Jane was something special. Loki had been the first person to know that Thor had fallen in love, that he had found the person their ancestors had sent to him. Then Loki had reacted with understanding, he had been supportive. Almost sweet, because he knew what Jane meant to Thor.

Now Loki was comparing this situation, that sharing of Thor’s deepest feelings, to his engagement to a man that he didn’t know. To a ploy. A scheme. It hurt. The realisation that Loki didn’t seem to value what Thor had shared with him. Not the way Thor did.

Odin’s eyes moved from Thor to Loki and for a moment Thor thought that he would leave the decision to him. Like the negotiations of the Language Act. That didn’t happen though and Thor remembered Odin’s words. About denying Loki his permission as his father and his king.

Eventually Odin actually sat down and Thor’s mouth ran dry. This wasn’t what he had bargained
“I will not let you waste any more of our time than necessary, but I will listen.”

“Father…” Thor stared at him in disbelief, thinking back about his father’s rejection when Thor had first presented Jane. A memory that was made of pain, now that Odin seemed to give Loki’s arrangement even a single thought.

“Sit down, Thor. We will listen and that’s all there’s to it.”

Reluctantly Thor did as he was told and Loki gave the lawyer a little nod. Then they had indeed to listen to the voice of madness.

“The young Lord of Jotunheim and the Duke of Glæsisvellir worked out a list of compromises that will assure that all titles and property will stay in the hands of each family. The fact that the Prince and the Lord are both male plays out to everybody’s advantage. Since there isn’t going to be any offspring with both of them as biological parents there don’t have to be any changes to the law of succession. Nonetheless the Prince and Lord are both agreeing and insisting on including all eventualities in the marriage contract. The Prince’s ranks and titles are going to by inherited by his biological children. His sons are going to be included in the succession of the crown. If the Duke of Bilskimir’s marriage should not bear a son of his own, the first born biological son of the Duke of Glæsisvellir is going to inherit the throne of Asgard. No biological child of Helblindi Ymirson is going to be included in the succession to the crown.”

Everything else would have been insane, so neither Odin nor Thor reacted to it.

“Same rule applies the other way around. The Lordship of Jotunheim is going to be inherited to Helblindi Ymirson’s first born biological child. The Prince’s children have no right to Jotunheim whatsoever.”

“First born child?” Surprise was etching from Odin’s face and the lawyer merely nodded before continuing. “After the wedding the Prince is going to live in Jotunheim with the Lord. All of the children born within this marriage are going to be raised bilingual…”

Thor’s head started to swim after the next points. The list appeared to be endless and it finally dawned on Thor. This wasn’t going to go away. Loki meant this. Both him and Helblindi had put a lot of thought into this and Thor was almost getting nauseous thinking about his nieces and nephews being raised in Jotunheim, under the constant influence of people who had to hate them or who would enjoy to poison their minds. They were never going to be safe there. That was the main thing Thor couldn’t understand. Loki being willing to risk his own life and his children’s.

Finally the reading and explaining of paragraphs came to an end and silence spread among them. Thor had no idea anymore what to say and Odin seemed in a familiar dilemma. The realisation that Loki wasn’t going to turn around and say ‘I will not do it’.

What he said was something else entirely. “Father, I am not asking you to smile and accept this. Not now, not tomorrow. You may have lost faith in my judgement, but I refuse to only see our family history when I look at the Ymirsons. Our people have trouble trusting each other, because they see our families and they see the contempt, leeriness. This country is never going to heal if our families don’t make peace. I want that.”

Odin kept watching Loki and Thor asked himself if he was capable to read his little brother’s face. Thor couldn’t. When Odin spoke again there was nothing left of the anger he had put on display yesterday. His voice was quiet and soft, but what it didn’t lack was seriousness. “I believe that this is what you want, Loki and I can believe that you are able to put all of this history aside to overcome the last 500 years. I believe you can do that. What I want to know is – do you believe that he can do
Loki waited only long enough to not seem overeager. “Yes, I do believe that.”

Thor wished he could have laughed, but the conversation had turned on them.

“My fiancé knows that you will have a hard time accepting him and therefore he had sent me us a gift as a sign of his goodwill. A gift that is overdue.”

Slowly Loki pushed a few sheets across the table. “Those are the names and data of 73 individuals associated with Frjáls who have spent time in prison. Until now the Jotun authorities refused to share this data with us. We might find in there someone involved in the attack on Thor.”

That had to be doubted since Thor should be damned if the entire Ymirson family wasn’t involved. The money had had to come from somewhere.

Odin quickly glanced at the papers, then met Loki’s eyes. “I want to talk to him.”

“What?”

“Call Helblindi Ymirson. Invite him to the court. I want to talk to him personally. I am not saying else at the moment.” Conversation ended. Without further ado Odin stood up and left the conference room.

Thor leaned over, sighing deeply as he buried his face in his hands. “Loki, please… for once. Let us protect you.”

“I will always let you protect me, Thor… but I don’t need to be saved from the person you want to protect me from.”

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This is your last chance, your highness. If I don’t hear from you soon, I have to assume that you forgot about your manners.

Loki rolled his eyes before typing a response. I wasn’t interested in the very predictable but still despicable actions of your government

Why wasn’t Loki surprised that the response came immediately?

That’s what I get for warning you? I feel so disappointed. Anyway, what’s up? I am so bored

Although this would probably end up being an amusing conversation, Loki didn’t have time for this. I am very busy

What I’ve been wondering about – you guys over there in Asgard still haven’t converted to Christianity. Does that mean you don’t have Christmas? If so – my condolences.

Stark wasn’t fooling around, he was most definitely bored. No, we don’t have Christmas. It looks very nice though when I watch it in movies

You should try it some time. You can show up at my place in New York any time you like. Check out the Rockefeller Centre ;)

Fine, now he had Loki laughing. Mr. Stark, I admire your determination, but since I am in a relationship meeting up with you would be rather inappropriate.
Stark’s reaction came pretty quick. Wow, already another one? You’re going through your guys at the speed of light, my friend. I thought we had something special ;)

Chuckling Loki shook his head. I wish you the most pleasant day, Mr. Stark

Easy for you to say after breaking my heart. I am going to cry myself to sleep now

Americans. Always so overdramatic. Loki pushed that thought away and did what he had wanted to do for three days now.

Helblindi was quick to answer his phone and Loki was smiling. “Hey, how are you doing?”

“Amazing.”

“So bad?”

The response was a long sigh. “I am not used to fighting with my father and even less so with my brother. So I am not really feeling too great.”

“I am really sorry, but I think I made some progress here. You’re officially invited to the court. My father wants to talk to you. Which means he is trying to figure you out.”

In response Helblindi hummed. “I can’t believe that I am at the point where going to Valhalla to talk to the king sounds like a friendlier atmosphere than home.”

Gnawing on his bottom lip Loki tried to swallow down every comment he could have made. It just felt wrong. They were in a very familiar situation and Loki had a pretty good idea how lost Helblindi felt that moment. “I am in Valhalla. That should be motivation enough, right?”

He heard him laughing, a little weak but still good enough to cause a little flutter in Loki’s chest. Sometimes he really thought that he was lost. “That sounds indeed rather nice. I think Fenris misses you.”

“Fenris, right. You should bring him along then.”

“Alright. I call the plane then. I’ll see you tonight?”

That was a lot sooner than Loki had expected, but there was no way he was going to complain. “I guess I have to make a few preparations then. See you tonight.”

“Just so you know… Fenris isn’t the only one who misses you.”

Yes, Loki was definitely lost and he didn’t necessarily want to be found.”
Burning eyes

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

An entire chapter from Odin's point of view and Helblindi and Loki are in the same room again :)

Have fun :)

1989 – November

It was very easy to find the little black book on the shelf. Odin didn’t even try to fight down the uneasiness as he picked it up and sat down with it in his favourite chair. The one he liked to read in, in the rare moments when he could get away from real life. Now wasn’t one of these moments.

Slowly Odin opened the book and searched for the entry he had written 28 years ago. November 10\textsuperscript{th} 1989. Even back then Odin had known that the events of this day would have consequences. How right he had been.

November 10\textsuperscript{th} 1989

Tonight I was woken by Heimdall at 1:24. My first thought was that Loki’s colic had come back, but Heimdall instantly reassured me that both boys were fine, fast asleep as they should be. It was a matter of state.

Reports of disturbance of the peace by night all over Valhalla. Unapproved fireworks all over the capital and other major cities. I knew the meaning behind it before Heimdall could explain it to me. I beg all the spirits to forgive me for feeling nothing but dread and even wrath about the birth of a child.

Laufey Ymirson has a son. Born today.

The birth itself is no surprise. Everybody knows about Fárbauti’s pregnancy, but she hasn’t had a public appearance in weeks. Heimdall told me that there hadn’t been a public announcement, no official statement for the press.

Yet all over the country people know what has happened. They’re singing and shouting Frjáls chants, all over Valhalla. Celebrating the birth of their so called future king.

Not a single second of my entire life Frjáls or any radical Jotun has been able to spark fear inside of me. The foul intentions are not new to me or anybody else, but they fail to scare me. Whatever I feel now, I will not call it fear, but something has changed now, knowing about the two little boys sleeping down the corridor.

The nobles of the country haven’t been informed yet. Nor have the news. Yet there are Frjál members in this city who know about the birth of Laufey’s son. Who celebrate it. Who clearly have plans for this child.
I am worried, I cannot deny that. I can see the fireworks from my bedroom window. They are close to home

Lowering the book Odin thought of the colours. Most of it had been gold. As if it had started raining stars in the middle of the night. He also remembered the feeling. Deep concern. Something that changed his life a little bit. The Jotun threat had always lurked in the background. Odin would have liked it to stay there. Forever. No, it had shown its ugly head the day Helblindi had been born. Although Odin hadn’t written it down, he would never forget that he had promised himself to protect his two little boys. Helblindi had been the reason for that and now he was the reason why Odin thought that maybe he had already failed. 28 years later.

Putting the book on the little table next to him Odin got back up and walked back to the shelf. When had been the first time? Odin ran his index finger over the books. 1995. 1996. 1997.

Yes, that sounded about right.

Back in his chair Odin searched for his entries during the summer time. It had been a wedding. The Indulrsons if Odin remembered correctly. The entry was several pages long. Odin had written down conversations with members of the other families. Had described Frigga’s beautiful dress and her smile. The wedding ceremony. Had proudly mentioned how Thor was doing the most wonderful job at one of his first semi-public events. Odin skipped all of that.

Laufey brought his oldest boy. Rather tall for an eight year old. I cannot deny that I felt very curious to see him. I have never seen a child that is such a perfect combination of both of his parents. His face is made of Laufey’s and Fárbauti’s most pleasant features. He has his mother’s eyes, only bluer. Even his black hair seems to shimmer blue whenever the light falls upon it. The boy looks like the content of every old legend. Everything about him is Jotun, it is almost forbidding. So much more than his father or mother. I cannot help but wonder if his ancestors created him this way as a sign. I do not know what for.

Even now as I write down these words and try to recall his face in my mind, I am stunned by this child’s beauty. I suppose as an adult he will be impossible to overlook. If I am honest with myself, he was hard to overlook today. I couldn’t help but notice many of the guests looking at the boy which was clearly Laufey’s intention or he hadn’t brought him along. It was an introduction to most of the noble families.

After dinner Laufey brought him to me and officially introduced his firstborn son. The boy has perfect manners, a straight posture and his words don’t sound like he has learned them by heart. I was surprised by how easily he could talk with adults and nobles, unafraid and without stutter.

He had a certain way of looking at me. Made more intense by his blue eyes. I would have preferred them to be cold, but they were burning. His small body was completely still, without any sign of emotion. I wasn’t fooled to believe that there was a lack of sensation. This boy, the heir to Jotunheim, embodies everything that his father must have wished for. He could not hide his hatred for me. Too much to ask of a small child. Why should he hide it anyway? He is an Ymirson, he is following the family tradition.

Looking at this beautiful child with the burning eyes I know that he is going to cause me misery.

Yes, Odin had known it at their first meeting and now, 20 years later, he turned out to be right. As expected the little boy with the burning eyes had grown up into a gorgeous man who mastered a patronizing grin just as easily as a mask of indifference. That man, next in line of a family that has sworn to bestow despair over them, was supposed to wed his youngest son. Loki was no fool, he knew like everybody else that Helblindi despised the blood that was running in their veins. Feelings
that ran so deep couldn’t be simply overcome. Not even for the good of an entire country. Especially since Jotunheim mattered more to Helblindi than the rest of their nation. Odin didn’t think it impossible that Helblindi might be willing to burn it all down if he thought it would somehow benefit his own people.

What had the spirits whispered into Loki’s ear to even make him consider this? Or should Odin ask which words Helblindi had used. He was without a doubt his father’s son and Laufey knew how to clad poison with sweetness.

Nonetheless Loki was the last person who should fall for this kind of strategy. Odin would have rather thought Thor fall victim to such a scheme. In the end it didn’t matter – Odin had sworn to himself that he would protect his two boys and he would do just that.

He was still holding his old journal when the door was being opened without somebody knocking. Raising his head Odin expected to see Loki, but instead met the eyes of his wife. Or rather a woman who was supposed to be his wife. Right now she had little in common with her. Hardly anything of her usual calm demeanour was visible right now. Gentle smiles replaced by a pained expression and fierce sorrow inside her eyes. She was kneading her fingers, a nervous gesture that Loki had inherited.

“Frigga?”

At first she shook her head and Odin saw her shaking with rage, half expecting tears to appear in her eyes. “How can you do that? You throw him to the wolves. Your own son.”

Her being afraid for Loki was natural, but the state she was in almost had Odin believing that something else had already happened. A concrete threat against Loki’s life.

“I am not doing anything like that. I am merely inviting Helblindi Ymirson to the court. To talk to him about Loki.”

Frigga knew him, she had to know that Odin wasn’t going to let Loki go. Not to Jotunheim where he would be helpless.

“What is there to talk about?” Frigga’s voice sounded suffocated, as if panic and disbelief were still fighting for control. “I will not let my child be sacrificed for a political ploy that’s eventually going to be without consequence. I want you to end this farce instantly.”

“Frigga, it was our son who chose this way and who kept insisting that…”

“Because Loki thinks he has to do this! Since nobody else was doing anything! None of this is fair. Thor gets permission to marry a Midgardian and Loki gets sacrificed?”

“Frigga, please. Listen to me. It was Loki who brought himself into this situation. I am trying to find out how severe it actually is.”

“That is not enough!” Frigga raised her voice and it was trembling. “You have to put an end to this madness. We’re talking about my son’s life.”

As if Odin didn’t know that. As if he had been thinking about anything else during the last two days. “I am not inviting Laufey’s son, because I plan to accept this union. I am going to talk to him and with a bit of luck I can make him reveal his true intentions.”

In pitiful despair Frigga shook her head and clutched her own fingers. “Helblindi Ymirson is the one thing I worry about the least. Loki would not be going to Jotunheim. For the rest of his life. Where
it’s impossible to protect him all the time. At the moment things may have calmed down, but whoever attacked Thor is still out there. Frjáls is still out there… We can’t let this happen. Loki is not going to be sacrificed because he is the second son."

Odin could understand her anguish, he was going through the very same experience, but he could react with panic and trying to blame somebody else. Standing up Odin shook his head. “I know that you fear for him, but what you are saying right now just isn’t true. I have never treated one of my sons unfairly. Yes, I treated them differently, because they have very different characters. Loki is not going to be sacrificed. Not because he is second in line or for any other reason. He is not going to sacrifice his chance to find the person that his ancestors will send him. And most importantly, I will not risk his life. Helblindi Ymirson will arrive in less than two hours. I will talk to him and then I will decide on further actions.”

Frigga was still shaking and Odin waited for her to continue protesting, but it didn’t happen. After a bit of silence Frigga turned around left him alone without another word. Which was good. There wasn’t much time left and he somehow had to prepare himself for the confrontation with Helblindi. A dull feeling spread from the pit of his stomach, reaching out to every single limb.

Laufey’s son wasn’t a child anymore. Far from it. By now he was the grown man that Odin had feared. The man that Odin knew would bring misery and pain over his family. What else to expect from Laufey’s son? A child being born into a certain set of beliefs that was half a century old.

Stalling himself Odin reached for his phone and had himself updated on the preparations for Helblindi’s arrival. Despite Odin’s reluctance to see him, Helblindi was still the son of a Lord and he needed to be greeted with the necessary respect. The car would bring him to the eastern patio and Loki would personally greet him. Odin didn’t like that idea, but he wasn’t going to miss out on the advantages that this setting would offer.

The next hour passed ridiculously fast and Odin was still standing by the window 10 minutes too early. It was an ideal spot to observe the entire patio and Odin could see that everybody was already in place. A few members of the staff and Loki. Odin watched his son who seemed perfectly calm, except that he kept brushing his hair back behind his ears.

Odin’s phone buzzed and the message on the display said ‘Ymirson’s arrival in two minutes’. Seconds were passing so slowly they might have been crawling. Eventually there was the black limousine driving through the gate and coming to a halt. The front passenger door was being opened and a big man with a grim face got out. By the sheer size of him it was easy to tell that he was a bodyguard. This man glanced at Loki before opening another one of the doors.

There were no big surprises as Helblindi Ymirson left the car. He was moving with the same grace that all of the Ymirsons seemed to possess and the picture he presented was already a message being sent. All of this was spontaneous, only half-official and yet Laufey’s son was wearing a dark blue, traditional coat with Jǫtnar runes. He wasn’t here as Loki’s fiancé but as a Jotun representative.

Carefully Odin watched his movements, trying to see the little boy from 20 years ago in this man. Helblindi stepped forward and so did Loki. Instinctively Odin held his breath, almost afraid to miss some detail. The greeting was formal. Taken aback Odin watched how Helblindi slightly bowed his head and asked himself if it was a deliberate move or an honest gesture of respect. Loki’s back was turned to Odin, he couldn’t see his face which was unfortunate. Helblindi walked back to the car, reached inside and when he came back he was carrying a puppy in his arms.

It was then that Odin remembered Loki’s words and they caused a shiver to run down his spine. Loki had said it himself. The future Lord of Jotunheim had made him a gift to show his devotion. Another living, breathing being.
There had been lots of talk about children and heritage, voiced by lawyers. Theoretical and neutral. At this point it hadn’t meant anything. Now Odin could see his son and the heir of Jotunheim petting a small dog which had clearly been his proposal gift. Loki had moved, Odin could now see his profile and therefore his smile. After 28 years Odin knew himself capable of differentiating between all of Loki’s expressions. There were a lot of them and some were masks. This was a genuine smile and it scared Odin.

At this time he had to ask himself if the circumstances even still allowed him to change anything. A question that didn’t need to be asked. Even if it was too late, a father had no choice but to do simply everything to protect his child. Things were that simple. Like a king had to protect his country.

They kept on moving, entering the halls and left Odin’s field of vision. So it was about time.

The first meeting was supposed to take place in one of the salons. Frigga would already be there with them, Thor had excused himself since he had to attend a charity dinner. Probably his oldest son had never been more glad about such an appointment.

Odin took his time, going over all the things that needed to be said and asked. He was determined to drag it all to the surface. One way or another.

When Odin entered the salon he was confronted with an atmosphere that couldn’t be more tensed. A breeze of ice in the air. Frigga was sitting opposite of Loki and Helblindi and this situation had robbed her completely of her calm. At this moment it was hard to picture a smile on her face or to even remember what it had looked like. Her discomfort was clearly rubbing off on Loki. The only person who seemed somewhat at ease was of course the young Ymirson. Loki’s head jerked up as soon as he heard Odin. “Father…”

Odin shortly glanced at Loki before focusing on their guest. “My Lord.”

“Your grace. Thank you for the opportunity of this visit.”

“Thank you for accepting the rather spontaneous visit. Have you already had an aperitif before dinner?”

The answer was no, so they sat back down and had drinks. An awkward situation, but none of them had expected anything else. “I hope you had a pleasant flight, my Lord?”

“Yes, indeed. It passed rather quickly. Thankfully it stopped snowing. Roads all over Jotunheim are a complete chaos.”

It was all small talk and Odin felt strange since he had to be the one to actually keep the conversation going. Frigga was unusually tight-lipped, her eyes darted from their son back to Helblindi and judging by her face Odin would not have been surprised if she had started screaming any second. Which was understandable and still nothing like her at all. Dinner was a chore since there wasn’t anything they could possibly talk about. At least not until Odin had talked with the young Ymirson in private. For now Odin took advantage of the setting and watched his son in the presence of Helblindi Ymirson. Sadly any conclusion Odin could draw from his behaviour was worth nothing. Not in this scenario with both of his parents present and their disapproval all too obvious.

As soon as they were done with dessert, which didn’t taste like anything, Odin focused on the young Lord. There was a certain calmness to him and before even actually talking about anything that mattered, Odin had a feeling that nothing he could say would unsettle him. It was about time.

“I would like to talk to the young Lord in private.”
Loki opened his mouth, clearly to protest, to say that they should have the dreaded talk altogether, but Odin shot him a glance that had the words dying on Loki’s tongue. No discussion about that. Odin wasn’t going to make it easy for Helblindi by having Loki here to back him up.

“Of course.” Helblindi said simply, the hint of a smile playing on his mouth while Loki nervously started nagging on his lower lip.

Odin wanted this conversation to his own conditions, in his office with only the two of them. No distraction that might cause him to miss a lie or a subtle, truthful reaction.

Loki and Frigga were left behind and two minutes later Odin was sitting opposite of Helblindi who was casually holding a glass of scotch in his hand. Not a word had been said yet and Odin was already upset about the fact that he couldn’t tell if this laid-back attitude was merely an act or of Helblindi indeed wasn’t nervous in the least. Both possibilities were absolutely plausible.

“Would it be an affront if I were the one to ask the first question?” Helblindi sounded perfectly polite, but Odin didn’t miss the hint of provocation. Like he would ask the question anyway, no matter if Odin allowed it or not.

“Please, go ahead.”

“I couldn’t help but wonder if this was also the most uncomfortable dinner that you’ve ever been at.”

He was making fun of the situation from the very first second and Odin could see his father in every single gesture and expression. The small but definitely sly grin around his lips and how he wrapped his long, lean fingers loosely around the glass. Yet there were differences. Laufey had never had that casual and relaxed posture. Helblindi was sitting there with his legs crossed, leaned back, seemingly without a care in the world. A position that he hadn’t been in only minutes ago.

“No, I cannot recall a similar situation.”

“I thought so.”

“Nevertheless you seem at ease.”

Helblindi tilted his head, the hint of a grin remaining on his lips. “Do I have a reason to feel worried? In your opinion?”

Odin shook his head. “Not worried, but I am surprised by your calm. The circumstances of your meeting are rather extraordinary.”

“Indeed they are, but there is nothing you could say that I haven’t already heard. I’ve already had this conversation with my father whose opinion I value. None of this…” Helblindi gestured between the two of them. “… really matters to me.”

The sentiment was anything but a surprise and if Odin was completely honest, he wouldn’t have expected Helblindi to feign. This was Laufey’s son, he’d probably prefer torture to having to smile at Odin and to admit that he had any kind of authority over him. That didn’t mean he was going to ignore the young Ymirson’s insolence. “So you do not value my opinion and do not care what I might have to say about your engagement to my son?”

For once he stopped smiling, probably because he didn’t want any misunderstandings or doubts. “No, I don’t.”

It was the only answer that made sense and it couldn’t even make Odin angry. Still, Helblindi’s
casualness was sooner or later going to rub him raw. Despite everything Odin wasn’t going to tolerate any disrespect. “I am your king.”

“Is this how this conversation is going to go down? I refuse to call you my king and you are going to demand that I show you the respect that you deserve and I keep refusing. All of that is beside the point. We’re here because of Loki.”

Helblindi had been acting differently when Laufey had been around. His audacity was nothing new, but he had kept it down with his father around. Odin thought back to the moment he had first seen Helblindi and to Laufey’s firm hand on his small shoulder. The blue, burning eyes that hadn’t changed one bit.

“I don’t believe you’re so naïve to actually assume that this is beside the point. How do you plan on getting my permission if you make clear that you do not care about it? The animosity you feel is mutual and if you are not even trying to hide it for a moment – why should I ever consider giving this engagement my blessing?” Odin studied the other’s face and for now he couldn’t spot anything that might help him to get him. No lead, but they were merely at the beginning.

“You will have to forgive my honesty, but I do not care about your permission or blessing. Personally. I will admit that an endorsement by both families is necessary if our marriage is supposed to have the effect that we want it to have. That is politics though. I am sure Loki explained it all before and by now you must have grasped the meaning of what we’re trying to do. That is all that matters to me. I don’t care about how much disgust you feel at the idea of seeing your son with a descendent of Ymir.”

Did Odin see the meaning of what they were trying to do? Only partly. “To me this sounds like a big betrayal on the people. A marriage between a Búrison and an Ymirson to show everyone that if our families can overcome our differences, the rest of the country can do that too. Except that nobody has overcome any differences. You loathe us.”

Helblindi kept looking at him, completely unashamed. “I do not loathe Loki.”

Odin tried to see something different now. Something in his eyes or in the soft, almost non-existing lines around his eyes. Anything that might indicate that Helblindi was lying. Or a treacherous sign that might reveal how he really thought about Loki. There was nothing though. Only the realisation that Helblindi had his face under absolute control wasn’t going to give anything away.

Then Odin would have to bring up a topic and Helblindi couldn’t react neutrally to. “What does your father think about all of this?”

There it was. Subtle but definitely there. Helblindi Ymirson winced. Then he immediately raised his chin a little bit as to cover it up. “My father’s thoughts on this don’t concern you.”

“I assume he reacted harshly since you were so quick to flee from your home at the very first opportunity.”

Now the grin was a relic of the past, Helblindi’s face darkened. “I know that assumptions about my family come to you naturally, but they don’t mean anything. Whatever my father feels or thinks is none of your concern.”

“You are right. My only concern is my son. There is only one question that I absolutely need to ask you. Why? Why would you agree to marry my son who is a member of the family that you despise?”

Trying not to miss the slightest reaction on Helblindi’s face Odin studied his beautiful features, but
they didn’t offer him anything. Nothing.

“I will tell you what I told him. I was born to serve my people. Jotunheim is what comes first for me and everything I do is in Jotunheim’s favour. So is this marriage. The last couple of weeks were not only a hardship on Valhalla. I do not enjoy seeing my people enraged or desperate. It fills me with pain to hear them chanting and to have to tell families to keep their children off the streets, because they are not safe. Riots. Burning houses. The feeling and knowledge of being second-class. I am going to end that. No Jotun child should ever again have to ask themselves if their life would be better or easier if they were born in Valhalla. That is why.”

The word Frostgiant suddenly seemed so perfectly fitting and unforgivably wrong at the same time. A contradiction that should not be possible. His exterior was indeed cold, resembling ice. Like nothing could ever faze him or make him move. Except for his eyes. They were blue fire. Burning with an unforgiving intensity. Odin could feel it slipping out of the other man. A fire that should devour Odin alive and Helblindi would laugh.

“You did not answer my question. What is a union with my son going to change? A sign of reconciliation is after all just a sign. You talk about peace and your words may sound idealistic, but I know the man who raised you. Who taught you everything you know. I do not doubt that you want the very best for Jotunheim, but there is more to it. Marrying Loki is not going to change any laws, it is not going to give you the dominance over Asgard and it is not going to make you king.”

The last word didn’t make him flinch, it didn’t make him smile. Helblindi’s lips curled lightly, but that was about it. “I am not surprised that you assume the worst of me.”

“I am not assuming the worst. I am questioning your motives. I know that you are smart, Helblindi Ymirson. Definitely not naïve. I know that you are willing to go against your father. I also know the people you surround yourself with. They don’t want the peaceful coexistence that you are talking about. They have other plans for this country and for you.”

Finally Helblindi started to show a little bit of himself, even if it was just the usual contempt. Once more he was tilting his chin up. “Do not let yourself be fooled. You know nothing about me. I do not care about anybody else’s plans. Only about my own.”

“Those would be?”

“I have already told you.”

“I will not be fooled. I will not allow you to become a threat to the country I am bound to protect. I will not let you put my son in danger.”

There. A twitch in his fingers, so easy to miss. At least Odin could tell now that he had angered him.

“I am a devout man, I respect every word that has been written down in the trúa. My spouse would have my complete devotion and trust. We have come to an agreement. Loki would not be put in any kind of danger. About the country that you are bound to protect… for the last 500 years your family has only one big part of the country. The one that isn’t called Jotunheim. Finally there is member of your forsaken family who cares, who wants to change things. That’s what I want from this union.”

Parts of it were the truth, Odin was sure of that. Therefore he would be gracious and also give Helblindi the truth. “There is no way I am ever going to let my son go with you. To a place where he is surrounded by enemies who would not hesitate to hurt him… only because he carries a certain name.”
What happened then left Odin speechless. Helblindi laughed. It was a short, amused but ultimately joyless sound. “Once more I am not surprised that you do not know what you are talking about. As if Jotunheim was a pit of snakes waiting to devour him. Has it ever occurred to you that the only person taking a severe risk is me? You are proof yourself that not everybody is going to understand what we are trying to do. There are going to be people who will call me a traitor. Who are going to feel betrayed by me. When I would never do anything like that.”

Helblindi put his hand flat on the table and in a somewhat unnatural movement he stretched out his arm and Odin got to see the reason why. The sleeve of his jacket slipped back a little bit and Odin could see dark lines around his wrist. Within seconds the blood in his veins turned to ice. It shouldn’t come unexpected. Who else but the child with the burning eyes from 20 years ago would bring this tradition back to life? A tradition that had nothing to do with reconciliation or peace.

And Helblindi wanted him to see it.

No, Odin wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Not even for a single moment. His eyes had already betrayed him though, Helblindi knew that he had seen it. Looking back up Odin saw that empty face. “Despite your doubts I know more about you than you might think. You excelled at every class you have ever taken without getting special treatment. You have diplomats out of three different countries eating out of your hand without ever giving them what you promised. I know that you turned 28 years old last month and Frjáls members all over the nation drank to your health.”

“Is there a question hidden in this speech?”

“If you were to marry my son, would you accept your brother-in-law as your king?”

Helblindi was as flat as his voice. “Never.”

Odin asked a question that he already knew the answer to, but it was necessary. Since he had to tell Loki about it. “If not my firstborn son, the crown prince, who is the legitimate heir to the throne?”

“Me.”
Hey there,

Well, first I was on holiday, then this chapter was a bitch to write and then it's also holiday season and I still need to get a load of presents, so this kinda took a while. I know, I am sorry.

Have fun :)

The silence was heavy, but it still seemed preferable to the any kind of conversation with Helblindi. Odin watched him without voicing another word. Even now, after putting all of his insolence on display without even realising that he was out of line. None of them could see it.

For a moment Odin pushed all of that aside. Naturally Helblindi saw himself as the rightful heir, every single firstborn Ymirson had done that. Him saying it out loudly was no surprise either. Merely his ease and how effortlessly he was looking straight into Odin’s eyes was astounding. Odin tried to ignore all of that and to only see the man in front of him. What would he think if he didn’t know anything about Helblindi? How would Helblindi talk to him if they were just anybody?

Laufey’s son wasn’t able to hide in a crowd. Put him in a line of people and all eyes would eventually be drawn to him. That might be superficial, but his physique was Helblindi’s defining feature. If you didn’t know him. This young man was beautiful and Odin thought of his own son during the dinner only half an hour ago. He should have paid more attention to Loki. There had been that smile though. During Helblindi’s arrival.

In the end Odin was painfully aware of his limited power in this situation. Once more it came down to Loki and to how much power the young Ymirson had gained over him.

“Are you sleeping with my son?”

Helblindi arched an eyebrow, finally a question that he hadn’t expected. At least not like that. Not a question that Odin wanted to ask, nothing he wanted to think about. The idea of his own flesh and blood being intimate with an Ymirson was a concept that had nothing to do with reality. Something that didn’t make sense and felt wrong. Almost like betrayal.

Then there was a completely other side to this coin. The much simpler one. Loki was young, passionate and Helblindi was beautiful, definitely charming if he wanted to. It was everything but unlikely. Which would complicate matters severely. The marriage only as a political union was a mad idea, adding personal sentiment only made it an even more explosive mixture. It would put Loki in such a vulnerable position and Helblindi was smart enough to take advantage of that.

Normally Odin wouldn’t put it past Loki to be the manipulating party, but with Helblindi Ymirson in the equation that was suddenly hard to believe. What was there left for him to do except for praying to his ancestors that this relationship was merely a means to an end. For both of them. Every other possibility seemed too far detached from reality.
Helblindi easily met his eyes. “I am not going to discuss any private details of our relationship with anybody else than Loki.”

It was the clearest ‘yes’ that Odin could get from him and a hard punch in the stomach. This sentiment was so entirely new to him. Worrying about Loki in this way. Not once in his life had Odin wasted a thought on the possibility that his youngest son might fall to someone else’s emotional manipulation. Loki harboured too much distrust and there was his habit of assuming the worst in people.

This situation now was nothing either of them was prepared for.

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Loki was into his third glass of wine although it didn’t make anything better. His thoughts should probably be with Helblindi and the most uncomfortable conversation he was ever going to have, but his mother wasn’t making it easy for him. By now his patience was running dangerously thin and he had given up on trying to understand what his mother was going through. His mother who was always calm and collected and had completely lost all of these qualities the moment Loki had announced his engagement. There had been a faint hope that with Helblindi’s presence she would be reassured.

None of that had happened.

Helblindi had left the room and Frigga had pleaded with Loki. Once more. He had no idea what he was doing, what he was getting himself into. Danger would be all around him. Loki was sick of hearing that. Although he could sense the sincerity in his mother’s words and her fear, he felt nothing but annoyance. What he wasn’t sick of was Helblindi though. Another vivid reminder of how far Loki had gone down the rabbit hole.

The last couple of days hadn’t been painful withdrawal, Loki hadn’t turned into the main participant of a romance novel. No, he hadn’t been lying awake in his bed, thinking about the other man, wishing he was here. Had he missed him? Definitely, but not in a way that was unknown to Loki. Nothing that would ever change him as a person or how he looked at the world. Seeing him again was something else entirely though.

Everything had changed the second Helblindi had stepped out of that car. Looking as beautiful as ever and Loki had been hit with an unknown force. Sheer happiness to see him. Without any conditions or a single thought wasted on the circumstances of their meeting. All of it wiped away. There was only that untamed and raw urge to wrap himself around that man. An intensity that was so fierce and new that it almost scared Loki. If he had bothered to actually think about it which didn’t happen.

He was too busy cursing etiquette and protocol for keeping him from doing what he wanted. First there was only the joy to see him again, Loki was drinking in the sight of him. Ignoring the itch in his fingers to touch him, to tangle his fingers in his hair and to do so many more things that weren’t appropriate.

Seconds later there was the bite of doubt. The gnawing sensation of a very simple question. Did Helblindi have any kind of idea what was going on in Loki’s head? Was he experiencing the same? Loki wanted him to, desperately. And Loki wanted him, in the simplest way there was. Lusting after someone wasn’t a new concept, but Loki had never gone through it with such ferocity. Standing next to him without touching him was similar to an ache spreading all over his body.

Those were the things Loki concerned himself with. Not his mother’s empty but clearly desperate
When the doors were being opened Loki looked up only to see a member of the staff who informed him that his father wanted to talk to him. On the short way to his father’s office Loki tried to ignore his racing heartbeat. The fact that Helblindi wasn’t in the office didn’t help one bit. “Where is my fiancé?”

“After we’ve finished our conversation I sent him to get comfortable in his room.”

Loki bit his lip to not tell his father that Helblindi would stay with him. They were engaged and even if they weren’t, they would share a room. That couldn’t be Loki’s priority right now. “What did you learn from him?”

“Why don’t you sit down before we talk?”

The calmness portrayed by his father did nothing to put Loki’s mind at ease, he was merely waiting for lightning and thunder. It almost seemed impossible that Helblindi and Odin would have found anything they agreed on. Slowly Loki slid down on the chair opposite of his father. “I am listening.”

Odin looked past him, eyes captured by something that wasn’t there or at least something that Loki couldn’t see. “He is an extraordinary young man.”

A horrible neutral statement. When it could mean that Helblindi was rotten to the core or person with endless sympathy and grace. Loki decided to reply in the same way. “I know.”

“What do you really know about him? The first time you’ve met him you were still a child. How often have you seen him since? Once every three years? Your first real interactions with him have only started happening during this year. What have you learned from him? About his dreams and ideals? Fears and doubts? How he imagines a perfect day and what might stop him from catching sleep tonight? Or how far he would go to achieve something that he wants?”

Loki couldn’t deny a bit of confusion, the last thing he had expected were questions. Questions on a personal level. To be honest, he had been prepared for a fiery speech from his father. Which hadn’t come. Instead they were talking about the personal aspects of the engagement. “I know his dreams and ideals very well. So do you.”

“Exactly. Which is why I am worried. No matter how hard I try I cannot read in his eyes, I have no idea what is going on in his head. What I do know is that it is the very same for you. Despite all that you might have discussed, all that he might have said and all that you have agreed on… in reality you do not know what he is thinking about all of this. Or what he is planning.”

None of it sounded like a reproach. Instead Odin was rather gentle, counting down facts and Loki knew better to deny or to pretend that he could read Helblindi like a book. Nonetheless, there were a few details that he couldn’t leave unmentioned. “I may not know what he thinks, but I know what is most important to him. I understand your distrust, but the love for his country almost makes him predictable.”

“I disagree. It makes him dangerous. Despite all your fierceness you have your boundaries, you have always had them. I don’t know if he has any. Last night I wrote to our ancestors, I asked them for advice and to look out for you. I know that this man is going to bring only misery and pain upon you. What do you expect me to do, Loki? I know his father. He is an Ymirson. You are asking me to allow you risking your life. Which is something I can never do. But I also know that it’s impossible to lock you in. All I can do is plead you to be reasonable. Go, take a look at the man you brought here. Look past his blue eyes and try to see what is behind them. Only then decide if what you are
trying to do is really the best for the country and for yourself. You want the very best for Asgard, but you need to look at him and ask yourself if he wants the same thing.”

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Loki wasn’t a big fan of whiskey, but he couldn’t deny that the taste helped him to calm down. Even if it was only a little. Oddly enough he had felt better before the talk with his father. Before this dose of reality that he definitely hadn’t wanted.

Take a look at him and try to figure him out. Easier said than done. Especially at this point when Loki couldn’t deny that this was more than a clever ploy. Only two minutes ago he had told a staff member to bring Helblindi to his rooms and he couldn’t wait for him to be here. There wasn’t enough denial in the entire world to pretend that this had anything to do with the political implications. Yes, Loki was playing a dangerous game, but how was he supposed to care when it filled every fibre of his body with tingles. Could he even be afraid of something that excited him and made him feel the intensity of every moment? Something that wasn’t banal or by the numbers.

And yet…

Where were the limits? How good could anyone get to know another person? At least Loki knew himself and how fiercely he wished for a life that he could live according to the trúa. To have somebody next to him that he could cherish and trust completely. By now Loki also knew who he wanted that person to be and more importantly he wanted the other person to have exactly the same thoughts.

There was a knock on the door and Loki released a shaky breath. He couldn’t ignore what his father had said and he wasn’t going to. After putting down his glass Loki walked up to the door and then called out to give the people on the other side permission to enter. The staff member opened the door for Helblindi who said a few words of thanks before entering Loki’s salon. He looked like the opposite of how Loki felt right now. Calm, collected and completely at ease. A spark of want turned into a bursting flame. Something too potent to control and why would anybody want to do that? The door was being closed, they were alone and Helblindi made a soft sound of surprise when Loki pressed their lips together. It was greedy, messy and so overdue. Helblindi had only started to kiss him back when Loki pushed him up against the wall, hands sliding down his sides. Time to talk or to think would be later. Trailing his lips down Helblindi’s neck Loki pulled that unnecessary shirt from the black pants before starting to work on the buttons. Another beautiful, still astonished sound passed Helblindi’s lips before Loki could feel his hands on him. They kissed again, almost biting each other and Loki pressed him harder against the wall, lining their bodies up perfectly.

Helblindi’s beard slightly scratched him, every now and then Loki could feel his teeth grazing over his button lip. All of that combined with the taste and feeling of Helblindi’s skin had liquid heat running through Loki’s veins.

Not letting go off each other they stumbled towards Loki’s bedroom, swiping something off the table as they passed by without giving a single care in the world. Finally Loki got to push him down on his bed, right where he wanted him. Helblindi’s fingers ran through his hair, tugging at it which had Loki grin against his lips. There was a sound of clothes tearing, but Loki only marginally registered that. The only objective he had at the moment was to lay bare that gorgeous body. To touch him and to get as close as possible until they couldn’t tell where whose limps began and where they ended. It was like intoxication, only much sweeter.

When they eventually lay next to each other, breathing hard Loki enjoyed the heat slowly leaving his body. Even more so he relished the feeling of Helblindi’s breath ghosting over his shoulder and his hand on his stomach. Humming softly Loki reached out to once more run his fingers through
Helblindi’s hair. It was just long enough to do that.

“So… how was your day?”

Helblindi’s eyes darted up to him before he squinted slightly only to finally break out into loud laughter. An honest and real sound that pleased Loki. It took a couple of seconds before Helblindi had calmed down enough to verbalize any thought. “About one of the worst days I’ve ever had… excluded the last 20 minutes of course.” To underline this point Helblindi pressed an open-mouthed kiss onto Loki’s shoulder. “Your father must have already told you that we’re now best friends.”

“That’s an understatement…” Loki sighed. “He doesn’t trust you. It would be too much to ask to demand him to do so, but… he knows that he can’t really stop us from getting married.”

“I know, but we’ve already discussed that a marriage doesn’t mean anything if the public realises that our families are dying inside while watching us… Then again, I guess I didn’t do much to improve the situation when I talked to your father.”

Loki shifted onto his side, so they were lying face to face. “What did you say?”

“He asked questions and I answered honestly.”

“I told you to be nice… despite being honest. So what did he ask you?”

“Who is the legitimate crown prince.” Helblindi’s voice was as even as ever and Loki exhaled loudly. It wasn’t exactly surprising. Odin definitely wouldn’t shy away from the most important questions. “So what did you answer?”

“I told the truth.”

No need to ask further, Loki was well aware of Helblindi’s opinion. Fortunately there were other facts to consider. “I told him that Jotunheim’s wellbeing is more important to you than any history concerning our families.”

“Right and therefore I am immensely worried about your brother becoming king.”

Those were the words that Loki didn’t want to hear, but since he was already well aware of Helblindi’s opinion, he wasn’t going to start a fight. Letting it go completely wasn’t an option either. “You’re unfair. You’re not even willing to give him a chance or to get to know him.”

“I don’t feel any desire to get to know somebody who calls my brother a Frostgiant.”

“Is that how you’re going to do things? Judging people by one single mistake that they made without looking at the bigger picture?”

“There are some mistakes that cannot be forgiven.”

“I don’t think that this is the case here.”

“It is my decision if I am going to forgive something or not. As it was his choice to say it. I have my reasons to be worried about him.” Helblindi’s features relaxed a little bit before he reached out, trailing the tips of his fingers along Loki’s cheek. His touch was like electricity and Loki leaned into it. “I would not be worried about you as king. You would know what you are doing.”

Loki felt a sting inside of his chest which didn’t diminish the sparks caused by Helblindi’s fingers. “Do not even start.”
“Why not?”

“Because I am not having this conversation. There are more than enough things that need our attention. Like how are we going to get our parents to publicly embrace our relationship. Go on, I am ready to listen to some useful suggestions.”

Helblindi shot him a smile and then shrugged. “I did my very best at being polite. I don’t see much more that I could have done.”

It was a joke in a ridiculously serious situation and Loki didn’t really mind. After all it was the first time that Loki laughed today.

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Loki couldn’t remember his dream nor why he had woken up. All he knew was that he immediately wanted to fall asleep again and therefore rolled over. To find out that the side next to him was empty.

“Helblindi?” Loki called his name into the emptiness of the room without getting a response. The first thought that came to his mind was Helblindi walking alone through the palace and that was anything but a nice idea. Then again, it was rather unlikely. Sighing softly Loki pushed back the blanket and stood up, leaving the bedroom. His fiancé was easier to find than he had expected. In the salon, sitting with his legs pulled up on the window sill. Something in his gaze had Loki stopping before walking further into the room. Helblindi was looking out the window, the expression on his face made clear that his mind was miles away, only his body was present.

For a reason that Loki couldn’t name he felt his chest tightening. He tried to make out something familiar on Helblindi’s beautiful face. The fire burning in his eyes or the mischievous smirk playing around his lips. None of that was present. Instead Helblindi seemed to be wearing an emotion that Loki had never before seen on him. Helblindi looked sad.

Standing there Loki was suddenly at loss. What was he supposed to do or to make of this? Sadness or chagrin was something that Loki didn’t associate with Helblindi. Least of all now. It was a sentiment that Loki didn’t want anywhere near him.

Stalling himself for something that probably wasn’t going to be pleasant Loki walked over to his fiancé. “Hey… is my bed not comfortable enough for you?”

Loki tried a smile, but he hadn’t expected Helblindi to slightly wince. Hadn’t he heard him coming? The left corner of Helblindi’s mouth twitched, almost as if he tried to smile but failed miserably. “Hey… I woke up and… I couldn’t stay in bed anymore. Go back to sleep.”

“Not without you. Or would you rather talk about something?” Slowly Loki sat down next to Helblindi who huffed softly. “I think there has been enough talking for today.”

His voice was different. It wasn’t shaking, but it lacked its usual playfulness. “Don’t you think it’s about time to start telling me what’s on your mind? Because I should be the one you are talking to. Sure, I don’t know everything about you, but I definitely know that something is wrong when you slip out of bed and stare out of the window. And you have that look upon your face. One that I don’t know either. But I do know that something is wrong. I guess it has been wrong the entire time, but you only started realising that when it became silent around you.”

Helblindi turned his head away, leaning the side of it against the window. “I hate it when people don’t live up to my expectations. Or if they don’t react like I expect them to.”

“Okay. Who are you talking about?”
“First of all you. Your father…” Helblindi’s voice had already been quiet, but now it had dropped to a whisper. “… my father.”

Loki let a second pass, just to study the other’s reaction. It dawned on him that Helblindi hadn’t exaggerated when he had told him that his last days had been awful. Perhaps even worse than for Loki. Odin had asked him what he really knew about Helblindi, if he had any idea about what was going on behind those beautiful eyes. Loki knew that Helblindi could hide things from him if he wanted to, but he also knew that this right here wasn’t Helblindi controlling the situation. Helblindi wasn’t controlling anything right now, he was far away from it, once more staring out of the window.

“What happened with your father?” Loki mumbled gently and Helblindi visibly chewed on the inside of his cheek. “I’ve already told you that he wasn’t pleased about our engagement.”

“I know, but… what actually happened?” Reaching out Loki grabbed his hand, but Helblindi didn’t squeeze back. “What was to be expected… only a lot worse. Worse in a way that…” Helblindi stopped, Loki could see his teeth grazing over the inside of his lower lip. It was so strange to see him not completely composed, unsettling even and yet Loki couldn’t deny that he also wanted this. Seeing all these different sides that Helblindi would like to hide away.

“What?”

Loki tried to capture Helblindi’s eyes, but they wouldn’t leave the window. “My father is a great man and there is no person in the world that I respect or admire more. He shaped my soul and made me who I am. Who taught me to believe in myself and who always valued everything I had to say. Who told me how important I am and who was proud of me. My father carries the responsibility for all of Jotunheim and for me there has never been anything more important than having his trust. Till yesterday I was sure that I had it. Until I mentioned you and our engagement. The look on his face… I knew that look and it has nothing to do with me. He looked at me like…” Helblindi took a breath and shook his head. “The look he gets when he talks about your family and that has nothing to do with me. I am his son, I would never dishonour him… but he didn’t listen to me. I didn’t get to say word. He yelled at me and my father doesn’t yell. For him that’s a sign of weakness. I had lost my mind. Our ancestors must have stopped watching over me. When I started protesting… he hit me. He only did one single time during my whole life when I was 15. My father slapped me across the face like a disobedient child and looked at me like…”

Unwilling or unable to finish his story Helblindi pulled his hand out of Loki’s grip and ran it down his face. “Let’s just say I was more than glad to leave Jotunheim and to come here… which is insanity.”

For the Jotun prince it had to be. Madness. A little unsure Loki shifted closer and slid his arm around Helblindi’s waist. “I am sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. I… I’ve been at odds with my father before, but not like this.”

When Helblindi didn’t resist his embrace Loki pulled him closer, resting his chin on his shoulder. “I will talk to your father. I know there is a good chance that he will never accept this, because of my family line. Nonetheless I could try to make him understand that ultimately we have the same goal. I want the best for the country. That includes Jotunheim.”

Loki more felt than heard Helblindi laughed. It didn’t sound happy. “I sincerely doubt that you and my father have the same goals. You probably couldn’t be further apart.”

A simple piece of honesty that shouldn’t surprise Loki and it didn’t really. Nonetheless he could feel
it cutting into his bones and there was the bitter question how similar Helblindi was to his father. Same blood, same ancestors, one being responsible for the education of the other one. Loki felt deep affection and want for the man who had come from it. “Alright, but then I’ll have to convince him and… it’s not just that. Besides all politics, I could tell him that I believe I am capable of making his son’s life rather pleasant and enjoyable. Although my father believes that you will only bring me pain and misery.”

“A little advice…” Helblindi sighed, raising his head and Loki was so helpless confronted with those eyes. “If you are trying to cheer somebody up, don’t end your story with the words ‘misery’ and ‘pain’."

“Okay, I am going to use different ones then.” Loki smiled, leaning in closer to brush his lips over Helblindi’s cheek. “We are not with our back up against the wall. Nothing has been made public. We don’t have to marry. The two of us know that we could work together regardless.”

After frowning softly Helblindi finally smiled and it was small but real. “Except that I proposed to you and that I just told you something that… I don’t have a best friend. I share what’s on my mind with my brother. Yesterday he looked at me the same way like my father. So here I am, talking to you. Despite the risk of shifting the power balance in this relationship… I kind of want to get married.”

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I write to you in a situation of great urgency. The most precious asset of our home is surrounded by enemies and although nobody among us has the right doubt his judgement or abilities, it is still our duty to always watch over him and protect him.

Therefore I need you to provide a certain number of items to ensure his safety. The list will be brought to you by a person of our mutual trust and I count on you to take care of it in absolute secrecy and at an instant.

For the Jotun King and every single one of us

Frjáls
Jealousy wasn’t an unfamiliar sentiment. Even less so when Loki was involved. Thor remembered vividly when his little brother had had his first girlfriend. Before Thor himself. Those had been some rough couple of days. Or the ease with which Loki had mastered all his academic courses. Despite envying Loki in these kinds of situations, it would be exaggerated to call it a searing or intense sensation. They were siblings, it was a natural form of rivalry. Nothing more and nothing less.

Thor had never felt like he needed to fight somebody for Loki’s attention. Had never felt like there was someone who could catch Loki’s interest in a way that would make Thor feel like he was taking the backseat.

None of them had a best friend, Loki was the person Thor had always confided in and the other way around. A simple fact that hadn’t changed when both of them had been in a relationship. It would always be like that, Thor had taken that for granted. Why not? They loved each other, trusted each other and Thor knew that they were both willing to walk over broken glass for each other. Although Thor knew that Loki couldn’t be underestimated, in no area of life, he still felt the urge to protect him. As his brother and his future king.

Thor was seething with jealousy as he looked out the window and watched the two men wandering around the park. Loki was laughing about something and Thor’s fist got a little tighter. He wanted to turn away, to do something else to rid himself of this unpleasant feeling, but Thor was rooted to this exact spot. Almost afraid to look away. Loki was anything but helpless or easy to push around, but Thor was afraid for him. How couldn’t he be?

Helblindi’s hand was resting on the small of Loki’s back and it stayed there until they continued walking, away from the palace and further into the garden. Taking a deep breath Thor reached for his phone. He couldn’t just sit here and wait the entire time. One had to fight fire with fire. Thor sent Loki a message although he could have easily called him, but he wanted to delay an actual conversation as long as possible. Until Thor knew which words to say. The ones which could make Loki understand him without driving him away. It should be so much easier, like it had been not so long ago. Something had changed along the way and Thor couldn’t tell if it had been him or Loki. Both of them?

Loki had kept things from him, from the entire family and since then Thor was always looking for ulterior motives. Reasons for Loki’s actions that he maybe wasn’t willing to share with them. That probably wasn’t fair. All of that would be so much easier to deal with if Helblindi wasn’t part of the equation.

Thor’s eyes still followed them and he couldn’t deny the desire to understand what was going on. What was going on in the young Ymirson’s head or in Loki’s? His chest was uncomfortably
tightening when Thor saw someone else but them in the garden. The giant of a man who called himself Helblindi’s bodyguard. The kind of person who made Thor’s skin crawl. He was used to security personal being stoic and tight-lipped, but there was something in the other man’s gaze. Beneath the surface, something menacing. As if he was willing to stab anybody who was looking at Helblindi slightly too long. A dry laugh escaped Thor’s lips. What misfortune or danger could possibly cross Helblindi’s way here? What need was there to protect him? The only person who was running an actual risk was Loki. Who was going to protect him in Jotunheim? Even if him and Helblindi had formed some kind of alliance, there were so many other factors that could endanger Loki. An entire province full of Frjál and other people who felt nothing but contempt for his brother.

“Thor? We should slowly get ready for breakfast.” Jane put her arms around his waist, resting her forehead against his shoulder. It was an obvious reminder of much taller he was than her and it made Thor smile for a short moment.

“I fear we’re going to postpone it for another hour. I invited my brother and his fiancé.”

He could feel Jane tensing slightly. “That’s going to be a very pleasant and enjoyable breakfast then.”

“Anything but… I feel like I have to talk to both of them. Without mother or father. Perhaps I can get a more… I don’t know what kind of reaction I want. I want to see them together and at the same time I don’t. I need to figure out what is going on between them.” Thor tried to make them out again between the trees and bushes, but they had disappeared and the fact that he couldn’t see Loki anymore made him anxious.

“What is going between them?” With clear confusion Jane repeated Thor’s words. “Do you believe that there is more between them then an alliance of convenience?”

Thinking about it the very first time Thor would have thought it impossible, but after playing the thought things appeared to him in a different light. “You have seen Helblindi…”

Jane hummed in agreement. “I doubt that your brother is so superficial that he would be with someone for their good looks.”

“No, but I am sure that somebody like Helblindi knows to use everything to his advantage.”

Loki eventually responded to his message and agreed to join him and Jane for breakfast. Nobody thought that this was going to be nice experience for anyone. Well, who know? Helblindi could be wicked enough to find some fun in it. At least Thor was trying to show some goodwill, even if it was only to create an atmosphere in which he could talk to Loki. And he wanted to see Helblindi acting around him.

At least they were on time. As they entered the room Thor wished that he could stop time, just for a second. To look at them as someone else, to see them through someone else’s eyes. They were easy to look at. Thor could admit that they were beautiful. Alone and next to each other. Even as a couple since their forms were similar. Both of them were tall and lean, Helblindi a little more so than Loki. Physically they matched and it made Thor furious.

“Good morning.” Loki opened the situation with a smile and Thor couldn’t immediately sabotage it. Thankfully there was Jane who was naturally sweet and didn’t feel the weight of their history on her shoulders. She instantly stepped forward, wearing a smile on her lips. “Good morning. It’s so nice that you join us.”

She kissed Loki on the cheek and then turned to Helblindi who already seemed slightly amused by
the entire situation. “My Lord, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

Helblindi respected the etiquette and bowed his head. “Miss Foster, the pleasure is all mine. You look radiant.”

Jane continued to smile and Thor swore he could see the faintest blush on her cheeks. Thor really didn’t like that, but there was no time to think about it. Helblindi had turned to him and he was still smiling. It looked perfectly real which meant that it was anything but. “Your highness.”

“My Lord.”

This was going to be painful. Probably because he was sensing the very same thing Loki took another step forward and his fingers curled around Helblindi’s lower arm. It was a gentle gesture and Thor wanted to shake him. Then Loki said something, merely a whisper and nobody understood it, because it was Jǫtnar. Instantly Thor felt the heat rising inside of him.

How he was doing it on purpose. Building up walls and locking Thor out.

Helblindi turned his head, Loki and him were looking at each other and there was an entire conversation without words. Thor pressed his short fingernails against his own skin until it hurt. The Jötun responded in the same foreign language and Thor’s anger turned into sadness. He didn’t have the power to yell even if he wanted to. So he just searched Loki’s gaze and asked him to stop with a single word. “Loki, please.”

His brother’s eyes were suddenly on him and Thor could see that Loki was feeling bad, that he had realised what he had been doing. Nodding softly Loki cleared his throat. “We should sit down, I am starving.”

Jane’s presence during this breakfast was a blessing. Without her they would have had trouble to get any conversation going. But Jane was here and asked the most normal things, seeing no reason why she should act any different. Had Helblindi had a pleasant flight? How long was he going to stay in Valhalla?

“As long as necessary to clear the technicalities of our engagement. I have obligations in Jötunheim, but I will admit that I was looking forward to this visit.”

Thor saw his fingertips brushing over Loki’s wrist and that was all he needed to see. They had a physical relationship. For how long? By now everybody knew that they had conspiring together. Had they been sleeping with each other for the entire time? Had Loki really fallen for the oldest trick in the world? Yes, Helblindi’s appeal was undeniable and Thor could see a lot of people wanting to go for it despite the obvious risk. Loki wasn’t like most people… but so was Helblindi.

“Since we are already discussing the engagement…” Thor was trying to keep his voice even, he wasn’t going to give Helblindi any reason to turn this against him. To instantly take control over the conversation and to decide where to go with it. “It was you who proposed to my brother. Without the two of you ever dating. Which of course is not necessary for a politically motivated wedding. Therefore I am rather confused why you are exchanging endearments?”

Thor wasn’t confused. He knew what was going on, but he still wanted somebody to prove him wrong. To tell him that Loki could still be saved. It was hard enough to try to analyse both of their reactions at the same time. Helblindi’s lips twitched. As if he was trying not to smile. The situation was amusing him and he saw no necessity to hide it. Not in front of Thor whom he clearly didn’t consider a threat or even a worthy opponent. “Do the circumstances of our engagement imply that I cannot appreciate your brother? He is smart and beautiful. I enjoy his presence. Does the art of our
engagement forbid me to show him my affection?"

It took a lot of effort to keep his face without expression, to not wear on the outside how he was feeling. To not unleash the storm inside his chest on the man in front of him. Nobody knew more about Loki’s fantastic character than Thor. Nobody but Thor knew better that Loki deserved to be adored and complimented. Helblindi was lying though. The blood running through his veins and his education prevented him from doing so. It didn’t matter that his description of Loki was correct, it came from a man who couldn’t be serious about it. The boldness and easiness with which Helblindi voiced his lies was still astounding Thor though. Truth to be told, it filled him with discomfort and a bit of fear to hear how easily Helblindi was able to say these kinds of things. Words that should never come over an Ymirson’s lips. Helblindi should prefer being flayed alive to complimenting a member of the Búrison family. That had kept all of them safe for centuries. Contempt that ran so deeply that they couldn’t even feign sympathy for a malicious plan or a ploy. Except that now, after so many years, one of the Ymirsons seemed be able to do just that. A shudder was running down Thor’s spin and it left him feeling cold.

Helblindi’s face though wasn’t the one Thor needed to see, not the one he needed to analyse. Therefore his eyes travelled to look at his little brother’s face. Loki liked to flatter himself with his self-control and how nothing could faze him. That definitely wasn’t the case right now.

Loki’s mouth was forming half a smile that he couldn’t hold back and the softness in his eyes was there for everybody to see. Right out there in the open, Loki made himself an easy victim. A prey that Helblindi had already thrust his claws in, but instead of tearing it apart, he would play with it some first.

At least that was his plan, but Thor wouldn’t let that happen. It was his duty as Loki’s brother to look out for him. To keep him safe.

For now the conversation continued and Thor knew better than to go for a direct confrontation, he had learned the hard way that Helblindi liked to drive in the nails with a smile on his lips.

The only time Thor felt comfortable during this breakfast was then Jane came to his aid another time without even realising it. “What are the two of you going to do with this lovely day?”

“Another walk in the park probably. This time with Fenris.”

“Fenris?”

“Who is Fenris?”

“Our dog. The engagement gift.”

Jane frowned and shot them all a questioning glance and Thor explained evenly. “It’s a tradition as old as Asgard. Whenever a same-sex couple decides to get married, the one proposing gifts an animal to the other one. The idea is that since they cannot have children, they have another living, breathing being to take care of together. Like a family, since that is what they become through marriage.”

“That is actually very cute. Can I see the little guy?”

“Sure.”

Thor jumped at the chance. “Why don’t the two of you go ahead and get him? We’re going to join you in a second?”
Loki hesitated, looking questionably at Thor, but when he didn’t get an explanation he turned to Helblindi who was still smiling. Sharply. What he said next was in Jötunr and that was provocation enough itself. Nodding softly Loki was clearly repressing a sigh. “Alright, I will see you in a minute.” Leaning over Loki brushed his lips over Helblindi’s and Thor felt his throat constricting. So Loki was even openly presenting the nature of their relationship. He wanted Thor to know. For now he wasn’t giving them any kind of reaction although it pained him to see Loki caught in this trap.

Thor remained silent until Jane and Loki had left the room, all the time feeling like Helblindi’s eyes were burning his skin. The half-smile wouldn’t leave his lips and it tormenting Thor’s nerves. Fortunately there was no more need for his worn out patience. To his surprise thought he wasn’t the one to break the silence.

“I am dying to find out what words you are going to use to threaten me.”

“What reason would I have to threaten my future brother-in-law?”

Helblindi’s smile turned into a grin and that was proof enough. “You are already looking at me like you want to separate my head from my body. Now that Loki has left the room, I thought you might want to inform me of how to stop you from doing so.”

“I am not interested in your games. We both know that you are not afraid of me.”

The grins disappeared and Helblindi wore his hostility out in the open. “No, I am indeed not. Unlike you and perhaps you should be.”

“Are you the one threatening me now?”

“If I were to threaten you, you would know and wouldn’t have to ask. There is no need for that anyway, am I right? You are already scared that I might have more influence on your brother than you or your father.”

Thor put his left hand into his lap and balled it into a fist. Of course it wasn’t enough to rid himself of the anger rising up inside of him. “Loki is smart and careful. He will not let himself be manipulated by you.”

At least Thor hoped so.

Leaning comfortably back in his chair Helblindi went back to smiling. Seeing him having so much fun made Thor almost tremble with rage. “Do you think I’m beautiful, Thor Búrison, heir to all of Asgard?”

That question came so completely out of nowhere that Thor’s mind was wiped clean for a moment. He didn’t even remember being caught between rage and worry. Content with himself Helblindi watched him, clearly aware of how he had taken Thor aback. “I guess you do which makes it even easier to hate me. Not that I care. Loki thinks so too, but you already know that. It’s not just that he desires me, but he listens to what I have to say. It must be killing you.”

Growing up with Loki Thor had had his fair share of patronizing and condescension, but that was nothing compared to Helblindi. With him it wasn’t teasing for good fun, but pure malice.

“Now listen to me. I don’t exactly know what is your plan and how you are planning to use Loki to get there, but I know one thing. If something happens to my brother, if you endanger him in any kind of way or if somebody somehow associated with Frjáls comes near him, I will have you killed.”

His words seemed to bounce off Helblindi, not capable to penetrating the walls he had built around
him. Completely unfazed the Jotun continued to smile, showing off his perfect teeth, clearly not having a care in the world. “That sounds fair enough. Now will you excuse me? My fiancé is waiting for me.”

With a sheer endless amount of sarcasm Helblindi even bowed his head before standing up and leaving the room. Left alone Thor stared after him, his heart beating too fast in his chest. Just how was he supposed to protect Loki from this? Especially if Loki himself didn’t believe that he needed protection? Burying his face in his hands Thor wracked his brains on how to convince Loki to be more careful. Somebody as reckless and…

His phone went off and Thor winced at the sound. It was Heimdall and Thor took a deep breath to calm himself down before answering the call. “Yes, I am listening.”

“Young highness, I have to call it to your attention that we got a match on the fingerprints of one of the individuals on the list that Lord Ymirson brought us. We now know the identity of another who was in the hotel room and therefore involved in the assassination attempt.”

Thor bit his lip, feeling strangely numb about this new information. He hadn’t believed that Helblindi’s sign of goodwill would actually help them with the investigations. Thor had severe trouble believing that Helblindi would ever throw a Frjál member under the bus. They would willingly throw their heads on a blade for him, now doubt about that, but if Helblindi had some loyalty, it had to lie with Frjáls. Or was Helblindi not involved in the assassination attempt after all? If Laufey was orchestrating it all, maybe Helblindi had no insight into the details. “Do we know anything about this person? Any connection to Þórirsson?”

“Not that we know of. Middle class, family has a long tradition of Frjáls. We’re giving your father the details right now.”

“I am on my way.”

As Thor joined his father and the secret service in the conference room he couldn’t help but painfully noticing Loki’s absence. He was spending time with Helblindi right now, they were going to update him later on. For now Thor sat down with his father and the agents who were discussing the new information. The fingerprints belonged to just another Jotun man, a known Frjál member, but they hadn’t been able to trace any connection to the Ymirsons yet. Thor doubted that they would ever get that far, it had been Helblindi who had offered them this information. It probably wouldn’t lead them anywhere.

“There is something else, your highness. Not directly related to the attempt on your life, but it’s still a potential security risk.”

The agent handed over the files and Thor took a glance at the photographs in it. He couldn’t pretend being surprised, but his blood ran cold anyway.

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“I’m going to have to listen to complaints about you alter on, right?” Despite being a little worried Loki smiled and that had mostly to do with Helblindi letting himself being chased around by Fenris.

“I was perfectly polite.” Helblindi laughed when Fenris jumped at his leg and his fiancé leaned down to pet the dog. “Don’t get used to playing around that much, little one. We’re going to get you a trainer soon enough.”

Loki was biting the inside of his cheek to stop his smile from getting bigger. Helblindi’s carefreeness
made him feel warm despite the chilling cold. It was ridiculous to stop himself from showing his happiness, Loki knew that. Something had changed last night though. Until now Loki hadn’t been able to point his finger on it. Perhaps it had been the sex or the fact that Helblindi had shown himself vulnerable in front of him for the very first time, but today Loki felt lithe. Reassured. So much he almost didn’t worry about the five minutes that Helblindi had spent alone with Thor.

Almost.

Helblindi was kneeling in the snow, tickling Fenris’ neck with both hands. Loki had to think of Brazil and seeing Helblindi at the beach. For some reason Loki preferred him like this. In a long dark blue coat, a black scarf wrapped around his neck which almost had the same colour as his hair. Most of it was hidden beneath a blue bonnet. One or two snowflakes were stuck in Helblindi’s perfectly trimmed beard and he was smiling. He was beautiful.

“You saying that you were polite means that you were a jerk to him.” Loki crossed his arms in front of his chest and raised an eyebrow although he couldn’t stop feeling amused.

Looking up Helblindi shrugged. “A little bit, but neither of us was throwing insults around.”

“So what were you talking about?”

After petting Fenris one last time Helblindi stood up and brushed the snow of his coat. “Your brother threatened to kill me if I caused you trouble.”

“What?”

“Oh, I get it. My brother probably thinks the very same thing. Only he is smart enough to not say something like that out loud.”

Now it was way easier to not grin back at Helblindi. “This is not funny.”

“I am not joking. You know as well as me that he thinks I am only waiting for an opportunity to drive a knife into your back. Or his. That’s nothing new.”

Admittedly not, but Loki knew that he had to talk to Thor to get his side of the story. “Whatever he said, you know that…”

“Loki, calm down. I am not going to run for my life. I know that he is just a barking dog. It’s amusing actually.”

Rolling his eyes Loki stepped closer and slid his arm around Helblindi’s slender waist. “None of this is funny.”

Loki felt Helblindi’s hand on his hip. “It is. A little bit. It’s funny that you really think that things are ever going to work out between me and your brother.”

Sighing softly Loki shook his head and decided to change the topic. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Let’s hear it and I’ll decide what I can do.”

Applying a bit of pressure against Helblindi’s back Loki indicated that he wanted to walk a few steps. “I want you to contact the Russian ambassador. Invite him to dinner. Recently the court’s relationship to the Russian government hasn’t been the best and I would like to try to smooth things over.”
“I am pretty sure you have the ambassador’s number yourself.”

“Of course I do, but at the time you have a way better relationship to the Russians than I do. I plan to use that to my advantage.”

Smiling softly Helblindi shrugged. “I guess that should be possible.”

Stopping again Loki brushed his lips over Helblindi’s cheek. He was about to whisper a soft ‘Thank you’ when he stopped a face behind a window in front of them. Turning back at Helblindi Loki sighed softly. “My mother is watching us.”

“I would be very surprised if she was the only one watching us.”

That was probably true and Loki didn’t care. The rest of their lives would be people watching them. Leaning in Loki pressed a gentle kiss on Helblindi’s lips before mumbling “Come on, let’s keep moving.”

Giving him a quick nod Helblindi grabbed his hand and they continued to walk in the snow.

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Thor had sent him a message that he needed to talk to him. Alone. Which was already making Loki worry, but an opportunity presented itself rather quickly. Helblindi wanted to take a bath before dinner and Loki told him that he had to take care of a meeting. A very quick meeting with his brother.

“Did you tell my fiancé that you were going to kill him?”

Against all of Loki’s expectations Thor didn’t bat an eyelid. “I told him that I wouldn’t let him put you in danger. That’s not what I want to talk about. The secret service came up with information on your… fiancé’s entourage. His bodyguard is the descendant of a long line of Frjál members. Loki, he brought one of them right here. To us.”
Hello everybody,

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year :)

Time for an update

“I will talk to him.”

“That is not the best idea.”

“Why? Are you afraid that he is going to manipulate me?”

“Exactly.”

“You know me better than that.”

“Normally yes, but I am not so sure when he is involved.”

“I am tempted to smack you for that statement.”

“Then prove me wrong.”

“I am going to talk to him. Alone.”

Thor’s face made clear that he thought very little of that, but Loki didn’t care. If the wrong people said the wrong things now the damage might be beyond repair. Loki wasn’t going to let this happen since there probably wasn’t even an issue at hand. Nothing that couldn’t be resolved by a very simple conversation. One that Loki was going to have, not Thor or anybody else.

“We will talk about this. Later.” Thor insisted with a calm voice and Loki nodded. He knew that he wouldn’t get around this. After granted Thor a short nod Loki left him alone to return to his own rooms where Helblindi was waiting for him. Not really waiting. His fiancé was sitting on the couch, talking into his phone in a language that wasn’t Old Norse nor Jǫtnar. It didn’t sound like Russian either. Loki would come back to that.

When Helblindi saw Loki he started to smile, said a couple other words before ending the conversation. “I was wondering where you had disappeared to.”

“Just a quick meeting. I didn’t think you’d already be out of the tub.”

“Yeah, I was feeling bored. What’s going on? You’re making that face. Spit it out.” Helblindi’s smile was still there but a bit faint and Loki began chewing on his lower lip. Another thing that he liked and that displeased him at the same time. Helblindi’s ability to read him so quickly. Unfortunately now wasn’t the time to ponder on these thoughts, so instead Loki came right to the point. Why try to drag out an uncomfortable conversation? Both of them weren’t going to make it easy on the other one, so they could start instantly. But where? Maybe it was better to not give any
details at the beginning, then perhaps Helblindi would reveal some pieces of information and show Loki like this what he knew. Despite Loki’s convictions it was always better to act carefully in these kinds of situations. No matter who you were talking to.

“The secret service went over the list of names you gave me.” Loki told him calmly and Helblindi quirked one eyebrow. “And only now they came to a conclusion?”

“Conclusion is maybe too much of a word. Questions came up.” Such a vague phrase wouldn’t get Loki any information, he knew that. Obviously, Helblindi kept sitting right where he was, looking at Loki expectantly but without any real expression. It wasn’t like Loki had thought that he would actually get somewhere with this strategy, Helblindi was wicked smart and a damned lawyer. Why on earth would he tell Loki anything when he hadn’t even asked a real question yet?

Fine, then Loki was going to call a thing by its name. “The family name of your bodyguard showed up in connection with Frjáls.”

There. Loki wanted a reaction, but he didn’t get one. Helblindi was still looking at him, collected, without any surprise or impression. “Did it now?”

More wasn’t necessary for a spark of anger. No, Loki wasn’t going to let this get him. “Don’t be like that. You know exactly what I am talking about.”

“Do I? I would gladly tell you whatever you want to hear, but I fear you haven’t asked a question yet.” Helblindi replied drily and Loki swallowed a deep sigh. So they were playing the game, alright, he could do that.

„When you gave me that list of names I was under the impression that you were doing that to establish a basis for trust. A sign of goodwill, but actually more than that. You know very well what I demanded of you. A statement against Frjáls and what they stand for. For me that list was the first step to that. A clear action of your part without having to make any public statement. After a bit of research it seems as if said action wasn’t as fruitful as expected.„ Loki wasn’t even going to try to not clad this as a direct reproach. Both of them were well versed in the art of flattery and hidden insults. Normally Loki would enjoy a little duel, especially with Helblindi.

Except that now wasn’t the time. They could be facing a severe obstacle. Not just a bump in the road, but a wall too high to climb. Especially if Helblindi had been the one building it. No matter what Thor or anyone else might think about their relationship, Loki was the very last person to ever underestimate Helblindi’s abilities and his wit. Thor just liked to use the word „manipulative“ without having an idea what that actually meant when it came down to Loki’s fiancé. The weapons and resources he had at his disposal. His face, his words, his ruthlessness, united support in the population and a sheer limitless fortune. Loki knew very well who he was dealing with and that made it allthe more exciting. Even when it shouldn’t be. Like right now.

Unfazed by his dry tone Helblindi crossed his legs, as if trying to get into a more comfortable position. To prepare for a longer conversation. „It sounds like you are going to accuse me of something any moment now and you cannot imagine how curious I am to hear it. Especially since you were gone for half an hour and I know that you talked with that imbecile brother of yours.„

No, he wasn’t trying to provoke a fight as a distraction. It was way too obvious for that. Was he trying to make Loki think? To confuse him about his intentions? Or to simply gain a few seconds to have more time to think. Loki was already granting him those seconds.

„I am not going to accuse of anything, I want to talk about the definition a coincidence. How often does a rather unusual thing have to happen until you cannot speak of coincidence anymore?“
„I guess that depends. I need a more detailed example, then I will gladly give you my opinion.“

Fine, if Helblindi wasn’t going to meet him halfway, Loki wouldn’t build him any bridges. „The secret service went over the list and checked some of the names. Five individuals on the list left Asgard during the last three days. Four to Russia, one to Germany. My Lord, does that still qualify as an coincidence?“

Helblindi made a sound that reminded of a weak, half-suffocated chuckle. At least he was having fun. „I would say that your secret service has every reason to be suspicious. That chain of events seems rather odd, but I am equally interested to know how these men are of such importance that their departure bothers the secret service?“

Loki held his gaze, for once not distracted by those marvellous eyes. „Why would tell them to leave?“

„Don’t insult my intelligence by implying that I might know who is involved in the assassination attempt on your brother, hand you the list and be stupid enough to tell the people on it to leave the country. If I were involved you would never even know of the existence of these people.“ The bitterness was definitely real, as was Loki’s frustration. „I did not imply any of that. I neither am judging your character, nor your intelligence. I merely want answers. I am talking to you, trying to get to the bottom of this and clear up potential misunderstandings. The situation is confusing and it looks bad, you know that just as well as I do. So now help me understand, so I can stop people from coming to the wrong conclusions.“

„By people you mean your father and your brother.“

„The secret service, ministers. Pretty much everybody involved in this issue. Why is this conversation such a chore? Why are you feeling threatened by what I am saying? Can we have a civil discussion? You explain to me what happened and I will tell you what I think about it. That’s what we have done so far. It would be naive to assume that you don’t know what happened here.“

Loki shot his fiancé a rather soft gaze, but Helblindi remained unaffected. „That sounds fair. You’re still denying that you’ve already come to your own conclusions. I don’t doubt that they’re different than your brother’s. Nevertheless I want to hear them. Before I am going to say anything.“

To make a point Helblindi picked up his glass from the couch table, taking a sip from the lithe brown liquid. Alright, since they were both eager to make this conversation as unpleasant as possible. It merely pained Loki that so many more of those were going to come. „As you wish, my Lord.“

It made him feel a little better that it was the easiest thing in the world to make the title sound teasing and the corners of Helblindi’s mouth twitched. A smile that he didn’t really want to hold back.

„I believe that you are in no way involved in the assassination attempt and that you have as little of an idea who is to blame as we have. But the assassination attempt isn’t the only thing Frjáls has ever done. I believe that you know that some people on this list could get into serious trouble for other offenses. Therefore you made sure that they were warned and that they could get away rather comfortably. I think that you did that and that you didn’t bother to make them disappear from the list, because it doesn’t bother you that other people might find out about this. Because you don’t see anything bad in what you’ve done. There. These are my conclusions. How far of am I?“

Loki was challenging him, raising his chin a little bit and Helblindi smiled. Pleased by what should be fierce accusations.

„My humble opinion is that you do not need my explanations, your highness. You were perfectly capable of deducting the truth all by yourself. I would be impressed if I expected any different.“
Exactly at these times Loki couldn’t decide what sounded more appealing. Kissing his lips or hitting him. In Loki’s mind the perfect spouse should evoke exactly those kinds of feelings. In theory that was way more pleasant than right now. “What did they do? So important that the future Lord of Jotunheim did get involved personally.”

„Who am I talking to right now?“ Helblindi asked him in Jotnar and Loki thought that this was only fair. „Loki. Your fiancé.“
That obviously sounded good enough for Helblindi. „They were involved in the first riots in Jotunheim. An act of disobedience that I cannot condemn. Also I am not going to let a Búrison king going to be their judge.“
„They broke the law.“
„They disobeyed laws that were made to oppress them. I hope you are not going to try to debate me on this. It would neither of us do any good.“
Loki was gladly going to ignore this advice. „Why are you protecting them?“
„I am their Lord. This is what I am supposed to do. “
„Protecting criminals?“
„My countrymen who acted out of desperation. Desperation caused by your family. It is that simple of an affair. I will always protect my people. No matter what I have to do to ensure that. “

The determination in his eyes was proof enough that he meant every word and Loki knew better than to question his loyalties. They had talked about this, Loki knew that Jotunheim would always come first. Like Asgard. The way it had to be. They didn’t have a right to their titles or privileges if they should ever decide that anything on the surface of this world mattered more than their responsibility. Therefore Loki admired what Helblindi was doing, but there wasn’t only one side to this coin. „You are protecting Frjáls associates. That is not what I asked you to do. “
This was where the smiles disappeared. Helblindi’s eyes got a little smaller. „You are using that word so much and in so many different ways, it must have lost all meaning to you. “
„What word?“
„Frjáls. Despite your intellect and your studies, I doubt that you know what it means. “
The blood running through Loki’s veins had just gotten a few degrees warmer. His pride getting him into trouble was something new. A ridiculously easy way to rile him up and to make him forget about caution. Having Helblindi now questioning his qualifications as a historian could possibly set him off. „Why? Because I am not Jotun?“
„Exactly. “
Loki was in the mood to start yelling at him. To tell him he would like to shove that Jotun arrogance down Helblindi’s throat, because he suddenly sounded exactly like the man Thor wanted to see in him. No, Loki wasn’t going to start yelling. No pulling his punches either, Helblindi had taken off the gloves some time ago. „Is Týr Frjáls?“
If Loki hadn’t been sure if a line existed, he didn’t need to look for it anymore. He had found it, Helblindi’s face became a dark mask, smiles a relic of the past. Oddly enough Helblindi didn’t seem to have been expecting that question or any allusion to Týr at all. His voice was a little strained, but
not enough to make Loki believe that he had blindsided him. Or that he had gained some kind of advantage. “At which point did this become a conversation about my bodyguard?”

“I asked you a very simple question. Is Týr a Frjáls member?”

Not a single detail in Helblindi’s face reminded him of the softness or vulnerability that Loki had seen only hours ago. “He is not on that list. Nor his family name. So what business do you have looking him up? He is a Jotun citizen with a spotless record. What by all the spirits is your secret service doing snooping around in the data of my personal guard?!”

The most gorgeous blue eyes were filled with a spark that Loki had seen before, but at that time it had had nothing to do with him. Only now he realised that Helblindi’s anger had never been directed at him. It wasn’t even now. Loki was the messenger. Yet the message itself really pushed Helblindi’s buttons. It put him on the edge. The strategy he used was still the same, firing questions at Loki to distract from the real issue. Which wasn’t going to happen, not now. “Just answer the question. I know that his family is Frjáls. So is he? You’ve known him for all your life. You know.”

Helblindi huffed, shook his head and then got up to his feet. To Loki it looked a lot like he had to start moving or else he could not guarantee what he was going to do. “I will not accept any dismissive word about his family. A long line of loyal servants to the Lord of Jotunheim with impeccable reputation. They didn’t only serve the Lord but the entirety of Jotunheim.”

Loki ignored all of that. “I want you to tell me if your bodyguard is a member of Frjáls.”

Helblindi answered with a joyless laugh and then shook his head once more. How much Loki would give to know what he was trying to say with that. “How are you imagining this? That I asked him over breakfast? That I demanded to see his arms to see if there were any markings? No, I never did any of that and I do not care. He is a great man and he would his life for mine in a second. An affiliation to Frjáls would mean nothing to me.”

The clear sincerity had Loki’s throat tightening, making it hard to breathe. “You wouldn’t care if he was part of a terrorist group that tried to kill my brother?”

A strangled noise passed Helblindi’s lips and Loki could hear and feel how his anger finally found another target. This time it was indeed directed at Loki. “Why do you suddenly start sounding like them? Like you really have no idea that Frjáls isn’t that. You should know better. Until now you’ve been looking at Jotunheim like you are supposed to. See the people there as just that. People. But Frjáls seems to scare you so much that it poisons your mind. So much that you make your brother’s thoughts your own. When they have nothing to do with reality.”

“By all the spirits! They tried to kill my brother! They are responsible for terrorist acts!”

“A man tried to kill your brother! One man that belongs to an organisation like thousands of others. Frjáls has been existing as long as a member of your family is sitting on the throne. You created it. People organizing themselves to teach children our language when you forbade it, to wipe it out. People fighting as guerrillas for our lands that you took away. Frjáls made sure that the ones who lost their homes in the civil war still found support and were taking care of. It was created in a time of need and desperation and it brought grace and charity to the people. That is what Frjáls means to us. The only reason why it still exists today, because we still have to protect our language and our land. Those aren’t some radical men who meet up in dark cellar, hidden away from the world. They are mothers who wish for their children to have equal opportunities, they are teenagers who feel like their own culture is slipping away, they’re teachers who want to share what they know, they’re young people who want to shape the world they’re living in. Asgard cannot see any of that. For Asgard there is only one violent act that defines thousands of others. Frjáls is by no means a terrorist
organisation. It’s way too big for that. It’s full of different people. Mostly good people. People who decided that they wouldn’t stand by and watch their home being destroyed. They decided to do something about it in one way or another. 90% of it is completely peaceful, but since they only are people they can get pushed too far and when that happens I will make damn sure to protect them. You can be damned sure that I will use every bit of my power, influence and resources to protect every single man who decides that he wants to serve his country. I would rather put my head on a blade before handing one of them over.”

By the hand of his fierce statement Helblindi had once more become completely calm. For him there was not point to emphasize his words or to show any anger anymore. What he was saying was the most self-evident thing imaginable to him. Loki could almost taste it, so evident and all over him that he felt like if he touched Helblindi now, he might end up thinking the exact same way. And despite all the complicated and to some extent shocking implications Loki was marvelling at him. At this strength and conviction. Something he put on display so easily and that was unbendable. Right now Loki just knew. Helblindi could never be tempted, compromised or swayed. Nothing was as deeply engrained inside of him than the responsibility that he felt for his people.

Right now standing in front of him should be a king. Beautiful and strong. This was a moment Loki would remember for a long time.

“And the man who shot at Thor? The people supporting him? Will you protect them too?”

After releasing a long breath Helblindi met Loki’s eyes and the softness had returned to them. Not completely but it was a start. “I didn’t lie to you when I told you that I don’t condone violence. The man who attacked your brother is in prison, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but he didn’t act alone and I don’t want to have to feel afraid that you might end up protecting them.”

Helblindi shook his head. “I will not. A cowardly attempted murder had nothing to with Frjáls for me.”

“Can you promise me that?”

“Yes.”

It came easily and lifted a weight of Loki’s chest. Still, they hadn’t managed to overcome one single obstacle. Loki still needed to offer Thor a satisfying explanation and he didn’t have one, since Helblindi boldly admitted to hiding criminals and although this question hadn’t been answered, Loki was fairly sure that Helblindi’s bodyguard was somehow connected to Frjáls. “Good…” Running one hand through his hair Loki sent Helblindi a weak smile. “You understand that this still means trouble?”

“No, it doesn’t. The list I gave you was indeed a sign of goodwill, but it is supposed to only be used for one purpose. You’re supposed to look for leads that will help you with the investigation. Nothing else. I will not allow people being harassed or that you violate their privacy when there is no reason for it. Týr is in my service, for me he is family and he has nothing to do with all of this. To me this feels like you’re accusing my family of trying to kill yours.”

So this was where the last bit of the anger died away. With the hint of a guilty conscience. “I did not want that.”

“I know… I guess.” Helblindi shrugged and to Loki he suddenly looked tired, worn out. He remembered their conversation from last night, the distant look in Helblindi’s eyes while talking
about his father. Out of a sudden Loki couldn’t remain sitting on the couch anymore, so he got up and walked up to Helblindi. “I hate you for making this so hard on me.”

“I don’t think you hate me at all.”

Unable to keep the smile of his face Loki let his forehead rest against Helblindi’s shoulder. “I just want you to admit that you cannot control everything.” While Loki was tempted to believe that Helblindi knew what he was saying about Frjáls, he wasn’t involved in this organisation. There was no definitive head, so radical wings could easily act on their own without oversight.

Loki could feel Helblindi’s hand on his back, then it caressed his hair. “I am under no illusions that I can control you.”

“That was not what I meant.”

“I know. Doesn’t make it less true.”

Leaning up Loki kissed the corner of Helblindi’s mouth, not daring to make it a real kiss, because then this conversation would definitely be over. “There are still a lot of things that need to be discussed. The situation with Frjáls cannot continue like this. There need to be clear lines and definitions. You are the one who can make that possible. You promised me.”

“I understand, but I don’t think it’s possible in the way you want it to. Moreover I don’t think that I would even want that. You are not familiar enough with our history and our society.”

Again, Loki couldn’t pretend that Helblindi didn’t have a point and nevertheless it upset him. There was no denying in that. Then it was time to be bold.

“I guess since the situation is so complicated we will have to have proper conversations. I know you can establish contact and I need you to do that. I need to talk with someone in charge or at least influential within Frjáls. The both of us will talk to them. Just to be sure, I am not asking. I am demanding.”

Helblindi’s laugh reached his ears and his arms now fully embraced Loki. “You are definitely unlike any other, Loki Búrison.”

He didn’t need to say it out loud for Loki to know that he had accepted his demand. So despite everything Loki felt that there were ways to figure this out. Thor wasn’t going to be happy though. “About time you make a compliment…”

Amused, Helblindi brushed his lips over Loki’s forehead and now just wanting to enjoy Loki slid his arms between Helblindi’s blazer and shirt, then around his waist. They stood there, embracing each other tightly until a sudden noise in the pleasant silence had them wince.

Turning his head Loki saw his mother standing in front of the door and he felt the shameful urge to take a step away from Helblindi. No. Why should he? They were engaged, these were his rooms. Helblindi seemed to feel differently about this and let go of Loki. Displeased Loki glanced at his mother. “I did not hear you knock.”

Because she hadn’t, they all knew that.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. I felt like I had to talk to you. Both of you.” She looked serious, but a small smile played around her lips. It made it hard for Loki to figure out what she might want.

“Dinner is in one hour. We could have talked then.”
Frigga shook her head and came closer. “No, I wanted to talk alone. I know that I didn’t make the last couple of days easier for you when I should have done that. I wasn’t supportive when I should have been. You know that nothing is more important to me than your happiness and well-being.”

Instinctively Loki reached for Helblindi’s hand that gently squeezed his fingers. “Yes, I know, mother, but it’s me who decides what makes me happy and what doesn’t. Not you.”

When his mother lowered her eyes Loki thought that she almost looked embarrassed. “I do know that, but for a mother that is sometimes hard to accept. Because I like to think that I know what is best for you. Perhaps I was wrong. What I came to realise is that I cannot put myself between you and something you want.” She quickly looked at Helblindi and then back at Loki. “This is what you want, right?”

Her intention was obvious for all of them. Frigga wanted him to say it out loud in front of Helblindi. To be completely sure that Loki meant it. She probably didn’t imagine it would be so easy for Loki. “Yes.”

Loki could hear his mother taking a breath and her face betrayed her for a second. It showed how difficult all of this was still for her, but the smile that ultimately appeared on her face was genuine. “Then I will not stand in your way.”
Hello everybody,

I know this took forever, so let's get to it :)

“This sucks.”

Sighing softly Bucky straightened up and looked over his shoulder. Arnþórr was still leaning against the open door, arms crossed in front of his chest. His whole posture underlined his bad mood. To see him like this was completely new and although it was definitely a good thing that he didn’t want Bucky to leave, it was nonetheless an unpleasant situation. “Well, I would be done quicker if you were going to help me.”

Instantly Arnþórr shook his head. “Forget it. I am not going to lift a finger to help you putting your things in a box. I’ll be in the kitchen, drinking your wine. Call me when you changed your mind or when you want sex.”

Chuckling Bucky watched Arnþórr turning around and indeed leaving the room. He was a man of his word, that was for sure. With a heavy and uneasy feeling Bucky returned to putting his clothes in a box. Arnþórr was right after all. This sucked. Bucky had no desire whatsoever to pack up his things and leave, but unfortunately it wasn’t up to him anymore. It wasn’t going to be forever though, Bucky had done everything in his power to ensure that. For now he was still standing in his bedroom, putting half his wardrobe into little boxes. Most of it he wasn’t even going to take back to the States with him. To the States, right. Not home.

Bucky looked at his own sweater a little too long and then closed his eyes. No, packing up his belongings wasn’t any fun. Another week then he was going to sit in a plane. Just the thought alone was weird and making him uncomfortable. Opening his eyes again Bucky looked at the red sweater and then shook his head. Halfway done and he was completely fed up. Getting up from the floor Bucky slowly made his way to the kitchen where Arnþórr, despite his words, wasn’t drinking wine. He was stirring in a pot and Bucky smiled to himself, because Arnþórr moved around his kitchen with such ease. Sadly it wouldn’t be his kitchen for much longer.

Stopping right behind him Bucky slid his one good arm around Arnþórr’s waist and rested his chin on his shoulder. “What are you making?”

“Chicken soup.” Arnþórr mumbled lowly, tilting his head slightly back against Bucky. “My mother used to make it for me when I was sick and sometimes when I was sad. I am sad now. A bit angry. Mostly sad.”

It was strange to feel bad and good about something at the same time. So Bucky merely brushed his lips over Arnþórr’s neck and pulled him a little closer. Why should he say something when he could stand there and hold him? Arnþórr would prefer that anyway.

“Unfortunately it’s not going to be very good though. Your fridge didn’t contain all that I need. It’s
almost empty. Which of course it is. This sucks.”

“Can we talk about something else? It’s not going to be forever.”

“Yes, you say that now. Then you are going to be back in the States, things are going to get complicated. Maybe too complicated to come back. It’s going to take time. You’re going to meet someone else. I don’t like this scenario.”

“Because it’s a stupid scenario.” Bucky would have laughed, if he hadn’t feared that he would push Arnþórr away like that. He was showing himself so vulnerable that Bucky could easily make a wrong step. “I don’t want to go back. I’ve told you several times. This has become my home. I am here because of my job though. That job is done, so I have to go back, but only as long as necessary.”

Arnþórr made a pensive ‘Hmm’ sound, but he put his hand on Bucky’s that rested on his stomach. “All of my friends told me that I was stupid for getting involved with an American. They were right. This sucks.”

Bucky kissed his cheek. “I don’t think that the soup needs constant steering. Come on, let’s go to the living room.”

Arnþórr didn’t protest and let himself be pulled away from the stove. Hopefully they were going to be able to ignore the fact that the living room had also already become a lot emptier. “We can go over the whole plan again if you want to. I don’t plan to go back for real. I feel at home here. Also, you’re here. That’s reason enough to come back, don’t you think?”

“I know. It’s just…” Arnþórr sighed and shrugged. “Sure, you’ve been talking about immigrating and I know you love this country. Talking about something is still much easier than actually doing it. We have the toughest immigration laws in the entire world. It’s going to take time and… it still might not work out. You should have asked the prince to wave it through. He could snap his fingers and that would be it.”

“I don’t want that. I don’t want to get special treatment. I know it’s going to work out the normal way.”

“You’re American.” Arnþórr pointed out the obvious. “They’re going to throw your application directly into the trash.”

Smiling with soft amusement Bucky shrugged. “I doubt that. Since when are you such a pessimist? It’s going to be fine. I fly back to the States, take care of things, then I’ll use all of the holidays that I got left and come back. I hope you don’t throw out all of my stuff in the meantime.”

It was a weak attempt at a joke, to lighten up the mood, but Arnþórr only released another sigh. “I’d still feel better if we had any kind of guarantee that things are going to work out just like that.”

Laughing softly Bucky kissed Arnþórr’s cheek. “If you are so worried, you could still propose to me. A new citizenship comes easily with marriage.”

“If you want to become Asgaridan, you should know that we don’t joke about marriage. Ever.” At first Arnþórr’s gaze was rather stern, but he eventually lightened up “If there is one thing that is hard to do in this country, then it’s a spontaneous wedding.”

“Alright, if you are not going to help me getting my green card you could at least take me out to dinner. Nothing against your chicken soup, but I am sure both of us would feel better if we were to eat in a nice restaurant instead of my empty flat.”
“Why not? But I decide which restaurant and you are not allowed to look at your phone even one single time. I am slowly getting annoyed by Steve calling you all the damned time. Either he is finally going to tell you that he is love with you or he should let it go. It’s getting embarrassing.”

Embarrassed, that was the right word to describe how Bucky was feeling just now. Mostly because he didn’t know how to react he kissed Arnþórr’s cheek. “Can you let that go? I thought it was funny at first, but it’s getting a bit tiring.”

A long missed smile appeared on Arnþórr’s lips. “It’s kind of cute that you don’t realise something so obvious. Still caught up in Midgardian ideas. I’ll just turn off the stove, then we can go.”

Bucky nodded dumbfounded and still not really knowing what to say. It was undeniably hard to get used to Arnþórr’s most unforgiving character trait. Telling things as they were without taking into consideration if he might embarrass somebody else or get them into an uncomfortable situation. Maybe that was a bit Asgardian, but mostly it was Arnþórr. Tonight definitely wasn’t the first time that he had mentioned Steve having feelings for Bucky. To be honest, Bucky had has his own suspicions that Steve liked him in a not just friendly way, but that seemed superficial and like something that Steve wasn’t even completely aware of. Also, Bucky doubted that Steve even liked guys.

That thought brought a smile to his lips, because he knew exactly what Arnþórr would say about that. Nobody was entirely straight and Bucky was such a complete Midgardian for even thinking something else.

“You’re ready to go?” Arnþórr brought him back to reality and Bucky nodded quickly before getting up from the couch. They put on their winter jackets, then Bucky grabbed his hand as they left the apartment. Perhaps it wasn’t the worst idea to keep his phone switched off for the rest of the night.

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“Where are they at the moment?” Thor looked at the portraits at the wall for no particular reason, he just couldn’t imagine sitting down. It’s almost been two days now and Thor couldn’t shake off the feeling of helplessness and the constant tension that was taking a hold of his body. Impossible to shake off.

Unfortunately but unsurprisingly the portrait of his great-grandfather didn’t come to life and tell him what he should do. What would Thor give if things were that easy.

“Walking around the park, your highness.” Heimdall answered drily and Thor huffed, unable and unwilling to hide the repugnance he was feeling. “He seems to be rather fond of our gardens. They are vast and hard to look into. Almost impossible to overlook.”

“The palace security has them under constant surveillance, but there is no way to get any closer without violating the Lord’s privacy.”

Thor groaned and turned around to face Heimdall. “I don’t care about the Lord’s privacy, his privileges or whatever reason there is not to watch every single one of his steps. Yesterday I hand my brother undisputable proof that Helblindi’s bodyguard is involved with Frjáls and nothing happens. Loki brushes it all aside. We’re supposed to act like nothing happened. When that man walks through our gardens I want to know about his every step. I want to know what he and Helblindi are talking about. I want to know what they are doing at all time.”

Heimdall nodded in understanding, but his expression remained as stern and empty as before. “I see, your highness, but at the moment there is nothing more that we can do without causing an affront.
Týr is the bodyguard of the Lord of Jotunheim, he is therefore under the protection of the Ymirsons. Lord Helblindi is the fiancé of your brother and the Duke has been very clear on how he wishes them to be treated. Disrespecting his demands would cause severe friction.”

Thor was perfectly aware of that, but this wasn’t about disrespecting Loki or purposely ignoring what he had decided. No, Thor had the necessary distance to look at this more unbiased than Loki. It was hard enough for himself to believe that they had ended up here, but what other conclusion was he supposed to draw? His last conversation with Loki had made that perfectly clear. According to him Helblindi wasn’t even denying that his bodyguard was a Frjál member. And what was Loki’s reaction to the information that they had a person at the court who could have been easily involved in the attack on Thor?

Nothing. No, Thor wished that Loki would have been merely nonchalant about the entire situation. That he honestly didn’t know what to do about it and therefore fled himself into ignorance. Thor felt his guts twisting when he thought back to last night. When after dinner Loki had pulled him aside and told him that the demanded that the secret service would refrain from investigating any further in the bodyguard’s history. Not just that, Loki had looked right into his face and told him that he forbid any other interference. Helblindi was allowed to move completely freely around the palace as a guest and his bodyguard would still shadow him.

Loki wanted, no, he demanded to let Frjáls roam around their home. Unsupervised, free to do as they wished. Only a few months ago Loki would have never come to such a mad decision. The knowledge that it hadn’t been Loki’s own decision wasn’t any comfort. How had Laufey’s son gained so much influence over Loki? Was he playing him for a fool? Had he Loki convinced that his intentions were indeed honourable and for the good of their nation? Thor didn’t doubt that Helblindi could be very convincing if he wanted to, his charm was undeniable if he decided to use it.

Infatuation? Loki wasn’t the kind of man who could be controlled through sex. At least Thor thought so. At this time he couldn’t know what to be sure of anymore. Helblindi had gained that sort of influence over Loki. Frjáls walking through their halls was the proof of that.

Loki could for whatever reason hold his protecting hand in front of them, that didn’t mean Thor couldn’t get past it.

„I need to hear what they are discussing. It’s out of the question that a man like him is leaving the palace so many times without an ulterior motive. Understandable, everybody in his position would do the same. Or his phone. I would need the data on his phone.“ Thor mumbled mostly do himself, merely saying out loud ideas like at a brainstorming.

Naturally Heimdall heard everything, like he was supposed to. „Well, there are certainly ways, your highness. Unfortunately we can be sure that the young Lord has protection of the highest standards against cyber-attacks of all kinds and being caught in trying to get past that security would…”

„I know. Unredeemable break of trust. Loki would go crazy and even worse, Helblindi would immediately take in out to the public. We cannot make a mistake, but what we can do even less is sit around here and wait for his plans to come to fruition. I have no idea what is going on in his mind, but I am not losing my mind. How can the heir to Jotunheim come here, get engaged with my brother and not have a plan of some kind?“

„It is indeed highly unlikely.“ Heimdall agreed with him and Thor sat down, running both hands through his hair. In front of someone else it might have been a lot harder to show such a clear sign of frustration. Their head of security knew him since he was a little child, he had seen and Thor in way worse situation and had helped him out of them. That was his duty and he had always excelled in the execution. Not a single moment in his life had Thor ever doubted Heimdall’s loyalties, trust like this
could only earn through the years. It filled Thor’s chest with sadness that at the moment he might trust Heimdall more than his own brother.

„There has to be something I can do to open Loki’s eyes. Something that will make him see beyond a dazzling smile and the promises that he wants to hear. Loki wants a solution for the conflict and Helblindi is dangling it right in front of his nose… I am open to all suggestions.” Feeling so utterly helpless brought out the worst in him, but Loki was slipping through his fingers and Thor would never forgive himself if he should let him walk to his doom without doing everything in his power to save him. And more.

Heimdall seemed pensive, which gave Thor hope. He could see an idea forming behind the other’s eyes. „There are a few parts of the park that are close enough to the place that they are within reach of our cameras. If they walk close enough to the palace, we’ll have imagery.“

„Without sound that’s worth nothing.“

„It may be hard but not impossible to find a translator who is able and willing to read lips.“

Another feeling spread inside of Thor’s chest. A spark of hope, small but ready to grow. „Well, definitely not a Jotun. It’s a long shot, but we can try. I doubt though that Helblindi would say anything incriminating close to these walls. I need something more concrete. Something that he can’t twist and turn to his advantage. That will make Loki see what he is trying to do.“

Damn all their traditions and royal obligations. Damn Helblindi for being part of one of the oldest noble families of the country. His noble rank hindered them from applying measures that would be the usual procedure with a commoner. Getting caught spying on the heir to Jotunheim? Political suicide. Not just Jotunheim would never let them forget such an act. It could only work out if they found something. Something dark and unforgiving. Thor didn’t doubt that it was all there, somewhere hidden and only waiting to be dragged to the surface.

“Anything new on the list?”

“Your highness, you know that I would have already told you. Still no trace of the man whose fingerprints we’ve found and we don’t know if the young Lord tried to contact anyone. He hasn’t left the palace since he has come here.”

Of course, it would be too easy and definitely most wonderful if Helblindi took the next limousine and drove to a well-known Frjál member somewhere in Valhalla. Helblindi was a lot of things, but he definitely wasn’t stupid. Why couldn’t they trace the money back? Thor’s conviction couldn’t be stronger, he knew that the Ymirsons had sponsored the assassination attempt. Yet the secret service had been unable to find out where the money had come from. If only – then they would even have a way to legally act against them. The people responsible would go to prison, but again, the Ymirsons were reckless, but not foolish.

How had Loki ended up in the middle of this?

“I want him tailed. All the time. If he leaves the palace every single one of his steps has to be watched. It’s simply impossible to completely cover all of your tracks. There’s got to be something that we can get him with. The sooner the better.”

Unfortunately there was no way to tell when Helblindi’s plan was going to come to fruition. The Jotun was definitely playing a long game and since a marriage was part of his plan, it could take years until he got to the point where he wanted to be. Something that Thor couldn’t let happen. It was his responsibility.
“I assure you, your highness, if the Lord leaves the palace we will know where he is going.”

Thor nodded weakly. “Good. If they come close enough to any camera for us to get a decent picture, let me know about it. I have to leave now, my mother wished to talk to me.”

Heimdall gently bowed his head. “I will keep you updated, your highness.”

“Thank you.”

Still hunted by the terrible feeling of not doing enough Thor left the salon and walked down the halls. If he only knew what exactly Helblindi was trying to accomplish. Normally Loki and him would sit down and try to figure this out. Together. But since Helblindi had thrust his claws into Loki’s body, it was up to Thor to put a halt to this. To help Loki see again what he was getting himself into.

Still agitated Thor arrived at his mother’s quarters and the guard standing in front of the door nodded to greet him before letting him inside. Eventually Thor found his mother in her study. She was sitting at her desk, writing something when she finally noticed Thor’s presence. A smile was playing around her lips, only slightly tense around the edges. It immediately made Thor feel uneasy. Naturally they were going to talk about Loki and it worried Thor deeply that his mother was smiling. The last couple of days he had almost thought her at the edge of reason. Struck with fear for her favourite son. For once Loki had done something that didn’t make her eyes shine with joy and pride. Despite jealousy between siblings Thor couldn’t feel good about this. “You wanted to talk to me, mother?”

“Thor, thank you for joining me so swiftly.” Frigga continued to smile as she indicated him to sit down.

“What is it that you want to talk about?”

“Your brother and his future spouse.”

Thor bit back any answer he might have had and instead waited for his mother to continue.

“I have come to the decision that I will no longer stand between your brother and the man that he chose to be with.”

This was definitely worse than everything Thor might have imagined. All this time he had hoped that their mother might be able to talk some sense into Loki, to make him see the madness of his doing. Especially since Frigga had always supported him in everything he had been doing. With Helblindi she had drawn a line and now she was pulling back? Abandoning Thor when he was the one who was trying to protect Loki. “Mother, I hope that this is a cruel joke. We both have been of the same opinion. That Loki is putting himself in danger and that this engagement is going to cause him misery and harm. All of us.”

Frigga slowly shook her head. “I have never believed that Helblindi is a threat to Loki. I believe him when he says that they want to reconcile this nation with their union. Yes, the thought worries me that he will go to Jotunheim, but I know that he can win over any Jotun’s heart. What made me change my mind is fairly simple though. I want your brother to be happy and therefore I cannot object to his relationship with the man he is in love with.”

All air was leaving Thor’s lung like after a punch in the stomach. Love. What a big word for such a bizarre relationship. “I would never try to stop Loki from pursuing a relationship with anyone he chooses, but he is my brother and therefore it is my duty to protect him. I cannot deny that you are
most probably right, that Loki is falling for the future Lord of Jotunheim, but I also know that it would be foolish to trust Helblindi just because Loki’s feelings for him.”

A frown spread on Frigga’s forehead. “Do you distrust your brother’s judgement?”

“In this case, yes.”

“I watched them together, Thor. In private moments. The gentleness they shared together makes me believe that their affection is genuine. Please, Thor. Your brother has the right to be with whoever person he chooses to be. Like you.”

Inside of Thor’s chest a spark of anger was ignited. Now she was using Jane to talk him into a bad conscience? When this had nothing to do with Thor’s fears. “This is not about Loki being able to marry the one he wants to marry. It is about him marrying the head of Frjáls an organisation that swore to give the Ymirsons back their throne, using violence if necessary. They already tried to kill one of your sons. I am not going to let Loki put himself at their mercy. That is all I have to say. I am sorry that we are not of the same opinion on this matter.”

Thor wasn’t going to remain here any longer, so he got up and left his mother behind who didn’t try to hold him back or talk to him. It was only minutes later that Heimdall called him to tell him that Helblindi had officially asked for permission to visit Þórirsson in prison and talk to him. Alone. A shiver was running down his spine at the thought of Helblindi meeting up with the man who had fired a gun at him. Subconsciously Thor rubbed his shoulder. Helblindi had to be insane if he believed that the king would grant him this wish. Sadly Thor had no doubt that Loki would speak out in his favour.
Hello everybody,
Let’s get to it :)
Have fun

„Father, this is a reckless suggestion and it worries me deeply that Loki is supporting it.“ Thor glanced at Loki whose expression was unreadable. His arms were crossed in front of his chest and only a little line on his forehead was testament to his annoyance. Annoyed. Loki was dancing on a rope over a dark abyss, unable to see the ground and yet he seemed agitated by Thor’s attempts to create a net for him.

„Nothing about this is imprudent o as Thor likes to call it – reckless. Who else but Helblindi should talk to him? He is probably the only person on this planet that he would talk to.“ Loki was talking with a shocking calm, but Thor could hear just the sardonic hint in his voice. Yes, he definitely was annoyed and not far away from talking down to them. When he was the one losing his sanity. He was handing it over to Helblindi like a cheap piece of garment.

„Oh, I don’t doubt that he will talk to Helblindi. He will sing like bird. An entire song about how he failed and how sorry he is for not getting the job done for his prince.“ Thor spat the last word out, because it was important for Loki to hear it. How could he not know that Helblindi considered himself the heir to all of this country? That for him the last 500 years hadn’t happened. Of course Loki knew, Loki knew better than anyone, but at some point he must have stopped caring. Or and Thor was afraid to even think that, Loki had started to agree with him. Which couldn’t be. Loki would betray his own kin, the very blood running through his veins and despite the cloud that seemed to have gathered around his thoughts, Loki still loved them dearly. Not a single moment Thor would allow himself to doubt that. Still, the rejection and to see how Loki was drifting further away from them hurt.

They could easily end up yelling at each other today, tearing at each other’s throats. The tension was noticeable and Odin appeared to be the only person in the room who had somewhat remained calm.

„Yes, he definitely considers Helblindi his prince and therefore Helblindi is the only one who can reach him.“ Loki replied stubbornly and it was hard for Thor to not laugh into his face. „And what do you think is Laufey’s son going to tell him? A Frjál assassin who was paid with Ymirson money? He is going to tell him that it was a nice try, but that he failed. Someone else is going to try again."

Loki’s eyes were sparkling while a shadow appeared on his face. „I will only ask you once to stop implying that my fiancé is somewhat involved in the attempt on your life."

„I wasn’t implying, I was stating the obvious. Loki, I cannot believe that you are so blind when it comes to him. You of all people!“

„And you are so wrapped up in your perceived ideas about him that you simply refuse to see that he
wants the same as us. A peaceful co-existence. He didn’t have anything to do with the attack."

Their voices had already become louder, so their father silenced both of them. „Enough! Inside of this room the both of you will act like the adults that you supposedly are. We are not discussing an easy decision here, but I want both of you to carefully think about the implications and consequences. You are far too quick to judge. Loki, your relationship to him does not matter in this question. His rank and name do. The son of a Lord asked for permission to visit one of his countrymen. His request cannot immediately be dismissed. One the other hand, he is not just any Lord. Despite your insistence, Loki, you cannot deny that his name opens all the doors within Frjáls. We have no ideas about his actual affiliations with this organisation, but it is out of the question that he has stayed his entire life completely away from them."

Thor’s eyes remained fixed on Loki’s face, to capture his reaction and it was easy to spot. How he pursed his lips, slightly spiteful, because he knew that there was nothing he could possibly respond. A little triumph.

„He knows that the meeting would be under complete surveillance and he accepted anyway. Still, he claimed that he wants to talk to him as his future Lord and doesn’t plan to ask him anything on our behalf. He also refuses any briefing."

Not a surprise. „So much about our theory that he wants to help us?“

Loki lowered his eyes, but Thor wasn’t going to mistake for a sign of weakness. His brother merely took one second to think before firing it all back to him. For a Jotun. „Helblindi is an Ymirson, raised with different traditions and views. I cannot attempt to tell you that he is seeing the same terror as we do when he looks at Frjáls. He does not. His view is way more layered and I know for a fact that is never going to do anything that he might consider a betrayal against his own people. I also know that he condemns what has been done to you. When he is going to talk to this man, he is going to say exactly that. How can it be that you do not want to see what an incredible asset he can be? Thor, you are right Frjáls does adore him, they look up to him and therefore he has the power to dismantle this bomb. To turn Frjáls into something else entirely. By all the spirits, we can pull the fangs of this lion. Please, father, just let him do it. He is our ally in this. It would be foolish not to use him."

„By all our ancestors, Loki!“ The frustration that touched Thor felt cold endless. Something that he couldn’t remember experiencing before. Right in front of him was his brother, as strong as he always had been, but using his strength against them. „Has somebody poisoned your mind? You call him an ally when he is the leader of those you want to fight? He is not going to help us! Þórirsson did what he did for him and it would be foolish to let them talk to each other!“

The look Loki shot him was seething and clearly wished for anyone else to have this conversation with. Eventually he went as far as ignoring Thor completely. Instead he turned to their father. „Please. You don’t have to trust me or him. You only have to see the opportunity that has opened up for us. Even if I had lost my mind and Thor were right – what are we risking? He is going to talk to a man in a cell and we’ll hear every single word of it. That is all I am asking for."

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The bleakness of the interrogation room made it impossible to look at anything else than Þórirsson. There was nothing special about him. Actually he looked rather ordinary, somebody you wouldn’t remember if he passed you on the street. For Thor it was different though. This absolutely average person provoked inside of him a feeling of horror. Combined with the urge to run and hide away. How was Thor supposed to lead a country when the mere sight of a single man was rendering him helpless. Thor closed his eyes for a second, telling himself the obvious. Þórirsson couldn’t see him, he was cuffed to this table and as soon as this conversation was over, he would go back to his cell.
Somebody moved next to him and Thor tried to ignore how crowded it had become in this little room. Security personal, prison guards, an interpreter and Thor’s brother. Loki was kneading his fingers, giving away that he was nervous. At least he also wasn’t completely sure about what was going to happen. He couldn’t be worried about Helblindi though, everybody knew that Helblindi wasn’t running any danger. He was going to meet a devout member of his fan club. This was still a bad idea though. Thor had done his best to stop this from happening, but he had failed. Now he could only sit here and watch the scene unfold like everybody else.

Leaning back in his chair Thor ignored the people around him and instead focused on the screen in front of him. They had to get to it any second now. Uneasily Thor tapped his fingers against his knee, waiting for things to get started. Helblindi was going in there completely alone. Thor couldn’t understand why his father was allowing that. Naturally, Helblindi had nothing to fear, but it was still completely unorthodox.

Eventually the door of the interrogation room was opened and Thor could see Þórirsson’s head moving up. Alright, at least he looked surprised to see Helblindi, but not displeased. Why would he? Þórirsson made an effort to stand up what the cuffs made impossible. He started talking and Thor glanced at the interpreter who instantly began translating.

“My prince, I hope you will be willing to forgive me that I cannot greet you with the respect that I owe you.” To emphasize his point Þórirsson tugged at the cuffs. “Thank you for the immense honour of coming to see me.”

Thor tried to hear anything treacherous in Helblindi’s voice, but he couldn’t make anything out. “There is no need for a formal greeting. I am here to talk to you.”

Slowly Helblindi sat down, leisurely crossed his legs as Þórirsson nodded. He was watching Helblindi like a drowning man would watch a drop of water. “Anything you want my prince.”

It was loyalty coming from a fanatic. Completely blind.

Helblindi took his time, he was closely watching the other man. Thor asked himself if they were already communicating. If they had some secret way of talking.

“How are you? Are they treating you well?”

Instantly Thor glanced at Loki who quickly avoided his gaze. Sure, that was the first thing Helblindi asked a Frjál member in prison. If the people from Valhalla were abusing him. Nothing else mattered to him.

“I am doing alright.”

This time Helblindi nodded. “I have talked to your wife and family. They are still at home in Útgarðar, doing fine. They are not being harassed.“

Why were they letting them talk? All Helblindi did was reassuring a terrorist and asking him about his wellbeing.

“Thank you, my prince. I owe you more than I could ever repay you. Not in one life.”

It was hard to listen to this, but Loki should hear it. Perhaps it would help him realising a few things. Thor desperately hoped so.

“I deeply regret the circumstances of our meeting and how you came here. And although I can understand your reasoning and your pain that made you do what you eventually did, I cannot
condone your actions.”

Of course he couldn’t. He would incriminate himself and he couldn’t have that.

No disappointment was visible on Þórirsson’s face, he remained passive, closely watching Helblindi. “I am aware, my prince. Unfortunately in these times we are living in it’s necessary for some to stand up against injustice and cruelty. To grant my daughter a better life. To ensure you will one day ascend to the throne that is rightly yours.”

What more did Loki need?

“An act of violence cannot be the solution. It could never be considered as a legitimate change of power. There are other ways to guarantee our freedom and equality. This is where I have to ask you for forgiveness.”

What?

“As your prince I have failed you. I could not inspire enough faith in me, you didn’t believe I would be capable to change our home for the better. For all Jotun children. That is my only purpose and responsibility. Jotunheim and all the people living in it. I could not make you believe in me and therefore I have to ask for your forgiveness.” Despite the foreign words Thor could make out the softness in Helblindi’s voice. Right now he couldn’t tell where Helblindi was trying to go with this, but it worried him deeply.

For a short moment it was completely silence. Here and in the interrogation room. Þórirsson didn’t say anything, he only looked back at Helblindi and his expression was so neutral and calm. It was impossible to interpret.

Eventually, a minute could have passed, Þórirsson spoke up again, hushed and slow. The words remained without translation, so Thor turned to the interpreter who seemed confused, not sure what to do. When she noticed Thor’s eyes on her she stated helplessly. “I cannot… he is not speaking Jótnar anymore. I don’t know what language he is speaking. I cannot translate.”

Thor’s heart skipped one beat and then sped up to what had to be an unhealthy rhythm. His eyes darted to Loki who looked paler than usual and this time returned his gaze. “I don’t understand either…”

Quickly Thor turned back to the screen and the speakers confirmed the thought that had instantly come to his mind. Helblindi had no trouble understanding Þórirsson, he was answering him.

“What about the Lord?”

There was a slight hesitation before the interpreter answered. “I do not understand him either.”

“Loki?”

No response.

“Loki?!”

His brother wasn’t answering and when Thor stared at him, Loki merely shook his head. They had no time to lose. “Go in there. Stop them from talking. Bring the prisoner back into his cell.”

A part of him waited for Loki to protest, but that didn’t happen. Only seconds later the door to the interrogation room was pushed open and the security personal swarmed inside. Helblindi was on his
feet instantly. “What is the meaning of this?”

“My Lord, the conversation is over. The prisoner will be brought back to his cell.”

“You will not touch this man. I was guaranteed an undisturbed conversation with him. I demand you to leave us alone.”

“I am sorry, my Lord, but you have no right.”

“I am the firstborn son of Laufey Ymirson and a direct descendant of Lopthæna, Queen of Jotunheim and all of Asgard, I am the heir to Jotunheim. This man is Jotun and therefore I have every right. Leave us! Now!”

Thor balled his hands into fists as he saw Helblindi being angry. A rare sight, but it seemed that he was finally losing his composure. The situation needed to be de-escalated.

The security was still doing their job, unimpressed by his demand. Two of them were walking around the table to get Þórirsson who was not resisting, saying a couple of words. Then Thor had trouble keeping up with what was happening, since the interpreter and Helblindi were talking at the same time.

“Please, my prince, you don’t have to humiliate yourself by speaking their language. Not because of me.”

“I have never witnessed such audacity! I am the son of a Lord and I was guaranteed this time with the prisoner.”

He had raised his voice and his deep blue eyes were probably trying to pierce the head of security’s skin as he was slowly approaching Helblindi. “My Lord, I am apologizing for the interruption and the inconvenience, but we are acting on behalf of the crown. May I escort you back to the conference room where you can discuss the situation with the ones in charge?”

Thor had no idea if the man had really wanted to touch Helblindi’s arm or if his intention had been to merely show Helblindi the direction in which he was supposed to be going. There was no way to tell, Helblindi slapped his hand away with a seething glare and then things became instantly chaotic.

Þórirsson’s passive and calm demeanour had turned into extreme aggression. He was yelling, trying to get out of the hold of the security person. A scuffle was the result, Þórirsson thrust up his elbow, smashing it against one man’s nose.

A door was loudly being slammed shut and Thor could see that his brother wasn’t in the room anymore. The interpreter was quietly translating. “Get your hands off him! I will kill you if you dare to touch him again! Step away from him!”

Inside Thor’s chest his heart was racing as he got up and followed Loki. Where else should he go but towards the interrogation room. By now they must have got Helblindi out of there. Lord of Jotunheim or not. For Thor this should be a triumph. Helblindi had clearly shown that there was a connection between and that he didn’t care if they knew about it or not. Still there were things that they weren’t supposed to hear.

No matter what, every person who was somehow associated with politics knew that things shouldn’t be discussed in a corridor. Also they most definitely shouldn’t be yelled. At least it was in Old Norse.

“… for permission and he assured it! They had no right to interrupt us! Why am I even surprised?! Your family’s word is meaningless! They think they can do anything because we’re Jotun!”
“Your conversation wasn’t stopped, because you are Jotun, but because you started talking in another language! What were you saying?”

“You couldn’t have given me a clearer sign of disrespect and distrust!”

“Helblindi, tell me what he told you!”

Thor turned around the corner and there he saw them. Standing right in front of each other and their faces were one and the same. Lovely features contorted by anger and eager for confrontation. Loki’s rage easily understandable, he had to feel the harsh sting of betrayal. Helblindi on the other side had no right to be surprised or irritated. Only minutes ago it had been him who had violated all the trust that they had been feeling to put in him. That Loki had put in him.

“Stop yelling! The both of you. You are not in the private rooms of the palace! None of this belongs here!”

His presence was only noticed when Thor spoke up and they both stared at him. The tension and aggression could almost be felt physically, but Thor wasn’t going to let that distract him. He needed to get them out of there and then sort the situation out. It was vital to find out what Helblindi and Þórirsson had been discussing.

“You will not tell me another time where I am supposed to go or to be!” Helblindi pressed the words through his gritted teeth and the intensity of his eyes made Thor believe that he was tempted to hit him.

Alright, the Jotun could make the situation worse if he wanted to, but Thor wasn’t going to play along with his game. “My Lord, you had indeed permission to talk to the prisoner. You were instructed about the rules of this conversation. The prisoner broke them by talking in another language. You should have refused to answer, but you did not. You also broke the rules. Nobody surveilling the conversation could tell what you were saying. Therefore the conversation was ended. You should be well aware of the reasoning.”

Helblindi let out the bitter laugh that Thor knew very well by now. “If the prisoner started talking in another language, then obviously because he didn’t want you to know what he was saying.”

Now it was Loki who joined it. “He has no right to keep anything from the surveillance. He was not talking to his lawyer.”

Helblindi shot Loki a dark glance. “I am a lawyer and I am his Lord. That man has every right to confine in me and without anybody else listening.”

“You are not a defence lawyer.” Loki’s voice lacked its usual bite, but Thor wasn’t going to hold back. “What were you saying? You are obligated to tell us.”

Raising his chin slightly Helblindi was clearly defying him. “I am not obligated to tell you anything. You are in no position to demand anything.”

“Helblindi, you cannot keep that from us.”

Thor agreed with Loki. “Even if you refuse to cooperate, we will find out anyway after analysing the video.”

Another bitter laugh. “Good luck with that. I am leaving.”

Neither of them made an attempt to stop him as he walked away. Loki exhaled loudly. “I will talk to
him later on. When he had a chance to calm down.”

“I am curious to hear your explanation for that. He was asking for this talk and then they talk in a way that nobody can understand. A Frjál member and him.”

Just like Helblindi Loki had no trouble with meeting Thor’s eyes. “I do not know what happened in there, but it wasn’t Helblindi who started it.”

“Nonetheless he seemed at great ease with a terrorist.”

“We will find out what has been said and I will talk to my fiancé about what happened. I am sure he will apologize.”

Thor could tell that Loki was still overcome with anger, but trying to play it down. Especially in front of him. “I doubt that. It is more likely that he will demand an apology himself.”

“Well, he is not going to get one.” Loki muttered under his breath.

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Back at the palace Loki searched in vain in his rooms for his fiancé. He knew though with certainty that Helblindi had come back here. The fact that Helblindi had probably returned to the rooms that had been offered to him as a guest added fuel to the fire that was burning inside of Loki’s chest.

Helblindi had gone behind his back and Loki had no idea why. His fiancé was going to tell him, Loki was going to make sure of that. Loki’s body was tingling with anger, but he was still trying to keep a somewhat cool head. There was no doubt about Helblindi’s intelligence and determination, Loki didn’t believe that he would discuss incriminating things with a Frjál member on camera. Or that there was a reason for Helblindi to incriminate himself in any way.

Loki violated all forms of etiquette when opened the main doors without knocking. Helblindi was sitting in a chair, a book in his lap.

“You’ve fled from my rooms.”

“I didn’t feel like being in your presence when I came back.” Helblindi replied in a dry but calm way.

“Me?! What have I done to earn your anger? It was you who violated the procedures and you left me standing there like a fool!”

Soundly Helblindi closed his book and pushed it aside. “You let them walk in there and throw me out like a criminal! You watched on a screen and you didn’t say anything!”

So now Helblindi was going to blame him? “What? In your opinion I was supposed to let you converse with a terrorist if nobody is able to understand what you are saying? I had no idea what you were doing! So I am asking you now – what were you doing?”

“That man showed great trust in me and I am not going to violate it.”

“That means you are violating mine?”

“This has nothing to do with you.”

“It has everything to do with me! I vouched for you! Because I thought you would help us find out why he did what he did and who was behind it. Instead you privately converse with him and refuse
Fighting with Helblindi felt dirty and awful. Loki couldn’t find any satisfaction in it whatsoever. Too much was at stake and he felt too disappointed. He wondered if Helblindi was experiencing the same thing.

“You should know why I did what I did.”

“He is a terrorist! He tried to kill my brother!”

“He is Jotun!” Helblindi shouted, his blue eyes flashing. “He is Jotun and therefore under my protection! It does not matter what he did or what prison he is in. It is my duty to protect any Jotun and I would never reject him if he wants to tell me something in secret.”

Speechless Loki stared at him. It was one thing to know about someone’s devotion and actually experiencing it. “If he told you something about the assassination attempt, then you have to share it.”

“He did not. He said nothing that would be of importance to you or the investigation.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Loki was angrily staring at him and when his phone went off, he was tempted to ignore it. To continue this conversation until Helblindi would tell him every single detail. After today’s events though Loki knew it would be reasonable to answer this call.

“Yes?”

“Your highness, the video footage has been analysed by several linguistic experts.”

Good, then Loki would finally know what they had been saying. He would have preferred to learn it from Helblindi, but that seemed no longer like an option. “And?”

“They have not been able to identify the unknown language. They doubt that it is an actual language.”

Feeling strangely numb Loki muttered a few words of thanks before looking again at Helblindi. “What language were you speaking? No excuses or elusions. I am your future spouse. The trúa demands of you to trust me. I trusted you by letting you walk in there, now give me back that trust by telling me what language you used.”

Helblindi’s features visibly softened and Loki suddenly knew that he would tell him. The fierce doubt instantly faded away and immense relief washed over him.

After slowly licking his lips Helblindi nodded. “It is a constructed language. About 500 years old. Invented by Jotun guerrillas during the civil war. To have a secure way of communication… in case of betrayal. Call it a code if you will. Only taught to a few selected individuals. Today only a few dozen people should be able to speak it.”

A painful knot was forming in Loki’s stomach. “A Frjáls code, you mean.”

“No, that is not what I mean, but since the majority of Frjáls members were resistance fighters, it is very likely that the code is still present within the organisation.”

Loki huffed, running one hand down his face. “Obviously, he spoke it… why do you?”

“It has been taught to every member of my family for 500 years.”

A little out of his depth Loki shook his head before sitting down on Helblindi’s chair. His head was
throbbing and he with certainty that they weren’t going to find out what had been said if Helblindi wasn’t willing to share that information.

The silence which had settled in between them was destroyed by a beeping noise. Loki recognized it as Helblindi’s phone. The other one took a quick look at it before lowering the device. His eyes met Loki’s. “My father and my brother are coming to Valhalla. Tomorrow. To discuss the engagement.”

Loki fought the urge to laugh.
Hello everybody,

So I guess this it? The one chapter before the inevitable climax. Buckle your seats for the bumpy ride ;)

Have fun

“You are obligated to share any information. By law and by your conscience. What has he told you?” Odin wasn’t going to raise his voice, a king should not do that. Moreover it would not serve any purpose, Helblindi wasn’t going to be fazed by harsh words. It was upsetting how hard it was to get an honest, raw reaction from the young Lord. Threats to his own person would be as useless as disgraceful, Odin could imagine them simply bouncing off of him.

Jötunheim wouldn’t. Every Jötun political issue would set him off. That meant to ruin all the progress that had been made. What for? A couple of words that had been shared and that perhaps had no meaning at all. Not enough to risk an open confrontation and yet Odin knew that they couldn’t back away. They could not let a member of Ymirson family or anyone else simply walk away from such a despicable deed. They could have been watching him exchanging dangerous information with a Frjáls member. There was no way of knowing, Helblindi would never tell them. So what did Odin think? He could not tell.

Helblindi had been born into Frjáls. No matter how honest he was about his intentions of reuniting the country, he had been raised within a certain set of beliefs. One that was toxic and incompatible with the way that Odin saw the world. Or how his children lived their life. On the surface everything might look fine for a while, but as soon as you took a closer look the cracks were showing.

There were a few things that Odin would never doubt. For example the simple fact that Helblindi would never turn in a Frjáls if he had the means to. Loki was only slowly coming to that realisation, but he was a smart young man. Eventually that knowledge would settle in. Until then the damage might not be able to be undone.

If Odin had the ability to look into that beautiful head. Helblindi was holding it high and his blue eyes were unafraid and, more importantly, unashamed. Not a hint of regret to be found. And Odin could understand, why would you regret something that felt completely and utterly right to you?

“I am this man’s Lord and whatever he told me, he told me in complete trust. Trust that I am not going to abuse. I have no right to share what he said.” Helblindi had this cold calm about him. The calmness of a man who wasn’t convinced but who knew that he was in the right. Therefore he had nothing to fear and nothing could shake him. For him these words were so easy to say like to claim that the sun was going to rise in the east.

“You are wrong. You are not this man’s Lord. You are the son of his Lord. Your conversation is in no way under any kind of protection. Even if it was, he has been classified as a terrorist and therefore he doesn’t have the right to keep any kind of secret.”
Odin felt his hands growing cold when Helblindi frowned and blinked, seemingly confused. It was unsettling to see the difference between him in the interrogation room and him now. How he had completely lost his composure and how he was sitting here now. As if he owned the entire world. Because he knew that they couldn’t do anything to him.

“We must have a different definition of the term terrorism. Þórirsson tried to become an assassin. One attempted murder does not equal terrorism.”

Odin was talking to a lawyer. One that wasn’t afraid to twist words to hide the obvious. “He is a member of Frjáls.”

“I still fail to see how that has anything to do with terrorism.” Helblindi had the guts to raise his eyebrow as if he truly couldn’t understand what Odin was talking about. It was the nonchalant way he acted. To make a point and to provoke. In front of Odin was a smart young man, he knew better, so all of this was calculated.

“Your refusal to cooperate is not going to change this situation. It is merely going make people question your motivation for getting engaged with my son.”

The corner of Helblindi’s mouth twitched in amusement and Odin thought to himself if Laufey’s son was really ten steps ahead or if he merely liked people to believe that. Every word and every gesture was so perfectly convincing that it was hard to tell. Which made the situation all the more dangerous.

“I am sure Loki has explained in detail what made us do what we did and so have I. I see no point in going over it again. For a change I could tell you that I like his dry sense of humour and that he doesn’t bother to roll his eyes in public. More people should do that.”

They were not getting anywhere and Helblindi didn’t even grant them to admit that he had steered them right into a political disaster.

At this point Loki seemed unable to remain silent although it wasn’t his turn to talk. “Helblindi, please… We talked about this. You don’t have to be nice. Just try and be diplomatic.”

Those blue eyes focused on Odin’s son. Too intense for his liking. Once more calculating. Helblindi knew what he was doing and that also concerned Loki. Eventually Helblindi gave a slight nod of his head, even lowered his eyes. Odin wasn’t going to be naïve enough to interpret this as a sign of submission.

“Alright. No matter what my affiliation with your family is or with your son in particularly… You have to understand that it is my responsibility to protect my countrymen. To look out for their interests. You didn’t hear me argue that he should not have been arrested or that he should not be in prison. I do not condone any violent act of this nature. Nonetheless he is Jotun and therefore I would never disrespect his wish of sharing a piece of information with me. It was only meant for me and I am not going to betray his trust.”

It sounded all so noble. Until you reminded yourself of the fact that they were talking about a terrorist who had tried to kill the future king of this country. Odin’s son. Who was sitting with them at this table. Odin would have done a countless number of things to spare Thor this experience, but there was no way around it. Loki had made Helblindi an even bigger part in all of their lives and it was also a matter that Thor could not handle on his own. As much Odin wanted to take a step back and let Thor do his first steps, this was the wrong moment and the wrong issue.

“Since my fiancé will not tell you what he has already told me… for some reason… I will tell you.” Loki shot the young Jotun a glance, half a smile was playing around his lips. There was a bit of a
challenge in it, but it did nothing to reassure Odin that this relationship might be equal. “Þórirsson didn’t say anything related to the assassination attempt.”

Thor let out a silent huff which got him the attention of the entire room. Odin decided to let things unfold on and do nothing for a moment. To see how Thor would deal with Helblindi and the other way round. Since the Jotun had already proven that he had a lot less patience with Odin’s eldest son.

“Anything you might want to add, your highness?”

“Oh, I am just thinking about how insanely convenient all of this is. Your cooperation. First you give us a list of Frjáls members who are all coincidentally untraceable. Which makes it more or less useless. Then you talk with Þórirsson, he tells you something in a secret code that nobody knew about and that even my brother cannot understand despite speaking Jǫtnar. Nobody can understand what he told you and refuse to tell us, but fortunately for everybody he did not say anything of value. Brings up the question why he said it in code anyway. It is all so wonderfully convenient.”

Odin gave a little nod, because Thor had made a good point. One that had to be made. Helblindi liked to present himself as the person who was doing everything to build a bridge, he was even carrying the bricks himself. Unfortunately they were hollow on the inside and the bridge would collapse as soon as somebody stepped on it. Odin was afraid that this somebody could end up being Loki.

“I promised you cooperation, I did not oblige myself to throw my countrymen under the bus who didn’t commit any crime.”

“Who didn’t commit…” Thor was about to raise his voice, but a quick glance from Loki surprisingly stopped him. “I am sure my fiancé wants to rephrase that.”

Now Helblindi was the one receiving an intense glare, but he seemed rather annoyed than impressed. Eventually he sighed softly. “Alright. You are not going to see the day that I will send a Jotun to prison for going out on the street because of desperation. That is never going to happen.”

“Would you condone everything that one of your countrymen does as long as they do it out of desperation?” Thor asked that question with an unexpected calm, but also undeniably serious.

Helblindi’s eyes turned to Thor and Odin would have given a fortune to be able to look inside of his head. To understand what gave him strength and what could shake him. Underneath that cold stare and all that beauty was just another person. Helblindi had goals and fears like everybody else. It would be in their favour if Loki were able to look beneath the surface, but Odin doubted that Loki would like what he would find there. Or if Helblindi would let him see anything at all.

“I honestly do not know, your highness.” Helblindi finally answered and Thor slightly shook his head in resignation. “You are not even trying to make one step towards us.”

“Are you trying to make a step towards me?”

“The Language Act as it has existed for hundreds of years is gone, isn’t it?”

“Exactly and that was your brother and my doing. You merely signed the paperwork.”

This was another fight in the beginning, so Odin crushed it immediately. “We are not talking about hypothetical ideas. I am asking the heir to Jotunheim what the prisoner has told him. Despite our rank and privileges all of us are still living under the rule of law. The law is very simple. The prisoner has no right to any secret communication. It does not matter if it was with you or anybody else. It is your duty to share whatever he has told you. May it be essential or completely unimportant. My Lord, I
am waiting.”

The Jotun could easily switch between them, his eyes now resting on Odin. Unafraid and cocky. Or was it something more? Odin didn’t know. When he looked at that young man he could still see the fireworks that had been launched the day he was born. By the people he was protecting now.

“I have already stated that I am not going to tell what he told me. There is nothing you can say to change that. So please, let us stop wasting time. I am not going to tell you and there is nothing you can do about it. I am a descendant of Ymir, you cannot seriously expect me to abuse a Jotun’s trust in me and tell his words to the descendants of Búri. Some things are never going to happen.”

Laufey’s son was right. Some things were never going to happen.

“What a healthy foundation for a marriage.” Thor shook his head and Helblindi was clearly unbothered while Loki felt the need to chime in. “Every relationship is built on compromise.”

“I don’t see him compromising a lot.”

“In this case I am not and I am not going to repeat myself. The day is not going to come when I share information about a Jotun with a descendant of Búri against the Jotun’s wishes. It’s as simple as that. This is where we are now. All four of us know that I am not going to face any consequences for this conversation. Neither are you or anyone else. Loki pointed out the only thing that should matter. He did not say anything about the attack or any other plans or the people involved.”

Helblindi wasn’t like his father and yet the similarities continued to strike Odin with full force. The calm with which he was talking, his stance and position which were both unyielding. But there was one important difference. They shared the same coldness when they talked, but Helblindi sometimes liked to end his phrases with a little smile that didn’t lack playfulness and spite. Little details that were attractive and repellent at the same time.

With that thought in mind Odin concentrated on Loki. His youngest son was watching the Jotun and Odin could tell that he was attentive, listening closely and going over Helblindi’s words in his head. Unfortunately that wasn’t everything and Odin couldn’t fight the feeling that Helblindi had brought over him with his birth. Looking at him Odin thought he could still see the fireworks.

The softness in Loki’s gaze could neither be denied nor overlooked. Not just that, Loki was intrigued and he enjoyed listening to Helblindi, even when he emphasised how he would not share information even when it could be vital for their family.

It was an effort to keep his voice calm and ignore the intense and unstopping sting of fear that Helblindi provoked within him. Of losing his son. Or even worse of Loki becoming the pawn in someone else’s game.

“My Lord, if there is no trust between us at all, how am I supposed to entrust you with one of the most precious things in this entire country?”

Helblindi raised his chin a little bit, not enough for an open challenge, but enough to not let anyone forget who they were dealing with. “You entrusted your firstborn to a Midgardian who doesn’t have a shrine to talk to her ancestors. It was his decision to make, not yours. So this is going to be Loki’s decision.”

This was exactly what wouldn’t let Odin breathe easy. Doubting if this actually was Loki’s decision or if he was still capable of making them.

Right now Loki didn’t use his words like he usually would to make his opinion clear. Instead Loki
hinted at another smile and placed his hand on Helblindi’s which was lying on the table. They entwined their fingers and Odin thought about Thor’s description of what had happened today. That Loki had been furious, just like him, about Helblindi’s stunt during the interrogation. One talk later he was sitting here, smiling and nodding off whatever Helblindi was saying. Uncaring that Helblindi knew a secret way of communication with Frjáls.

Odin felt his own son slipping through his fingers, throwing himself into the claws of a man that neither of them could see through. This was something Odin could not let happen. Not as king and even less so as a father.

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“How about we steal some time? Tonight all of this is going to be really uncomfortable. I’d like to get away a bit before that.”

Raising an eyebrow Loki fought the urge to laugh. “You mean it hasn’t been uncomfortable until now?”

Rather carelessly Helblindi shrugged. “Nothing that I didn’t expect. So what do you think? Let’s get out of here.”

Loki felt temptation pushing him, dragging at his limbs to go with Helblindi wherever he planned to go. To feel like for a couple of hours like they were back in Brazil with nobody around them. That wasn’t going to happen though, because too much had happened the day before and even more was still going to happen tonight. “I do believe that we should rather talk.”

“Talking is something we can do anywhere. I am getting tired of this palace. I’ll let you decide what we’re going to do.”

“How generous.” This time Loki laughed and it was so easy to give in after all, because Loki wanted to leave the palace behind just like Helblindi. “Alright. How good are you on horseback?”

“Amazing.”

“Then let’s get going.”

Without losing any more time they got into the next limousine and drove out of the city. At the stables Loki let Helblindi choose a horse while he was greeting Sleipnir and apologizing for neglecting him so much. After a quick change of clothes they got on their horses and rode up the snow covered hill. “You can never do something like that again, do you hear me?”

“Are you back now at trying to tell me what to do?”

“In this case, yes. I am saying you cannot protect your countrymen, but you will never let me walk in another situation like that again. I vouched for you and I was convinced that I knew what was going to happen. I had no idea that there was the possibility that you could start chatting in a secret code, because I didn’t know about the secret code itself. You didn’t tell me. Something like that can’t happen again. I will not tolerate that.” Loki wasn’t going to let him have a way out, it was important that there were no misunderstandings.

Helblindi shot him half a smile, but it had bite like so often. This could easily end up in a fight, some points had to be made clear. “So what you demand of me is not having any secrets ever again?”

Would that be so bad? If Loki wanted to know him inside out and read him like a book? He was never going to be able to do that, both of them knew, but Loki liked to play the thought. “Yes, that's
exactly what I want. To know what you’re planning and I want to work as a team. That’s what we’ve had in the mind from the very beginning.”

Smiling softly but somewhat amused Helblindi pulled the reins. “Correct me if I am wrong, but I am fairly sure that we have already been working as a team. About the secrets, it’s not going to happen and you know that. You’re going to have secrets too. Don’t put on that look. Don’t start denying it. Some things are as clear as the sky on a cold winter day.”

Instead of opening his mouth to protest Loki thought about it and respective position would indeed make it incredibly hard to not have secrets every now and then. So it was all about compromising again. “Alright, new try. You cannot have secrets when it concerns my family. I still want you to tell me what Þórirsson said, but I can understand why you won’t. I am not going to dig deeper, but there can never be another situation like this again and if there happens to be a familiar situation and they tell you anything, you’ll share it with me. Otherwise none of this has any meaning. Do you understand?”

“Yes, more importantly, I accept. Nonetheless I need you to remember and to keep in mind everything I have said today. To you, your father and your brother. I’ve meant every single word.”

“I know that you have meant it and I understand. That doesn’t mean I am less angry…” Loki sighed, but Helblindi reacted with half a smirk. “You’ve stopped being angry yesterday.”

“That doesn’t mean I wasn’t furious.”

“Yes, so was I. But what is the point of being angry at each other when everybody else is also furious at us?” Helblindi shrugged and Loki felt the hot stones once more in his stomach. They had first appeared during the conversation with all four of them. Now they were back and Loki tried not to think of his father’s eyes and how they had examined Helblindi. How much repugnance they had expressed within a single glance.

So much about Laufey’s son. Loki hadn’t been blind, he had seen that Odin was disappointed in him, more than that. Probably he had expected Loki to make Helblindi talk, to make him tell them what Þórirsson had shared with him. Loki had done none of that.

“I know… for a second I felt like the son of Peter the Great when father looked at me today…” Loki bit his lip and Helblindi huffed. “I doubt that we’ve gone far enough for your father to arrest you for conspiring against him and throwing you into the dungeon before torturing you until you die. You are feeling a little dramatic, aren’t you?”

Dramatic or not, Loki felt his heart skipping a beat. “I thought I was the historian and you the lawyer? How come you are so well informed about the forgotten son of a great emperor?”

The smirk on Helblindi’s face directly got under his skin and sent a pleasant shiver down Loki’s spine. Something so strong and yet so simple. It should be worrying how easily Helblindi took control of the situation. Even his body. More shockingly so, Loki enjoyed it. So much that he wanted to fall into it and lose his mind.

“I had to impress Romanoff somehow.”

“Tonight I am going to smother you with one of the pillows.”

Winking at him Helblindi spurred his stallion and Loki released a long breath before going after him.

The next hour was wonderfully liberating, breathing the cold air and enough the sun on his face. And watching Helblindi of course. How he gracefully conducted his horse, smiled and looked like
an entirely different person than only a few hours ago. Yet they were the very same. A casual, almost carefree man and the stoic man with cold eyes who wouldn’t back down if someone put a gun to his head. Both of them were equally beautiful. In his convictions and his smiles.

An unfamiliar warmth spread inside Loki’s chest while watching him. Once more such a simple thing and yet it was capable of casting away the dark thoughts that had been weighing him down the entire day. Loki felt lithe, easy. And there was something else. An intense tingle in his fingertips that quickly took a hold of his whole body. Heat was joining the warmth and they were so easy to tell apart for being two very different things. Yet closely related.

After bringing the horses back to the stables and giving them to the grooms, Loki took another moment to observe his fiancé. Helblindi was gently caressing the head of the beautiful animal, then half turned to him. He was smiling, his cheeks slightly red from the cold air. In his riding boots he looked completely put together and casual at the same time. It was then that Loki felt his thoughts slowing down, almost coming to a halt. There was nothing he could do about it and he was quite willing to let it happen.

Overcome with impatience and longing Loki grabbed Helblindi’s and pulled him along. An action that earned him a surprised yelp and then a laugh. Unable to react to it for now Loki dragged him into the main house, into the apartment on the ground floor. As the door fell shut behind him Loki stopped, his hands wound tightly around the seam of Helblindi’s jacket. As he was leaning in Loki suddenly found himself slowing down. Maybe because he wanted to look at Helblindi’s blue eyes a little longer. Heat and warmth were fighting for dominance and then they were one.

Helblindi looked back at him, not smiling now, but his expression was completely open. Loki could see beyond the surface and a glimpse of his soul. Something that Loki could never possess, but the hunger for it devoured him anyway. It made him dizzy to see the same hunger in Helblindi’s eyes.

“I…” Loki’s mouth had run dry as he tried to find words for something that he didn’t know how to describe. Which seemed ridiculous since talking had always been Loki’s strength. A single person shouldn’t be allowed to have such an impact. That thought made Loki utter a gentle laugh and now Helblindi was smiling. “What?”

“I think you know.” Loki finally muttered and Helblindi had one second to smirk before Loki kissed him. As their lips touched the heat inside his chest had him go up in flames. Feverishly his fingers started opening buttons and flies as they kissed and Helblindi’s hands were doing the exact same. Despite the rush and need there was still some laughter since the riding boots were annoyingly hard to get off. It was between even more kisses and caresses that Loki heard two words whispered against his skin. “I know.”

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Thor could see Loki smiling at Laufey’s son when they entered the salon. They weren’t holding hands but they easily could have been. That would not have made a difference. Yesterday could have been 10 years ago. Frigga greeted them with open arms and Thor felt his stomach clenching painfully. From here it looked like he had them eating out of his hands.

Pressing his lips together tightly Thor served himself at the bar and filled another glass. Turning around Thor held out the glass. “My Lord.”

Helblindi came over while Loki remained where he was, talking to Frigga.

“Here. To your health.” Helblindi accepted the drink and showed his white teeth in a grin. “Is it poisoned?”
“I am not good at secrecy.” Thor replied drily and Helblindi took a sip. “A little too sweet for my
taste and unfortunately I do not drink. Not when negotiations are going on.”

“I wouldn’t want you to become too comfortable.”

There was no response, Helblindi kept on smiling, not having a care in the world.

“Don’t get the wrong impression. You have gotten away with this, but that doesn’t mean I will not
keep an eye on you.”

Tilting his head Helblindi slightly arched an eyebrow, but Thor didn’t miss the corner of his mouth
twitching. “Are you familiar with Armand-Jean du Plessis, your highness?”

Confused by the seemingly random comment Thor shook his head. “Am I supposed to be?”

“He is better known under the name of Cardinal Richelieu. First minister under Louis XIII, building
the foundation for the absolute monarchy. A man of your rank and education should have heard of
him before.”

That smile was promising Thor misery. “Of course.”

“Then you should also know that one doesn’t have to be king to rule. I am looking forward to the
dinner, I am sure it is going to be marvellous.” After mockingly bowing his head Helblindi turned
away again, leaving Thor with cold rage in his stomach. There was no time to even think about it
though since the staff announced the arrival of the Lord of Jotunheim.
Hello everybody,
Okay, let's get to it :) You've waited long enough, didn't you?
Have fun :)

A cold breeze went through the salon and Loki’s eyes darted from his brother to his fiancé. From
cold rage to glee. Rather concerned Loki mumbled lowly into Helblindi’s ear. “What did you say to
him?”

“I pushed some buttons.” Helblindi answered carefree, looking as beautiful as always when he
smiled and Loki felt himself wanting to go into two different directions at once. There was frustration
that Helblindi even now actively tried to bring out the worst in people and at the same time Loki
understood what game he was playing. There was a very good chance that Loki would do the same
if they were dealing with diplomats or ministers. Whatever Helblindi had said, Loki was sure that
his own words had done similar damage to the American delegation.

This was more important though. These were their families and Helblindi could easily take it one
step too far. On the other hand Loki wouldn’t want to miss the excitement that Helblindi’s character
and boldness caused him. Unfortunately it was very much possible to admire a quality and scorn it at
the same time. Was that hypocritical since Loki possessed the exact same trait?

“Buttons… you like to push those.” Loki muttered accusingly and Helblindi cocked his head,
offering him an ambiguous smirk. “Yes, I do, but those definitely aren’t the same buttons.”

Despite himself Loki felt tempted to smile at this comment and then he reminded himself of
Helblindi’s first night at the palace. How he had been sitting at the window, fleeing from the bed and
fighting with his father’s rejection in silence. Somebody as in control of themselves as Helblindi
could definitely hide his nervousness or even his fear. Helblindi was feeling just like him, Loki
needed to remind himself of that. Therefore he decided to let it go for now and reached for
Helblindi’s hand. “No more buttons. It’s going to be okay. You’ve said yourself that the both of us
could take over the world. Therefore we should be able to handle our parents.”

The expression on Helblindi’s face hardened. “Sure… that doesn’t mean it’s going to be pretty.
Here, you can have my drink.”

No, that wasn’t going to happen. Still Loki needed to remind himself of there was nothing their
parents could eventually do about their relationship. Even if they shouldn’t approve, there was no
way to force them to break up. One word to the public and they wouldn’t be able to break up at all.
Not that this prospect had anything threatening about itself.

“Your highnesses, it’s time.” Heimdall announced the impending arrival of the most important Lord
of the country.

It was Helblindi who let out an audible sigh and put the glass away. They had agreed on a non-
formal meeting, casual.

Eventually the doors were being opened and Loki felt how he instinctively straightened his posture. There was a hardly a man who could provoke the same reaction within him as Laufey Ymirson. Helblindi definitely shared his charisma, but it was warmer, attractive, it was pulling Loki in while Laufey was… cold. Not in a dangerous way, but it kept you on the edge, made you squirm when those blue eyes were drilling into you without giving anything away. It made Loki wonder if Helblindi possessed the same ability, but hadn’t decided to use it yet. On him at least.

Taking in Laufey’s appearance Loki let his eyes roam over the black frockcoat that clad a figure so similar to Helblindi’s. Lean, tall and a perfect head of pitch-black hair although he was in his late fifties or early sixties. Without a doubt, he was an attractive man, but his physique paled next to his son’s who had clearly inherited most of his facial features from his mother. Kind of like Loki.

With elegance and grace Laufey moved into the room, his eyes needed one second to find the person he was looking for. His eldest son who was still standing next to Loki, but had let go of his hand. Loki wanted to not feel upset by this.

“Helblindi.” As he heard his name Helblindi walked towards his father. He was greeting him in Jǫtnar. “It is good to see you, father.”

Loki could tell by his voice how different it was for him to talk to his father than to anybody else. The respect that lay in his voice.

For a moment Laufey merely looked at him, as if he was trying to read his face. Then his hand came up and to lie in the back of Helblindi’s neck. “Hello my son.” Pulling him closer to him Laufey pressed a soft kiss on Helblindi’s forehead.

After turning away from his father Helblindi greeted his little brother who Loki only noticed right now. It seemed unfair but understandable that Býleistr vanished next to two such impressive personalities. Still unfair.

“Hello little brother.”

“Hello.” Býleistr hinted at a smile, but the following hug was a lot warmer.

In the meantime Laufey had walked over to Frigga and greeted her by kissing her hand.

“My Lord, I hope the spirits blessed you with a safe journey. Thank you for honouring us with your visit.” Frigga’s smile was perfectly real, she was happy to see him and he didn’t seem to share that sentiment. “Thank you for the hospitality. I merely wish the occasion would be a more pleasant one.”

Loki was quickly getting an idea why Helblindi had fled from Jotunheim right to him. It was way too soon to become agitated, but Loki already felt that he was on his way there. Six people in the room and only one person on their side so far and as hard as it might be to speak such a fact out loud – Frigga’s opinion was the one that mattered the least. Or to express this in a more diplomatic way, she didn’t actually have the means to help them much. Their fathers were going to do the talking and Loki would bet his own head that things weren’t going to stay civil for a long time. Good thing that he didn’t plan on playing fair or nice either. Helblindi was right. Who could actually go up against them if they stuck together? Their opinions might differ on some important issues, but Loki knew that when it came down to their engagement, he could trust him blindly. Which he had to do or else what was the point in all of this?

“May I ask about the absence of the head of the family?” Laufey gave Frigga a questioning glance
and Loki wanted to point out that he still hadn’t greeted him or Thor.

“My father is still in a meeting with the ministers he will join us as soon as it has come to end. He promised not to let us wait for dinner.” It was pathetic that Loki felt the need to draw attention to himself and the second that Laufey’s blue eyes lay on him he felt small and like he didn’t know what he was talking about.

“You will excuse me, your highness, but I am rather interested in taking my son home than in food.” Laufey’s voice was dry and Loki tried to swallow the lump forming in his throat. So weren’t they even going to talk about it? Was he just here to get his son and then leave? The wheels in Loki’s head were turning, trying to come up with a clever reply, but help came quicker than expected.

“Helblindi is my brother’s guest and therefore he is free to stay at the palace as long as he pleases.”

Loki had to admit that Helblindi had his face under complete control, because he had to be absolutely dumbfounded right now. Thor supporting them and that in the very first second? A part of Loki hoped that Helblindi now felt bad for provoking Thor only minutes ago, but he was definitely smart enough to know that Thor was actually coming to their rescue. Instead he had jumped at an opportunity to seek a confrontation with the Jotun Lord. A rather calm and classy one for now. Maybe there was indeed hope.

“Your hospitality is admirable but this is a family matter. I would much rather handle it in private.”

“We’ve already talked about everything in private. Now it is about time to discuss matters with everybody involved.” Laufey didn’t react to Helblindi’s statement, but his younger brother’s mouth turned into a long thin line. How odd. After years of getting introduced to so many daughters and sons Loki had somehow forgotten that he might not be the ideal son-in-law for everybody.

A couple of words spoken and the air was already crackling with tension and bad energy. Odin’s presence would not make things easier, that was Loki’s only thought as the doors were being opened and the king walked through them. What followed was an icy but at least a befitting greeting. Since now they were all here the suggestion was being made that they should talk over dinner. It was rejected quickly as Laufey firmly shook his head. “Before any discussion I want to talk to my son. In private.”

“For me nothing has changed since our last conversation.” Despite all the respect for his father and one sleepless night it was definitely easier for Helblindi to stand up to him than Loki had imagined.

Not that it had any impact on Laufey. “You have already embarrassed me enough by leaving Jotunheim without giving notice. Do not contradict me in the house of Búri.”

It was not a coincidence that those words were spoken in Old Norse. Laufey wanted them all to hear and understand. That he was here despite himself, that he loathed their presence and that there could not be a worse humiliation than him and his son taking different sides with that other family present.

“Alright, father.” Helblindi ceded and that was definitely the right thing to do, nonetheless Loki felt an almost overwhelming sullen reaction rising up inside of him. When they walked past him Loki wanted to grab Helblindi’s arm and kiss him in front of everybody just to make a point. Not just kiss him, snog him, push his tongue into his mouth to make sure everybody got it. Highly inappropriate and there was nothing to gain from it. So Loki let it be although it was so very tempting.

Instead Loki didn’t move and only watched as father and son left the salon into the little adjoining room. From tension they went straight to awkwardness. An entire family and Laufey’s youngest son. The one who wore his hostility the most open. Who else but Frigga could try to start another
conversation. Not enough to break the ice, but at least to give them something to do, to be civil. A peaceful co-existence eve if it was just for now in this room. Loki knew that she was only doing this for him and it gave him a feeling of warmth.

“Býleistr, let us offer you a glass of wine. I hope your ride here wasn’t too exhausting since there is still a lot of construction going on the highway.” Loki liked to believe that he was as good as her at this. That he could make trivia sound so charming and not just like filler. Truth to be told, Loki didn’t know if it had any effect on Býleistr or if he was merely playing along, doing her a favour. He accepted the glass of wine and told them that a little waiting time didn’t matter if you wanted roads in good condition and therefore safe roads.

Not bad for a first attempt. Unfortunately Býleistr’s posture told them anyway that he didn’t want to be there and hat the whole idea of this meeting was making him sick. Loki was already starting to worry that Laufey and Helblindi would be gone for quite a while, but their conversation did not even take a minute. They came back and Helblindi shot Loki a glance that said ‘This is not going to be pretty’.

“I do believe that nobody of us is looking forward to this, but we should not make it unnecessarily harder on us. Let us talk over dinner. We should at least have an appropriate setting for this conversation.” Odin gestured at the open double wing doors that led into the dining room. Here they went.

Silence was ruling as dinner was served and as soon as the staff had cleared the room, Laufey stated what Loki had already known. That didn’t mean he was prepared for the cold and unbending tone that he used. “With all due respect to the Duke of Glæsisvellir, the idea of this so called engagement is absurd. I can and will not give my permission for this marriage to ever take place.”

Odin lacked the coldness, but he sounded just as convinced. “I agree.”

There was no biting his lip this time. “With all due respect to the king and the Lord of Jotunheim, our fathers, but we are not asking for permission. It is our decision to make.”

Helblindi was smirking. “I agree.”

Now suddenly everybody had something to say. “What are you even talking about? You must have lost your mind.” Býleistr was shaking his head and Loki would have loved to go for complete confrontation, but his mother beat him to it. “All of us have been surprised by our sons’ decision. Shocked. Displeased. Yet we owe them to listen to them. Let them explain to us what is going on in their minds and hearts.”

Loki felt Laufey’s eyes on him, but as he turned to look at him Laufey’s gaze had wandered to Helblindi. “I have already heard everything that my son has to say about this.”

“You haven’t heard a single word that I said.” Helblindi replied drily and the family quarrel continued straight away. “Because for the first time in your life, what you said didn’t make any sense. It’s like somebody stepped inside your mind and decided to redecorate everything.”

Helblindi huffed at his brother’s remark. “You are being ridiculous.”

Switching into Þjótnar Býleistr muttered a biting remark. “No, you are the one acting ridiculous. He is beneath you.”

A spark of anger rushed through Loki. “I can understand you very well.”

Býleistr looked at him and his blue eyes and nothing in common with Helblindi’s. “That was the
“Enough.” Laufey’s voice firm cut right through them. “We are here to talk, not to fight.”

“I would appreciate that. To talk and listen. Because until now I have not had the impression that anybody is listening to what we’re saying. Really listening.”

Odin’s hand was resting on the table, his food untouched. “I have been listening to you, young Lord, but listening to you and hear what you say does not immediately guarantee that you can change somebody’s opinion. Or that they will see things your way. You did nothing to dispel my doubts and fears about you.”

“Would you have liked me to lie? The way I feel about Loki doesn’t change my thoughts about you or the current government.”

Was there a person as stubborn as his fiancé? Who simply could not take a step back and try to be diplomatic.

Odin had no trouble using those words against him. “When my son came to us to tell us about the engagement, he presented it as an alliance of convenience. Are you telling us now that your engagement is motivated by mutual affection?”

Loki swallowed softly. By now there was no doubt that his family had realised that there was more to this relationship than strategy. That did not mean they could understand. In all honesty for once Loki had no idea if he should tell them the truth outright. He had no idea where this would go. Would admitting that he was in love with Helblindi change anything or even make things worse? If Loki had no idea how his own father would react, how should he know about Laufey?

“Why can’t it be both? We understand what this union can mean for the country and we appreciate each other. Sometimes things can work out perfectly like this.” Helblindi couldn’t possibly be as cool as he sounded right now. Nobody else was. Thor and Býleistr had the same expression on their faces. Struck with horror. At another time Loki would have cared and tried to find the right words to explain this to his brother. Now he couldn’t. All that mattered now was his father and Laufey. Who couldn’t get over themselves. Who either couldn’t see what they were doing or they simply didn’t care, because they did not want things to change. For Loki it was hard to understand that hatred could even run so deep. Especially when that magnificent man was sitting right next to him who was all kinds of beautiful. With a sharp, fascinating mind that one had to admire and that Loki wanted to dive into.

If a single member of that family was able to make Loki’s heart beat faster for all the right reasons then the trúa obligated him to believe that there was decency to be found in the entire line. That they would be able to see it if they only opened their eyes. Right in front of them.

“I did not raise my son to be this naïve.” Laufey stated dismissively before Loki felt the cold drill of his eyes on him. “What about you, your highness? You are without a doubt smart enough to appreciate my son’s intelligence and intellect. You have eyes, so you are attracted to his beauty. How is that supposed to be enough? It is superficial. It does not mean anything. Two young men finding out that they have more in common than they thought and taking a liking to each other has nothing to do with the history of our families or with politics. It does not change a thing.”

“I believe it does.”

“Do you?” Laufey turned back to Helblindi. “What about my son? Does your relationship with the second son of Odin change how you think about his older brother? Or about any other member of
this family?"

Inside his chest Loki could feel his heartbeat slowing down as dread was taking a hold of him. Perhaps he was the naïve one. Laufey knew Helblindi his entire life, all 28 years. Helblindi wasn’t the only one who knew how to push the right buttons.

Raising his head a little bit Helblindi probably tried to buy himself some time. Why? He wasn’t going to lie and Loki knew that.

“No, it doesn’t change how I feel Loki’s family. Or what happened 500 years ago. But that doesn’t mean I am blind to the advantages of this marriage. Even if it is just a sign. It will help the people to build bridges.”

“The people are not going to believe it.”

“I disagree.”

“Since your father has mentioned naivety…” Thor was drumming his fingers against the tabletop. “Do you believe us to be so naïve to even consider the thought that you entered this relationship for altruistic reasons? That you don’t want to gain anything from it but sending a sign?”

“Oh, I get a lot out of it.” Helblindi replied with all the spite he could come up with and Loki could see the fight already starting, but Laufey cut it short. “I have heard enough. In this unique situation Odin Búrisón and I see eye to eye. I am not going to give my son permission to pursue this relationship. I am not going to allow this marriage.”

The calm with which he said these words was cutting into Loki’s flesh. There was no anger or even strong insistence, because Laufey believed or even knew that he could simply brush this issue off. That a few words of him were enough to end whatever was happening between Helblindi and him.

Even though the Jotun’s intense stare was still making Loki feel uneasy, he was not going to remain silent now. “As we have said before we are not asking for permission and we do not need it.”

“You may speak for yourself, your highness, but not for my son.”

Loki’s eyes darted to Helblindi who had balled one hand into a fist. It was shaking. “I do not want to be the disobedient son, but I see myself forced into this very position.”

Hearing this Loki couldn’t be the only one surprised that Laufey wasn’t the one with the fierce reaction. It was Býleistr who spat his venom only a moment later. At least Loki thought he did. He could not understand a single word of what he was saying, it was the same artificial language that Loki had heard before. In the interrogation room. All that was there for him to interpret was his tone and it was angry, disappointed. Vile.

Slowly shaking his head Helblindi replied in Jótnar with a similar calm like his father. “Don’t. Just don’t.”

“I beg your pardon, young Lords, but it would be in favour of the conversation that we are trying to have if everybody spoke the same language.” Normally Frigga’s smile was disarming, but there was so much hostility and distrust sitting at this table that it was no use.

Býleistr reached for his wine and it seemed he was talking to his glass, rather than to anybody else. “It does not matter what language I say it in. My brother has lost his mind.”

The brothers looked at each other and Loki felt the tension and anger radiating from Helblindi. “We
will talk later.”

Loki’s fingers were itching. He wanted to reach out and touch his fiancé, run his fingers through his short hair and to take his hand. None that happened when Laufey decided to cut this unpleasant dinner short. “I do believe that now would be a good time for me to talk to you in private.” That was directed at Odin who nodded in agreement. It didn’t take more for Loki to snap. “There is nothing to be discussed without us.”

“There is, your highness. A lot actually.”

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A weight was lying on Odin’s shoulders and it was weighing him down. Not just old age and the presence of a man who wanted him dead. There was also the dawning realisation that the father was scaring him less than the son did. Perhaps Laufey was more ruthless, but Helblindi had arms that were reaching further. Words that were sweeter, but only if he wanted to.

“Serve yourself.” Odin gestured lazily at the small bar before sitting down in the cosy, big chair that reminded him once more of how strenuous this day had been.

Unlike him Laufey had no trouble standing on his own two feet. Casually he poured himself a scotch before taking a sip. Judging by how he subtly licked his lips Laufey enjoyed the taste. It was a sickening sight. To see the Lord of Jotunheim, the man who had ordered the hit on his son enjoying a glass of fine liquor in Odin’s office. Laufey didn’t have a greedy stare or was longingly observing the desk behind them or anything else in this room. No, he was walking around with ease, because he evidently thought he belonged here. That it was all his.

Just being here with him was a hardship. It had always been. Now Odin didn’t know how he found the strength to even look at him. When his entire being was repulsed by his presence and made his skin crawl. Made him think about all the possibilities he had as a king and which he wasn’t going to use although he was certain of this man’s guilt. Certain that he had paid for the gun that had been used to shoot at Odin’s child.

A wave of nausea threatened to come over him when he remembered the warm feeling of blood splatters hitting his skin. His son’s blood.

“A rather uncomfortable dinner, wasn’t it?” Laufey had turned to him and the idea of exchanging pleasantries with him had Odin snapping out of his stupor. It was unbearable.

“We are here to talk about the main issue and I am here because I want to know if all of this a big scheme. I cannot help but wondering if you are merely pretending to be against our sons’ engagement.”

Laufey made a dismissive sound as he walked closer. “Nothing could be further from the truth. You can be sure that I will not allow those two getting married as long as there is still blood running through my veins and oxygen in my lungs. I swear it on my ancestors.”

A person as devout to his ancestry would never use them to lie. Or would they if it might be a chance to get them what they wanted the most? The throne that they had no right to.

“Those are strong words. If your son isn’t acting on your behalf, if you haven’t come up with some twisted, insane and unethical plan to turn my own son against his family… Is it bothering you that your son might actually be in love with a young descendent of Búri? A man with my blood running through his veins, a boy I raised and taught my values?”
Odin knew he was fishing for a reaction and for a man as collected and controlled as Laufey, there could be hardly anything to make him flinch. Except maybe you could get him with the one thing that had to be the most important thing in the world to him. His legacy and therefore his sons.

“My son is not in love with you with Loki. He is young, passionate and despite his remarkable wit he still has absurd ideas in his head. Of course he recognized the difference between Loki and Thor and he therefore thinks that this relationship could change something when it cannot. It is a feeble idea that only a young man can have. It will pass.”

Odin wasn’t sure, but he thought he could see something in Laufey’s posture. Maybe he was imagining it, but he felt like he had a notch that he could keep digging into. “It seems to be you are underestimating your son’s conviction. The last time I talked to him he did not sound like a young man with fleeting ideas. He has a plan. Did he not let you in on it?”

“It would not surprise me if your sons are keeping secrets from you or if you don’t know them well enough. This is not the case with me. Nothing Helblindi does is in some way or form kept from me.”

That could be an admission or denial. It both sounded the same.

Nonetheless Odin needed to go a step further. “Or he is leaving you out of his plans. Getting closer to the position to you are craving for. Maybe he is sick of waiting for the throne you promised him. Maybe he decided to skip you and that it should be his turn immediately.”

Despite raising the glass to his mouth Laufey didn’t drink. He remained as calm as before. “Do you believe that would bother me? The… position as you call it, it’s just as rightfully his as it is mine. Laufey. Helblindi. Those are just names. It is the blood that runs through our veins and our ancestors that decide who we are. It makes us royal. What does it say about you that you think I would resent my own child for obtaining their birth right? Such a despicable thought. It does not come as a surprise though. Nothing could give me more joy than see my own finally receiving what he deserves. What should have been already his at the moment that he was born. To see and marvel at what he will do with it. The image of my son sitting on the throne that you stole from him, from me and all those who came before us is the last thing you can scare me with. It’s all that I want. This is what you can be sure of – my son is going to be king. Not through marriage, manipulation or a scheme. He is going to be king, because it’s his right.”

It was cold conviction and Odin was right. The son was definitely a bigger danger than the father and Odin needed to protect his own.

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“How can you not see this?! It is so blatantly obvious!”

Loki wanted to scream like Thor. His hands were shaking as he was trying to throw himself forward or to beat some sense into his brother. “I could ask you the very same question. His whole family is against our engagement and you are still seeing a conspiracy. Could you please just for one second try and consider another possibility than everything being a huge scheme?”

“You did not hear the allusions he made! About ruling from the shadows. He is so sure about himself that he is not even trying to hide it anymore! Because he knows he’s got you eating out of his hand!”

Anger was slowly digging its claws into Loki and they were digging deep. There was so much stubbornness and blind hatred that Loki could understand why Helblindi wouldn’t change his mind about Thor. “I am not a cat that lifts its head so it will be petted. I am his partner and we have a common goal. Even though nobody else seems to want or accept that.”
Thor was running both hands through his hair, face contorted by rage and fear. “They are playing you! All of them! Do you really believe that Helblindi Ymirson is going against his father because of you!? Or that he is going to break with his brother? All three of them are playing a game to give you a false sense of security and it’s working out perfectly. All you’re seeing is his beautiful face and you listen to whatever he is telling you!”

“So that’s what you think of me? That I am so stupid I am accepting everything that he says? That he is playing me? What for? I am second in line. He is an Ymirson. He has no right to anything even after we get married.”

Loki could feel that not a single word of what he said was reaching Thor.

“You’re supposed to be so much smarter than that and it scares me so much that it all goes out the window when it comes to him. I was shot at, did you forget that? He doesn’t need to have any special position when he can pull your strings so easily. You are being taken advantage of and you won’t let me protect you. That’s… have you any idea what that does to me?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with you! Helblindi and me are the only ones who can see beyond these two families. You want him to a terrible person so badly that you cannot even consider being wrong about this! About him! I chose to be with him and the trúa asks of me to trust him. Which I do. I don’t believe in a conspiracy. I do not know how things can continue between us when you… cannot accept him.” Loki’s voice trembled a little bit by the end and Thor was still shaking his head. In his eyes was the expression of a hunted and desperate man. “How? How am I ever supposed to do that when I see what he does to you?”

“Because I love him!” Loki shouted it right into Thor’s face. He needed to hear it. Said out loud. “I am in love with him! Not because he is gorgeous or because he wraps me up in sweet lies. He is brilliant, sardonic, funny, spiteful and openly hostile if he feels like it. Also, he believes that I can come up with my own conclusions! I asked him over and over again to be nice to you and what is the point? You can’t get past his name!”

“Loki, your faith into the trúa is stronger than mine ever will be. You know that his ancestors shaped his soul.”

“And what did they ever do to us?! It was 500 years ago! It was war! It’s still his choice who he wants to be and I happen to love who he is. I will marry him. You and everybody else will have to accept that. I have had enough of it. I am done trying to convince you or father or anyone else. We’ve tried and we’ve failed. I’m going to marry him, he will be your brother-in-law and you’ll have to learn to live with it.”

His rage was quickly cooling down now that Loki had made that decision. Talking to Thor was just him losing his time. Time that he could spend with Helblindi. Something that he desperately needed after that horrible dinner and even worse conversation with his brother.

Turning around on his heels Loki headed for the door when Thor was calling after him. “Loki, we are not done!”

“Yes, we are.”

Closing the door behind him Loki went away with quick steps, ignoring the crashing sound that came from inside the room. Should Thor trash it entirely, Loki didn’t care. He didn’t stop until he was in his own rooms, tearing off his jacket. “Helblindi?”

He wasn’t back yet from his own talk. With his own brother. So Loki busied himself with fixing a
drink and downing it immediately. To calm down his nerves. Not that it helped much. Loki wanted
to talk to Helblindi, exchanging words with him would make a difference. For now Loki could only
sit there and wait.

It was only after 20 long minutes that the doors were opened and Helblindi walked through. Looking
strangely similar to Thor. The air around him was vibrating with anger. “He says that he should
come back home, because you must have some strange influence on me! That I am not in my right
state of mind!”

Despite himself Loki laughed. “I’ve heard that one before. Just one minute ago when talking to
Thor.”

Helblindi seemed unable to stop moving, pacing around the room and continuing to mutter about
what his brother had said to him. “Yes, but your brother is an idiot! Býleistr is my best friend. He’s
always looked up to me and now he’s… I could tear down half the room thinking about it.”

“Will you please sit down first? You’re making me nervous.”

“I can’t! My heart is racing and I’m so angry I’m feeling dizzy.”

Not thinking about it Loki stood up, putting his hands on Helblindi’s cheeks and kissed him.
Intensely and with passion. At first it seemed like Helblindi would pull away, but then he ceded and
Loki could feel him lose up the tiniest bit. “Better?”

It was a hopeful whisper against Helblindi’s lips and it was answered with a crushing “No. I don’t
feel good. I feel like I can’t breathe properly and like I could feel asleep any second…”

Scowling Loki nodded. “Yeah, fighting with your entire family can do that to you…”

“I feel like I am going to be sick.” Helblindi half-groaned and then finally sat down on the couch. He
pretty much sank into the cushions and took a deep breath. It was clear to see that it did nothing to
relax him.

“Everything pretty much worked out the worst possible way. I get it…” Loki sat down next to him
and slid his arm around Helblindi’s shoulders and kissed his temple. “I guess we have to just go
through with it…”

There was no response and Loki felt worry rising him inside him when he realised that Helblindi was
indeed breathing unevenly. “Are you okay?”

“No, I feel like shit. I am not supposed to fight with my brother or with my father. That’s just not
how…” Helblindi stopped and waved his hand like he was trying to find the right word, plucking it
out of thin air. It didn’t work. The pause lasted a bit longer, then Helblindi shook his head. “We
never fight and I… I am so angry I want to trash the room.”

Loki smiled since that sentiment wasn’t unknown to him. “You know what helps with that?
Alcohol.”

“You know that I don’t drink. Especially not on such days.”

“We’re never going to have another day like this, believe me and hopefully we’re never going to
have a better reason to drink.” After another short kiss Loki got up and poured both of them a glass
of wine. Helblindi didn’t protest, quite the opposite. He finished the glass within a few seconds.
“Well… that works too.”
Closing his eyes Helblindi leaned back on the couch, his voice was suddenly a lot quieter. “So… how did your talk go?”

“Bad. I don’t feel the need to talk about it.”

Putting one hand on his chest Helblindi exhaled loudly. A couple of times and to Loki it sounded like it was taking Helblindi an actual effort. “Seriously, are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I just need… to calm down. Damn it.” While getting back up Helblindi seemed to have lost most of his usual grace and his steps are slow and a little unsteady as he walked over to the bar. Loki watched him with an uneasy feeling, not sure if he should tell him to sit back down or even to get into bed. How bad had his talk been that it obviously affected him even physically? What was there to say to make him feel better? Except for meaningless phrases. “I know that it matters to you, but there is nothing we can do right now to change their minds. We’ll get there. With time.”

“I guess…” Helblindi rubbed one hand over his eyes as he poured himself a second glass of wine. His reaction had Loki unsure if he had actually listened to him. So Loki just watched for a moment as his fiancé took a few sips from his glass and walked around the table. Something was off about him. “Helblindi?”

Stopping Helblindi put one hand against the table to steady himself, his voice was strained and husky. “I… can’t breathe… I…”

It happened at the same time that Loki got up. Both sounds were horrifying, burning himself painfully into Loki’s memory to never go away again. To haunt him whenever silence would meet his ears. First the noise of Helblindi’s head connecting with the edge of the table. The impact and some kind cracking noise which had Loki instantly denying to himself that he had ever heard it. As if the blood wasn’t there as a cruel reminder of the truth. Then Helblindi’s entire body hitting the floor.

Loki thought that he should be screaming, but not a sound passed his lips as he rushed over to Helblindi, dropping to his knees next to him. The sight made all the anger and frustration he had experienced only moments ago vanish. As if it had never been there. As if Loki was only capable of a few ghastly and very similar emotions. His mind was blocked, wrapped up in fear, panic and dread.

Helblindi’s beautiful head had rolled to the side, his eyes were closed and pool of blood was forming beneath it. Steadily getting bigger. Loki couldn’t see if he was breathing, his chest didn’t seem to be moving. Reaching out Loki knew that he had to help him, but he didn’t know how, had no idea what to do with his hands. Only his voice came back to him. “Helblindi!”

There was no reaction.

“Somebody help me please!”

With shaking hands Loki reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. As soon as he had sent the distress signal Loki dropped it and helplessly looked around in search for something to stop the bleeding. He didn’t even have enough time to get up and get his discarded jacket when the doors already flew open and five armed guards stormed into the room. The words came too quickly for Loki to remember them exactly, but he was pleading. Which was all Loki could do in that moment in which he found out what it meant to be completely helpless.
Hello everybody,

So let's continue with the drama, right?

“To those who were born before me, to the keepers and creators of my soul… Please, don’t take him away from me. You’ve sent him to me and now don’t take him away from me. You cannot. Please.”

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A loud, constant banging on the door had to be the worst way to wake up. Stephen groaned in annoyance as he rolled over. The person next to him made a displeased noise, but rolled over and continued to sleep.

“Doctor Strange! Open the door!”

Cursing under his breath Stephen brushed the blanket aside. Whoever wanted to talk to him, they better were willing to be yelled at for a couple of hours. How Christine could sleep through all of this was a riddle to him.

The banging continued. “Doctor Stephen Strange! Open the door! This is the palace guard!”

Not such a riddle anymore, because now Christine was rolling over, cracking one eye open. “What did he just say?”

“Oh, now you’re awake? He said that he was here on behalf of the prince who is an annoying little sod, but who is generous while writing my pay check. So I am going to get up now, since I doubt this man will go away anytime soon.” Getting out of bed Stephen grabbed his dressing gown and put it on before leaving the bedroom. Behind him he could hear Christine muttering “This country is beyond me”.

Stephen ran a hand through his messy hair and he was already feeling livid that he had to open the door in such a state. He liked to be collected and presentable when talking to anybody. Even if it were only the morons who were trying to break down his door. The banging didn’t stop until Stephen unlocked the door and opened it.

“Will you bloody well stop it? There are other people living in this building!”

The men in front of him were armed, but their guns were in their holsters. On their chests they were wearing the royal insignia. Damn, the prince was really going have to make this up to him. “Doctor Strange, please get dressed. Your presence is required at the Ársæll Hospital.”

“I am not going anywhere without a coffee.”

“It’s an emergency. Get dressed now.”

Stephen swallowed any other comment that was lying on his tongue when he saw the other man’s
grim face. It did look like an emergency after all. “I need one minute.”

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For now the situation seemed under control. A feeble illusion. The doors were locked, the area was closed off to the public, guards were controlling all staff that was passing through. Security measures had been taken. They were strictly following protocol, but for now that only meant polishing the catastrophe that was unfolding. Unable to be stopped. Disaster had already started the very second the heir to Jotunheim had hit his head on the edge of a massive ebony table.

Heimdall’s eyes darted to the prince sitting on the chair down the hallway. Head hanging between his shoulders. There probably wasn’t much time left until the Ymirson finally got here. They hadn’t been alarmed yet only through fortunate circumstances. The giant of a bodyguard had been with Laufey at the time of the incident, so he hadn’t been there when they had found them. Helblindi Ymirson bleeding on the floor and prince Loki out of his mind.

There was not much time left before the Ymirsons would find out about what had happened and then they would come here, turning this nightmare in an even more horrid disaster. They had done their best to be discreet, but there was only so much that was possible.

With an uneasy feeling in his stomach that promised him a very unfortunate near future Heimdall got out his phone and called the king. It was answered after the very first ringing. “You got it done?”

“The area is off-limits, we’re doing a check on everyone who is inside. The young Lord is in the operation theatre.”

The king replied with a stern but calm voice and Heimdall was certain that some of it was show. “That is not what I asked, Heimdall.”

Glancing at Loki Heimdall could see that he hadn’t moved. Still sitting there, hands buried in his hair, staring at the floor. “No, the prince is still here. He refuses to leave.”

“This is unacceptable. He should never have come there in the first place. You made a severe mistake by letting him go there. Now make up on it and bring my son home. This is an order.”

“Yes, your grace, but may I be allowed a personal remark?”

There was an unexpected pause which made Heimdall realised that the king of playing the thought of ignoring his plea. Something that had never happened before. “Go on, but make it quick. Time is of the essence.”

Heimdall nodded to himself. “Thank you, your grace. The prince is very distraught. In a way that I have never seen before. I fear he will not be willing to leave. Not voluntarily.”

“I have already told you that this is an order. Bring my son home.”

“The prince has already stated that he is not going to leave. I am sure he does not only want to wait until the young Lord is out of surgery. He wants to sit at his bed. I do not see a way of making the prince leave on his own.”

“Are you telling me that you cannot get your job done? It is your duty to protect my son. He will not be at this hospital when the Ymirsons get there. There will be accusations and my son will not be there when that happens. He will be at home, talking with security and a legal team, so we will figure out a strategy and find out what happened. If there was a fight, if he had to defend himself. He cannot be there when the Ymirsons arrive at the hospital.”
Heimdall nodded, not able to remember another situation in which the king had ever sounded so dire. It was the right time to feel like that. “Do they already know about what has happened?”

“Not yet, but it’s not possible to keep this secret a lot longer. Also it would be impossible to explain why we didn’t immediately inform a father that his son has been hurt. Maybe another 30 minutes, then we have no other choice. 30 minutes. My son has to be gone until then.”

Hearing those words Heimdall knew that it couldn’t be done. Not without using actual force. Once more his eyes darted to Loki and his chest tightened a little bit. For all the unpleasant things he had to have to go through today, this one was bothering him the most. “I hear you, your grace.”

“Good.” Another short and heavy pause. “Any news on the young Lord? Is he going to make it?”

“Nothing for now. The doctors instantly took him away. We don’t know yet if the head trauma is severe or not. He was still unconscious when he got here, so it does not look too good.”

“I need a constant update on his condition. At least we got him out of the palace, but the consequences of Helblindi Ymirson dying in a Valhallan hospital are still unimaginable. Now bring my son home.”

The call was ended and Heimdall morosely stared at his phone before putting it away. At least it was him here, he didn’t want to imagine any other member of the guards having to do this now. Loki deserved better. Not putting this off any longer Heimdall slowly made his way over to Loki who had to hear his steps, but who wasn’t moving.

“Your highness, we have to leave now. Your father demands your presence at the court.”

“Not even my ancestors could make me leave.”

Heimdall froze, because after such a statement there was nothing else to say. A firm believer like the prince did not take the trúa lightly and therefore Heimdall could only see them leaving together if he had Loki dragged out by other guards.

“Your highness, there is nothing you can do for him at the…”

“There are only two ways this can go.” Loki replied with a choked voice. “Either he dies and I am not here or he wakes up and I am not here. Both of those are unacceptable. I will be here with him.”

His eyes were glistening with tears that weren’t going to fall and Heimdall saw in him an eight-year old boy. Mother’s favourite. Way prouder than any child should ever be. So incredibly hard and yet so easy to upset at the same time. A boy that Heimdall had sworn to protect from physical harm. What was happening right now had nothing to do with any of his responsibilities. Emotional pain and mourning was not of Heimdall’s concern.

But it was still undeniably the boy that Heimdall was supposed to keep safe. That didn’t include dragging him out of here against his will. Not when he was in severe pain. Unfortunately Heimdall was also aware that the king’s concerns were completely justified. The prince could not be here when the Lord of Jotunheim was arriving. Absolutely impossible.

“Your highness, I can understand you do not want to leave your fiancé alone, but Laufey Ymirson is going to be here soon.”

Still, Loki didn’t move, staring at the floor. “Naturally. His son has a severe head injury. I saw how quickly they rolled him out. I heard what they said. His father should be here.”
“You cannot be here at the same time.”

“I do not care.”

“Your highness…”

Finally Loki actually looked at him and he was screaming with angry desperation in his voice. “I don’t care!”

Heimdall felt how the guards at the door turned to look at them, definitely taken aback by seeing their prince losing composure like that. They all had seen him angry at some point, outraged about some political issue or scolding someone for their stupidity. That wasn’t what was happening here. They were facing a young, drowning man here who was lashing out. Despite knowing him all his life Heimdall could only a guess how Loki was going to keep on reacting to the events unfolding.

Once more Heimdall was about to attempt to calm down the waves, but he did not get that far. At the other end of the corridor the guards opened the door and a familiar face walked through. Hectic and dishevelled. A night and day difference to how the man usually liked to present himself. Doctor Strange’s long legs carried him with fast steps directly towards the prince who quickly got up to his feet. “Doctor…”

“What the bloody hell am I doing here? I get harassed by your dogs to immediately get here, then I get pushed into an operation theatre where the most prominent member of Asgardian nobility is lying with a nasty head injury! You remember that my days as a surgeon are long gone. What am I supposed to do here?!”

The doctor was raging and Heimdall was about to move himself between them, but Loki was planting himself right in front of Strange. His head was raised, his eyes glistening with the same unshed tears. When Strange took in the state the other one was in, his posture softened a bit, seemingly confused.

Loki’s voice wasn’t trembling, but it was clearly audible that he was fighting to get the words out. There could be no doubt about their urgency. “You are here, because I need somebody I can trust. For the same reason that I hired you. Somebody without affiliation or ulterior motives. I need you to get back into the operation theatre and watch every single thing that the surgeons are doing. I need you to make sure that they don’t screw up.”

Strange’s eyes rested on Loki’s face for a short while and his own expression wasn’t giving anything away. He could be thinking about doing his taxes. “Alright. What else?”

“Just make sure he’s going to be alright. He’s…” By quickly raising his hand Loki brushed the tears away before they would find their own way down his cheeks. “He’s the heir to Jotunheim. A lot of people will get hurt or might lose their lives if he dies. So please go back in there.”

Nodding Strange turned back around and left as fast as he had arrived, just with less tension in his limbs. The second he was gone Loki sank back down on his chair, burying both of his hands in his hair, pulling at it. “To those who were born before me, to the keepers and creators of my soul, don’t take him away from me. You’ve sent him to me, so now don’t take him away from me. I need him. The country needs him.”

Swallowing softly Heimdall searched the courage within him to interrupt a praying man. An act that had nothing to do with courage. It was only distasteful. “Your highness, I must insist. Your father gave an order as the king, I cannot let you stay here.”
“Heimdall, if only one of the guards should try to touch me to get me out of here, I will force them to put me down.”

Another fact that Heimdall didn’t doubt and it could not happen. Loki was a prince and the only way to get him out of here was to arrest him. One thing more that could not be done. Heimdall wasn’t going to make the prince leave. Which was going to end up in a catastrophe.

What was he going to do?

“Your highness, he is young. Fit and healthy. There is a good chance that he is going to be alright.”

There was no reply, just another string of mumbled prayers and Heimdall lowered his eyes. Guilt was tugging at him for invading someone’s privacy like that. What he also knew was that he prince should not be alone. Not with his pain and especially not when the family was going to arrive, looking for someone to put their own pain on. Not of that should be Heimdall’s concern. The son of a very powerful Lord had ended up heavily injured at the palace. Even worse, in the private quarters of one of the princes. Circumstances were still unclear and the situation could not be more complicated. Investigations were always difficult with nobility involved, even worse with royalty. In this case there was both. The Ymirsons were going to insist on their own separate investigation. About an incident that occurred in the prince’s private quarters.

Stepping away Heimdall gave Loki some privacy and sent a message on his phone.

_HELP_ Prince is in an unstable emotional state. Forcing him to return to the palace would do more harm than good. It will be made sure of that he will not run into the Ymirsons at the hospital

None of this was ideal, but protocol had gone out of the window quite some time ago. Heimdall talked into his radio, informing every guard at every door that he had to know instantly if one of the Ymirsons was approaching. At least like this he would have a chance to get Loki into another room. Even if it had to be under false pretence.

Time continued to go by and they really needed one of the doctors to come out and tell them that the heir to Jotunheim was going to be alright. There was only so long that they could keep this a secret and by that time they needed to be able to say ‘There has been an unfortunate accident, but thanks to all the spirits the young Lord is completely fine’. If he were to die…

The sound of the door swinging open was jolting both of them and Heimdall was about to start yelling into his radio, but it turned out to be Doctor Strange. Now wearing scrubs and moving the same way he had the last time he had come here. Same rush, with anger in his movements.

Loki was up to his feet immediately, his face paler than it had ever been. “What happened?”

“Nothing is making sense. You were with him when he collapsed?”

Hastily Loki nodded. “Yes. How can I…?”

“What happened before he collapsed? Was he nauseous? Feeling sick? Anything?”

Heimdall thought he could see the panic returning to Loki’s eyes. Or had ever been gone even if just for a second? “Yes. Yes, he was… complaining about being dizzy and I believe… oh no, he had trouble breathing. He was fidgeting and saying at the same time that he was tired. Right before he… collapsed he said that he couldn’t breathe and then he just broke down.”

Strange stared at him down. “Anything else? Did he eat drink anything?”
“We’ve all had dinner together and…” Loki swallowed. “Right before… he downed a glass of wine. He usually doesn’t drink.”

Without another word Strange left again and the prince remained standing in the same spot. Hands balled into fists, shaking. His lips were parted and Heimdall could hear his accelerated, uneven breathing. Completely alone.

“Your highness, it might be better to sit down.”

When Loki turned his head to him Heimdall could see the desperation etching on his face. Such a strong and unforgiving person could easily be reduced to a despairing man who didn’t know what to do. “He wasn’t doing alright. He said himself that he was going to be sick. He said it and I didn’t get it. I made him drink and he hit his head on the edge of the table. I could have just told him to lie down and get some sleep…”

“Your highness.” Heimdall touched his shoulder. Something that he usually didn’t do, it was important to keep his distance, but he was still responsible for the prince’s safety. Right now he needed someone reaching out to him. “It was an accident. Nobody is at fault.”

He wasn’t sure if Loki had even heard a single one of his words. Instead he turned around, walking a few steps down the hallway, again with both hands in his hair. “To those who were born before me, to the keepers and creators of my soul…”

The minutes continued to run through their fingers and they definitely needed the information that the young Lord was fine. That didn’t happen. Heimdall got sent a message from the court saying that the Ymirsons had been informed and were now on the way to the hospital. “Your highness, please, you have to leave. Lord Laufey is on his way here and we cannot have a direct confrontation between you.”

“I am not leaving.”

“Another room would be…”

“No! I am going to be right here when the doctors come back. I am not going in another room.”

“Your highness, your father…”

“I don’t care!” A hoarse, almost primal scream passed Loki’s lips and his eyes were wild when they darted to Heimdall. Almost daring him to contradict him one more time, so he could tear him apart. It was a lost cause. Heimdall wasn’t willing to have his prince dragged out by his guards.

Loki was breathing hard, still staring at him, so Heimdall nodded softly, giving up. So they were going to do it the rough way and for the first time he wasn’t sure if the prince could be trusted in this kind of situation.

The doors wouldn’t open. No doctor was coming to finally tell them that Helblindi was going to be alright and Heimdall was watching Loki falling apart. Then the guards at the hospital entrance informed him the Lord of Jotunheim had arrived. Heimdall let Loki know and he didn’t get a reaction. Just more mumbled prayers.

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The sound of a door being pushed open had Loki experience overwhelming fear and hope all at once. In the back of his mind the last bit of reason told him that it had to be Laufey since Heimdall had warned him about their arrival. Minutes or hours ago. Loki couldn’t tell. There was still a chance
that it was Doctor Strange. That he would tell him that he could go inside and see Helblindi. A stupid flesh wound. Tomorrow he could take him home and then everybody would realise that there were thing so much worse than them getting married.

Of course it wasn’t Strange. It was the door on the wrong side that got opened. Still for a second Loki had hoped and it had made him feel better. Just for the second that he had allowed his mind to wander.

“Where is my son?” The thunderous voice of a father resounded through the corridor and Loki didn’t have the strength for a fight or merely to answer questions. A single one would be too much.

Nonetheless Loki turned around and he saw both of them. Laufey’s appearance was too defined by anger to convey a bit of worry and Loki could not see himself dealing with this now. Just one word and Loki would start screaming. Býleistr was an entirely different thing though. The last bit of colour had left his pale his face, his eyes were shining suspiciously and the look on his face could only be described as horror. If Loki had to guess, he would say that he looked exactly the same right now. It was the very first time that he felt some kind of connection to Býleistr. They both loved Helblindi. There had to be some foundation to build on. A castle that wasn’t immediately going to collapse.

Heimdall was taking a step forward, putting himself between Loki and Laufey. “Your son is still being operated on. All we can do at the time is wait, my Lord.”

“I need to see one of his doctors!”

“I am sure they will inform us as soon…”

“Don’t you dare! My son got brought here in secrecy! Without anybody informing me or his brother! Nobody was even willing to give us details how he ended up with a head injury! The pretender king is already trying to cover it up and now you tell me I have to wait until some doctor who his loyal to the false king is willing to talk to me! My personal guard is relieving your men! One of my men is going to be in the operation theatre with my son. I want a Jotun doctor. Get me one now!”

As the chief of the royal guard Heimdall wasn’t obliged to do anything that the Lord of Jotunheim demanded, but it would be the smart thing to do. Loki didn’t care. Why was still nobody here? They had to…

“You! He was with you when it happened! What did you do to him?”

Loki didn’t need Býleistr yelling at him, not now. So he didn’t say anything and the other one was losing it.

“Son of a thief, did you attack him?! Did he look right through you and you attacked him for it?! Is that what happened?!”

The force he was putting in his voice had it cracking and Heimdall held up his arm to stop Býleistr from coming any closer. Loki wanted to rip him apart for suggesting that. No, he wanted to want to rip him apart. He couldn’t. Not when he saw everything he was going through right on Býleistr’s face. A fear so intense and penetrating that it quickly replaced all other parts of you. When you were left so helpless and vulnerable, you had to find a way to deal with it and Loki happened to be here. Loki happened to be with Helblindi when it had happened and Býleistr hadn’t seen any of it. Things were so much easier to handle when there was someone to put the blame on. Loki couldn’t be angry with him.

“I would never hurt him.” Loki replied lowly, trying not think of the pool of blood on the floor and
how it had kept getting bigger and bigger.

“Then why is he here?! He left me alone to go to you and 10 minutes later he ends up in a hospital?! What happened?! What happened to my brother?!”

Closing his eyes Loki tried to push the images away. Helblindi falling down. The sound of his head hitting the edge of the table. The gunshot. Thor’s blood hitting his face. All of it was closing in on him and Loki shook his head. “He just collapsed… hit his head.”

“Am I supposed to believe…”

“Býleistr.” Laufey shot his youngest son a look and Býleistr fell silent. Reluctantly. “I want to see my son. Now.”

Loki couldn’t. Not with that man, not right now. Despite himself Loki searched for help with Heimdall. It came immediately. “This is a hospital. We are all at the mercy of the doctors.”

“No, it’s my son who is at their mercy. A Valhallan hospital, so I need a Jotun doctor to make sure my son gets the treatment he needs. I will no longer be kept in the dark about the state of my flesh and blood.”

Everybody vanished from existence. The guards, Heimdall, Býleistr, even Laufey. This time it was the right door. For the third time Strange came towards him and Loki knew that he wouldn’t be able to stand it another time. His ancestors had to protect him, they couldn’t take him away.

Strange stopped, his attentive eyes sceptically taking in the new arrivals. “I see that there more people that need to be informed now?”

“They’re his family. You can talk freely. Please.”

Loki just had to know.

“You are not Asgardian.”

Strange tilted his head, raising one eyebrow. “Not by birth. No.”

“Is there a Jotun doctor in there with my son?”

“Is the nationality of his doctors more important than his state of well-being?”

“His well-being is directly tied to that one fact.” Laufey replied coldly and Strange ignored him. “Your son suffered a traumatic head injury and a moderate concussion. We were able to stop the bleeding and can rule out clotting or a haemorrhage. Unfortunately the head injury is a just a by-product of the actual condition. We are still running several blood tests, but as for now we can be sure that he consumed a dangerous mix of prescriptive drugs and alcohol. The result was a dangerously slowed down heartbeat and breathing. Due to the acute head injury we detected the reason for his fall later than we should have. An overdose combined with a moderate concussion is a very severe thing and we will have to wait until he wakes up to see if there are any long-term consequences. But he is going to wake up.”

Drugs. Alcohol. Long-term consequences.

“That… that doesn’t make sense. He does not drink. He… he doesn’t!” All of Býleistr’s rage and bite had slipped away. Now he was a wide-eyed, stuttering boy, not willing to accept what he was hearing. Like Loki. He had made him drink. Helblindi might wake up and no longer be Helblindi
and Loki had made him drink.

“What kind of drugs?”

Strange focused on Laufey since he seemed the only person not on the verge of breaking down. “Like I said, the results aren’t all in yet, but we can act on the assumption that we are dealing with components that can be found in anti-depressants and sleeping medication. That alone is an unhealthy mix, combined with alcohol it’s even worse.”

Loki could hear his own blood, pulsing in his veins as he felt that he was going to be sick.

“Are you saying that my son might have been poisoned?”

While Loki’s heart was stopping to beat Strange merely lifted his shoulders. “I cannot say how any of it entered his system, but it’s there and it’s definitely the reason he collapsed. I need to get back now.”

Before Strange had the time to move Loki asked the only thing that mattered to him now. “Can I see him?”

“It will take another hour to move him and I do not see him walking up today, but as his fiancé I am sure we can arrange something.”

Loki whispered a word of thanks, feeling the last bit of strength slipping from his body. He could feel it rising inside of him. The urge to burst out in tears. He was going to live, but everything else was still up in the air. At least Loki was going to be able to hold his hand, at least he wasn’t going to be alone.

“You are not going near him.” Every word was a cold blade cutting into his skin. Looking at Býleistr Loki could see the tears running down his face which was torn apart by pain. “Do you hear me? You are not setting a foot into the room he is in. None of you is going to do that. You are not getting another shot at him. Leave now. Leave us alone.”

“I am his fiancé.”

“You are not. You are nothing. He comes to you and he ends up fighting for his life, because your family hasn’t killed enough of ours yet. Go. I swear I have our guards take you away by force if I have to. You are not going to come near my brother again.”
Keeping him safe

Hello everybody,

Let’s go down that awful spiral, right?

Have fun ;)

Answer as soon as possible. Are the rumours true? Need instant confirmation or negation.

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The entire drive Loki he was trying to swim through a sea of cotton wool. Resistance was soft but unyielding. No way to get through and you got tired so immensely quickly. Loki couldn’t see the end of it. He was sinking deeper and was unable to hear or see what was going on around him. The door was being opened, but the guard needed to call him three times for Loki to realise that.

Like in trance Loki got out of the car and walked past the guards waiting for him. His legs carried him completely on their own through the first door and down the halls. They had memorised the way from all the thousand times Loki had already walked it down. Somebody was calling after him, but Loki couldn’t make out the words. More importantly he didn’t care. He did not want to hear it. Not a single word.

So Loki continued to walk, his mind almost peacefully blank as he ignored the people staring at him. There was somebody right behind him, but they would leave eventually. As soon as Loki closed the door in their face.

The blankness faded away when Loki had reached his rooms and it was replaced with the same dread he had been feeling for the last couple of hours. Nonetheless Loki walked inside and then stopped instantly. He had tried to prepare himself for what he would see. The reminder of what had happened here. Except that it wasn’t there.

At the sight of the carpet gone a dark suspicion rose inside of Loki and he wasn’t not willing to shove it down. Quite the opposite, he would follow it down any path that it might lead him. With the carpet the stains of Helblindi’s blood had disappeared. Replaced by another carpet that looked absolutely identical. Loki would not be surprised if they had replaced the table too.

“Are we covering something up?”

“Your highness?”

Looking over his shoulder Loki shot the guard a cold glance. “All traces of what happened here are gone. Before an actual investigation. So I am asking if we are covering something up.”

“Your highness, your father was concerned that the state of the room would distress you, so…”

Loki pushed him aside and turned around on his heels. They had been taught from earliest childhood that it was misbecoming for a prince to run. There should never be reason for them to do that. They
needed to convey the impression that they had everything under complete control all the time. That there was no issue that couldn’t be resolved.

Control was far beyond Loki at this time. Again the guard was calling after him and Loki kept running. He felt like he was going to be sick and his head was throbbing. Helblindi was lying alone in some hospital bed with a head injury. Long-term consequences still out in the open. What if he wasn’t going to be who he had been before the fall? What if it changed him? What if he wasn’t going to be the same brilliant man?

Loki believed he might fall over at that thought. This scenario was one that he wouldn’t be able to stand. What he also couldn’t do was think about it or face the harsh reality. There was something else he had to do.

A guard was standing next to Thor’s doors and Loki ignored him like he had ignored all the other as he ripped them open. Jane was sitting on the couch, she jumped to her feet when she saw Loki. Keeping his lips sealed Loki looked for his brother and found him, standing behind one of the cosy chairs that made this salon so comfortable. His eyes were blown wide and he stared at Loki as if he was seeing a ghost.

Loki turned back to Jane. “Get out.”

In utter confusion she blinked at him and Loki had never been more disgusted by her lack of grace and charm. “Sorry?”

“Get out!”

His brutal yell had her flinching back and Thor hissed his name, accusingly. As if he had any right. Jane looked at him, searching for help and Thor nodded softly. Avoiding his eyes Jane moved past him, out of the room and Loki slammed the door shut.

“Did you do this?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I asked you if you did this!” Loki’s voice was trembling and so was he. The need to know was overwhelming, like he physically depended on it. That his body would just collapse if his brother didn’t cast the black thoughts away.

Thor kept staring at him, with that look when he didn’t know what Loki was talking about. That alone was already a lie. Because he knew. There simply was no way that he didn’t know. Heimdall had already reported back to the palace. Everything that Strange had said and more.

“How can you even think that…”

“Answer my question! Did you do this?” His own voice sounded alien to him. It had to be the screaming, but if Loki didn’t get a reply soon he would have to do more than that.

“If you are implying that I might have poisoned him, then no. You should know me better than that. We don’t even have an idea what happened yet.”

How could he even dare? What gave him the audacity to act like there was any doubt about what was happening? Looking at him Loki had trouble seeing his brother. There was only a man that didn’t care. “You told him you would have him killed! Then he gets poisoned in our home! What am I supposed to think?”
“By all our ancestors, Loki!” Thor moved towards him and Loki instinctively made a step back, almost hitting the door. Noticing that Thor stopped, raising his hands as if he was trying to negotiate or to surrender. “I was trying to intimidate him. All that we know for sure is that he hit his head and that there were drugs in his blood. Isn’t this way more likely to be an accident than a poisoning?”

Why not just slap him across the face? Loki had come here because he needed to know and he still did, but from right now on there was another force within him that started calling the shots. The urge to protect Helblindi in any conceivable way became so intense that it suddenly seemed like a basic need for him to continue existing. Like breathing.

“Don’t you dare to insinuate that he did this to himself! You don’t know him! You’ve never cared to get to know him! Now he’s been hurt and only the spirits know if he’s ever going to be alright again. You are not going to put the blame on him!”

By now Thor had to have realised what kind of situation he was in, that Loki wasn’t going to let up. “I am not… I am not blaming anybody, because I do not know what happened. Look, I wasn’t even aware that you’ve been back from the hospital. What happened must have been horrifying, without a doubt and I think you…”

“Do not even…” Loki shook his head, gritting his teeth to stop himself from screaming. First the missing carpet, now this. Already playing it down. Trying to blame Helblindi or acting as if he couldn’t have died. If he had been alone. If he had continued bleeding. The pain was threatening to become too strong, a permanent sting that Loki couldn’t shake off and that he needed to redirect. To the source. “Is this a form of sick retribution? You believe that he orchestrated the attack on you, so now you’re free to do the same to him! How was this supposed to play out? Was he supposed to die? Go to sleep and just not wake up again?”

They had passed some point, because now Thor suddenly didn’t try anymore to talk him down. “I know you are distraught and worried sick, but you still have no right to talk to me like that. You need to calm down. Get something to drink and then we’ll talk to father. Standing here and shouting at each other is not doing any good. The secret service and the legal department want to talk to you, because everybody still needs to find out what exactly happened.”

“So did you do it or not?” Loki needed to hear it, he was sick of all the talk that didn’t mean anything.

Thor looked directly into his eyes, seemingly unafraid. “No. Of course I did not.”

His brother was a bad liar, had always been a bad liar and yet Loki had no idea if he was telling the truth. Even worse, he thought either could be possible. Helblindi was in hospital, Loki could not be with him, so he would at least keep him safe.

Turning around Loki ripped the door back open and ran out. The confrontation had not made things easier as he had hoped. He knew what would make it better, but he could not go there. Technically he had no right to. Eventually Loki would find a way. It would take time and the mere idea of sitting around and doing nothing was torturing him.

“Your highness. Please. It is time to come with us.” A line of guards blocked his way and Loki knew that there was no more running.

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People are talking about the prince being hospitalised. Voices keep repeating that he might be dead. We need to know if there is any truth to these rumours.
The disdain was overwhelming. By now it had gained almost complete control over every fibre of Loki’s being. All-embracing, not leaving space for anything else. How they kept making him repeat the same things over and over again. Talking about what had happened in this stoic, matter-of-fact kind of way. They could be counting from one to ten over and over again. Or reading out loud the telephone book.

Nobody cared about what had happened, it only mattered to them what colour they could paint it.

“And what did you do with your own glass of wine, your highness?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Please give it a try. Every detail could turn out to be crucial.”

Loki tilted his head, looking at the one sitting opposite of him. His hairline was fading away, his suit was perfectly tailored and Loki decided that he was going to project all of his anger and hurt on him.

“Why don’t you ask the people who removed the carpet from my salon? They must have seen where I put my glass. I am sure they also removed it along with the bottle of wine.”

“Your highness, I understand your confusion, but there is an investigation going on.”

“Right and therefore all pieces of evidence need to be removed rather quickly, so when the Ymirsons are going to start their own investigation, they will have to rely on our reports only.”

Several members of the legal team shared a look of confusion and concern. What? Had they expected that Loki would be on their side? That he would comply? That he wasn’t disgusted by them and how they treated this incident like something that Loki had to be protected from. Helblindi was the one who was suffering, he was the one who needed protection after they had already failed him.

Loki hoped that they all would write to their ancestors today that they were feeling ashamed for being such miserable, despicable human beings.

“Son.”

It took an effort to turn his head and look at his father when Loki was so comfortable hating every single person around him. It was draining, consuming, but it was the only feeling he was capable of right now.

“The Ymirsons have already accused you of having some degree of responsibility of what has happened to the young Lord. It is crucial that we can retrace every single event, so we can rule out without the shadow of doubt any implication on your side.”

His fingernails were digging so deeply into his palm that it should hurt. Loki shouldn’t be able to stand it. Yet he didn’t feel a thing. Not physically. “Shouldn’t everybody be busy trying to find out what actually happened instead of making sure that nothing can be traced back to me? He was poisoned, there has to…”

That repulsive creature was interrupting him. “Nobody has used that word until now but the Lord of Jotunheim who does by no way have enough information to come to this conclusion. The most probable solution is that Lord Helblindi Ymirson took the medication himself.”

There is was. All the physical pain Loki could imagine and he wanted to shove it down that man’s
throat. Make him choke on it. “Sir, I firmly advise you to instantly apologize for insinuating that my fiancé brought this onto himself. For suggesting that a man who exercises the same profession as you and who is without a doubt so much more erudite and cunning would commit such a stupid act.”

“I…” A lawyer lost for words. Taken aback and not knowing what to say. Something that could never happen to Helblindi who had the vocabulary of several languages at his disposal all the time. Would he still have them eventually?

“Apologize now!”

He had a man in his sixties flinching at the sound of his voice and it didn’t give Loki a hint of satisfaction. Princes were not supposed to shout or to get emotional.

“Loki! Calm yourself!”

An interruption like that from his father should be enough of a warning. A wake-up call, but it did nothing more than to remind Loki that he could not be here. Could not breathe the same air as them. Not listening to their attempts to make him look better and put the blame all on Helblindi. Then back on Loki, because he had made him drink.

“No, I will not! I refuse to! I will not sit here and listen to you coming with ways on how make him look guilty when he is the sole person that cannot be blamed. He could have died! Did someone bother to ask me? He is a vegetarian, he does not drink and he is not taking any medication!”

All strength was slowly slipping from Loki’s body, but he was not going to let it show. Not in front of these people.

He could hear his father take a deep breath. “Out. Everybody. Leave me and my son alone.”

There was a lot of shuffling around, but not a single person didn’t immediately obey the order. With the scum gone Loki found it a bit easier to breathe. That didn’t make his father’s eyes on him any less heavy.

“I am aware that I do not understand what you are going through. I am immensely sorry that you had to be there and witness what happened.”

“You’re only sorry that I was there, because it’s inconvenient. Because it looks bad.”

Odin slightly raised his chin, his old eyes probably trying to be soft, but it was all lost on Loki. “Yes, it does. It will raise suspicion. I am trying to look past your emotional state and what you are going through, but you of all people know that time is our worst enemy here. We do not know what happened and we can be sure that the Ymirsons are going to paint their own version of this story. You were the only person who was with him when he collapsed, therefore you are in the centre of all the attention and we do have to assure that nobody can faulty accuse you of any wrong doing.”

“Everybody can say anything they want. Helblindi will confirm everything I’ve said as soon as he wakes up.”

“I am sure of that.” Odin said softly. “But until then we are in the most severe political situation that I can remember.”

“Don’t call it that.”

“It is what it is. He is not some average person, but the heir to Jotunheim who is now lying in hospital after getting hurt in the palace. I do not have to explain it you what the consequences might
be if this information gets out now. Things could not be worse, especially with Laufey throwing around the word ‘poisoning’.

“Because that’s most likely what happened.” Loki replied coldly and he could tell that his father knew that his grip on him was slipping. That this time he could not talk him around. Under no circumstances.

“I will gladly repeat myself to make this perfectly clear. We do not know yet what happened. Your engagement doesn’t change the fact that you have not known him for very long. He could have been using the medication for a condition that you don’t even know of. That is possible. Yes, he could also have consumed it without knowing about it. For that reason the wine in your rooms is going to be tested. If we’re indeed dealing with foul play, it does not necessarily mean that he was the target.”

Every single word raised within Loki the urge to contradict his father, to scream at him and to point out the obvious. To remind him of who was in the hospital. How Loki knew that Odin hated Helblindi. That Thor did so too. “Nobody has access to my rooms.”

Ignoring him Odin continued. “I also need you to give a blood sample to the doctors immediately. Just to be sure.”

Loki had reached the end of the rope. He couldn’t. Not anymore. It was finally overwhelming him. The casualness of everybody else when Loki was drowning. Locked in a cage, filling with water when he should be somewhere else.

“There was nothing in the wine! I am doing perfectly fine, because he is the one in hospital! He is the one who could have died! Because someone did poison him! Perhaps it went all wrong. He was not supposed to hit his head. He was not supposed to hit his head and end up in hospital. Perhaps he was to fall asleep and not to wake up again. Then he would no longer be bringing misery and pain upon me.”

Now his father finally stopped. Loki had finally to pushed him off the rails. For that very short moment they were merely looking at each other. With confusion and disbelief “What are you saying, Loki?”

“Pointing out the obvious. The very thing everybody sees. How he is a thorn in your side. How the heir to Jotunheim ends up being poisoned in the palace of Valhalla.”

“By all means, Loki! You are so much smarter than that! It’s insanity! You are right, people will see it that way and therefore this entire situation is an absolute catastrophe for us! Nobody wants him to get better more than we do! It will be an impossible task to keep it a secret, but we absolutely have to. At least until he has woken up and gives a statement himself. I need you to think about what you’ve just said to me and realise what you are imputing to your own family.”

Not a word could get under Loki’s skin. Not a single one. “Who else is there to suspect? I remember you saying that he will bring misery and pain upon me. I remember Thor saying that he is Frjáls and manipulating me and now we don’t know if Helblindi is going to be able to say anything when he wakes up. One thing is for sure though. As soon as I know who did this to them, I will bring misery and pain upon them.”

Loki fled from the room, past the bunch of lawyers in the corridor. There was only one place for him to go now. To finally make his heart stop beating way too fast. He mumbled thanks to his ancestors as he could make his way without any interruptions to the gardens. Walking down the marble path he pulled out his phone to shine a light in the darkness. As he opened the gate to the shrine Loki waited for himself to be able to breathe easier, but the cold air and the familiar smell didn’t help him.
After lightening some of the candles Loki sat down on the cold marble floor, letting his head hang between his shoulder.

“To those who have come before me, to the keepers and creators of my soul… Please tell me what to do. What to believe. Reason would only allow one conclusion. But what do I do then? If my own family turned against the man I chose. If they hurt him. It’s in our blood to hurt them… and what if I am not any different? I did not see it. He was in bad shape and I did not see it. I handed him a glass of wine… Please, speak to me. I don’t know who else to…”

The ringing of his phone tore his prayer apart and Loki gasped as he hastily brushed the tears away. Despite anything he could not bring himself to commit this act of blasphemy and stumbled outside before answering the call.

“Doctor? How is he doing?”

“Stable. He’s in his room, the family is with him. Don’t beat yourself up, he is not going to wake up today.”

Strange being the one who tried to be empathic and give him a word of comfort had Loki choking back a sob. “Did you call me to tell me that?”

“Actually no. I fear that I might not be of use much longer. The Ymirsons brought in new doctor. Man definitely knows his stuff and is as Jotun as they come. Nobody said anything yet, but I can read between the lines. I am positive that I’m going to be asked to leave soon.”

Loki had already ceded so much control and this was the very bit that he wasn’t going to give up. He had an obligation. The trúa not only demanded trust, but it also wanted Loki to keep Helblindi safe. As if Loki had any choice. “You are not leaving. No matter what they say or what threat Laufey is going to use. You’ll stay there with him. I don’t like to play this card, but I am the son of the king, I am Laufey’s sovereign. It’s an order, you are not leaving.”

By the sound of his voice Loki couldn’t tell what Strange thought about this. “Alright. I could also argue that there is no one who knows more about the human brain than I do and that might come in handy.”

If they spirits had mercy on them, nobody would need his expertise. “Is there any news? On the substances that you found in his blood?”

“We’re definitely dealing with components of sleeping medication. In an elevated dosage. The alcohol didn’t make things any better. All I can say that’s highly unlikely that somebody consumes such a cocktail if they don’t want to get high or kill themselves. Given the fact that apart from his current condition the young Lord is perfectly healthy, there are guards all over the place, the father is not getting off his phone and the brother has spent the last hour sitting next to his bed crying… I suppose that you didn’t have a party at the palace which went wrong.”

“No.”

“Well shit…” Strange sighed audibly. “If this gets out…”

“We’re doing our best to keep it under wraps.”

“That’s not going to work very long.”

Shaking his head Loki pushed the harsh reality away. “This should not be of your concern now. Just make sure that my fiancé is going to be alright and…” Loki ran one hand down his face, squeezing
his eyes shut. “Could you please… tell me about the potential consequences of the head injury?”

“It’s way too soon to tell. We’ll know when he wakes up.”

“Please.”

“There is a wide range. From seizures to constant headaches, vertigo. Loss of vision, sense of taste, sense of hearing. Swallowing problems, problems with memory, attention, multi-tasking, decision-making. Inability to organize thoughts and ideas. Changes in behaviour and character. Or it could be absolutely nothing. Every trauma is different.”

They could not take him away from him. They could not.

“I see. Thank you, Doctor Strange. Could you…”

“Your highness?”

The door to the cage was locked and Loki was running out of air. “Keep me updated and… please inform me if Helblindi’s father and brother happened to both leave him alone.”

“Of course.”

The phone almost slipped from Loki’s fingers after he had hung up. Once more his feet carried him to another place without Loki taking any part of it. Eventually he was standing in his own salon again and looking around Loki almost wondered how he had got here. Or if it actually was one of his rooms. It suddenly looked so blank and felt cold. Empty although nothing had really changed.

Loki winced, almost stumbling backwards when something touched his leg. Looking down Loki released a whimper and then dropped to his knees in complete exhaustion. Fenris licked the side of his face as Loki picked him up and pulled him against his chest.

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What happened to the prince? Asking for details about his whereabouts and wellbeing. Rumours about him being hospitalised in Valhalla keep getting louder

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Stephen mostly pretended to write something down on his notepad as he stepped in front of the door to the young Lord’s room. Through the little window he observed the situation and took notice that not a lot had changed. The younger brother was still sitting next to the hospital bed, holding Helblindi’s hand between his own. He was mumbling and although Stephen couldn’t hear him and didn’t speak a word of Jǫtnar, he was still capable to make out that the Jotun was repeating the same words over and over again.

This was the one part of being a doctor that Stephen had always enjoyed the least. Dealing with the patient’s family. He was not good at it and a lot of times the overemotional reactions hadn’t just been uncomfortable for him, but also annoying. Tons of people had told him to work on this, but after his accident there had been no point in it. No more patients, no more families.

Well, except for the prince and that was already more than enough for Stephen’s taste.

Unfortunately Stephen was more than aware that this was an entirely new dimension. The young man lying in this hospital bed did not only have a family, he had the bigger part of this country adoring him. From the very second Stephen had realised who they were dealing with, he had had
this feeling in his gut. Then the voice inside his head that told him to call Christine. Stephen was nothing but calm, collected and organised. Quick decisions were only made during a surgery when there was no more time left. This was something entirely different. More information was needed. Sure, the prince insisted to keep him here, but Stephen was fairly confident that he was going to be pushed out sooner or later. Better make most of the time that he still had. When Stephen entered the room the Jotun looked up at him, his eyes were puffy and red. They almost made him look like a child.

“Sorry for the disturbance. I merely need to check some of the vitals.”

That was a lie, Stephen already knew that nothing had changed. Pulse was strong, patient stable. Stephen just needed a pretext to be in here.

“Is something wrong? Has something changed?”

Dear God, Stephen had never been good at handling somebody when their voice had started to tremble like that. “No, everything looks good so far. Just doing a check-up. Making sure it stays that way.”

Instead of turning back to his brother the Jotun’s focus remained on Stephen. Good. “Your name is Strange, right?”

He was sniffing lightly, the aftershocks of too much crying. Stephen nodded. “Doctor Stephen Strange, yes.”

“Doctor Lorenzen told us about you. The British neurosurgery specialist. He said you’re the best.”

Interesting. That meant his Jotun colleague who had been called in had been doing him a favour. “If that’s what he said, then he is a man who knows what he is talking about.”

“Are we going to need you?” The Jotun glanced at his brother and the white bandage around his head was in sharp contrast to black hair and beard. “Please say that we won’t.”

“Your brother’s head wound is mostly superficial and not as severe as we feared. It’s the concussion and the force of the impact that we need to worry about. It’s impossible to tell until he wakes up.”

“And what about the meds? Could they have done any… permanent damage?”

“We’ve cleared his system and they’ve already done their worst to him by making him almost stop breathing.”

The young man nodded, then finally turned back to his brother. Stephen hadn’t learned anything yet. No need to worry about that when the door was opened again and the Lord himself walked through. Cold eyes took notice of Stephen in a dismissive way. “What are you doing here?”

“Taking care of my patient.”

Father and son exchanged some words in Jǫtnar, then Stephen became the centre of attention again. “I want my son moved. To Útgarðar. As soon as possible. Tonight would be ideal.”

Stephen snorted in response. “That would be the stupidest thing to do imaginable. Or not, if you want to risk actual, permanent damage. He has a head trauma. Nobody is going to move him during the next couple of days.”

The Lord frowned at him, clearly swallowing down his anger while the son seemed to want to
bargain. “He is not safe here. We need to take him back to Jotunheim.”

There was an urgency behind it that sent a cold shudder down Stephen’s spine. “Not for another couple of days. You can have as many guards here as you want. Prince Loki will be more than eager to…”

“He is not a prince!” Stephen actually flinched at the unexpected hiss that was so full of anger and viciousness. One second ago he had not thought it possible that such a broken, almost grief-ridden young man was capable of producing such a sound. “The prince is lying right here. The future king of this country is lying right here and we will do everything that is necessary to protect him, because he is the most precious treasure that this nation possesses. Do you understand?”

Stephen hesitantly nodded. “I do, but by moving him you would not be protecting, but endangering him. You believe that he has been poisoned and needs to be brought somewhere safe. I get that. It does not change the fact that he cannot be moved.”

After he left the room Stephen saw two of the Jotun guards talking to each other. He could not understand what they were saying, but he didn’t need to. Their expressions and the tone of their voices were enough.

Locking himself in one of the bathrooms Stephen called Christine.

“Hey, when are you going to be…”

“Christine, do me a favour and just listen. I know you just got here and I am not saying this, because I want to get rid of you. I need you to get on the next plane that leaves Asgard. Doesn’t have to be back to the States. Just make sure you get the next flight out of here.”

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*Rumours confirmed to be true. The prince is in a hospital in Valhalla. No details on his condition known. The prince was poisoned during a stay at the palace.*
Hello everybody,

Here we go :) 

_______________________________________________________________

Doch ich halt mich an dir fest
Solange du mich lässt
Hoff ich still, dass du mich noch erkennst
Auch wenn du nichts mehr siehst
Weil du jetzt schon gehst
Bleibt alles einfach stehen

Solange du mich lässt ~ ~ Gloria ~ ~

(But I hold on to you
As long as you let me
I hope that you still recognize me
Even if you cannot see anymore
Since you are already leaving
Everything just stops)

_______________________________________________________________

“That was a really great party.” Steve was putting the last of the glasses into the dishwasher while James was busy emptying the remains of crisps and peanut curls into the bin. “Good. It was a good. A great party would still be going on. We didn’t make it to great.”

The fact that his goodbye party didn’t reach that standard obviously did nothing to drag James down, he was smiling. Something he had been doing the entire night. Sure, nobody wanted long faces at a party, even it was only to see goodbye. Maybe he was a bit too happy for Steve’s taste. He definitely wasn’t happy. Happiness was the very last emotion that Steve would ever associate with James leaving the country.

Strangely enough this didn’t mean that he hadn’t enjoyed himself at this little get-together. Lots of guys who worked at the embassy and even more of James’ Asgardian friends. It was anything but a surprise that some many people liked him and that they thought it was a shame that he was leaving.

What better word to use? Shame. Because of one maniac who was after the blood of the prince James couldn’t do his job anymore. It was unfair and even worse, because there was nobody you could blame. Or at least nobody you could get your hands on or tell it to his face.
Now they were here and simply had to deal with the fact that James was going to head home and eventually end his contract with the American government. To ultimately come back here. Not only because of a guy, but it would be naïve to think that Arnþórr hadn’t played a part in this decision.

James’ boyfriend who was in the living room, cleaning it up. He had not been smiling as much. Probably he was more feeling like Steve.

“Are you actually going through with this?” Steve straightened up, looking at James rather unsure. Simply because he had still trouble imagining him staying here forever. Asgard was so entirely different from what they knew. Not in a bad way, but it was impossible to overlook. Steve wouldn’t want to stay here forever and it was the finality that concerned him. After giving up your citizenship you couldn’t just get it back if you changed your mind. Or if your new life didn’t turn out what you wanted it to be.

“What do you mean?” The question seemed to have James a little bit confused and Steve sighed. A sound that he regretted, because he feared that it would send the wrong message. “About becoming Asgardian.”

There was a hint of worry that Steve couldn’t play down. Almost scared that James would be annoyed with him for once more asking that question. Of course not. Instead James smiled, like he had done the entire night. “Sure, I’ve already filled out the paperwork. Well, the beginning of it. You still look like you can’t wrap your head around it.”

There was not much of another way to react than with a helpless shrug. “You know... It’s such a big step and you originally decided to work for the American government. I just cannot imagine wanting to live my entire life somewhere else. Permanently.”

“That feeling is the very same that I’m having. I cannot imagine leaving anymore. I fit in here.”

Leaning against the counter Steve slowly nodded. “Okay, I get that… I really do. I guess it will always be weird to me that you choose to live in a country where you are not allowed to vote. Yeah, don’t say it, I know there are referendums all the time, but it’s not the same. I’ll never get over the idea that you are born to become head of the state. It’s just not right.”

“A matter of opinion, I guess. The country itself is perfectly fine with it and they’re doing quite well. Pretty much every European monarchy collapsed at the beginning of the 20th century. The Asgardian one wasn’t even put into question. Maybe one day it will, could be. Right now people are doing fine, they’re content with it. I’ve talked to more than one person about it and they bring up the same points all the time. Nothing really obliges an elected government to keep the promises they made to be elected. That they’re only in it for a limited amount of time, so they use it to fill their pockets and don’t care what happens afterwards. Sure, it’s the worst possible way to see a democracy, but I guess looking at the monarchy and thinking that the king doesn’t have to care, because he doesn’t have to fear any consequences. Look, I really get it. It’s something you have to think about properly and I didn’t make a half-hearted decision. I guess it helps when you know some members of the royal family personally.” James shot him a crooked grin.

Steve nodded. Yes, that clearly helped, because they all made the impression of being decent enough people. But it was all still horribly superficial. None of them had an idea what went on behind closed doors or what these people were really thinking. Despite all it was just Steve trying to come up with distractions and excuses.

The thing nagging on him wasn’t the Asgardian form of government or where the king’s interests lay. No, it was knowing that one day his work here would be done. The traveling altogether would stop and then Steve would go back home and he would do that gladly. Having a barbecue, eating
apple pie and watching the fireworks on the 4th of July. Steve was looking forward to all of that.

James wasn’t going to do that. There was no going home for him, because James was creating himself a new home. Here and far away at the same time.

“I guess so… Maybe I’m just… Do you think that you’ll be happy?”

Such an easy question and yet mind-bogglingly complicated. Not for James though. The smile on his lips obviously took no effort whatsoever. It came naturally. “Yes, I am pretty sure. If they let me back into this country. That’s not sure yet.”

“Well, they would be stupid if they didn’t want you here. I don’t see a big chance of that happening.” Steve stated the obvious and James shrugged, continuing to smile. What could Steve possibly say when somebody looked so at ease with themselves. James was sure of what he was doing, therefore all Steve could do was keeping his mouth shut. Those were his worries, his concerns, his egotism.

“It just feels right for me. Not much more that I can say about it.” Eventually James shrugged and Steve nodded. “I hope it all works out for you the way you want it to.”

“Thanks man.”

It was heartfelt, Steve had no doubt about that. Especially when James walked the two steps up to him and pulled him into a hug. Tight, warm, honest. Steve released a long, drawn-out breath, then closed his own arms around the other man. A couple of things were impossible to deny. Like how good it felt to hold him and to be held by him. Such simple a thought and it still unleashed a storm. A storm like any other which meant Steve couldn’t control it, but he also refused to let himself be controlled. Not be something that he wasn’t capable of understanding when this was probably the only place on earth where there was a chance for him to figure it out.

“By all the spirits, I fear I cannot take much more sentimentality tonight. The last ten hugs were wearing me thin.”

That whine came from behind them and as James let go Steve could see Arnþórr leaning against the doorframe. So he was probably done with restoring order in the living room. A smile with so much softness that it made Steve’s chest tightened appeared on James’ face. “Hey… you finished?”

While saying that James slid one arm around Arnþórr’s waist and pressed a quick kiss on his lips. The Asgardian returned his smile and shook his head. “Not really, but I decided that it can wait until tomorrow. It’s late and I really don’t feel like cleaning up anymore.”

“Yeah, I can understand that. Perhaps I should get going since there is not much left that I can help you with.” With just the three of them the situation was once again awkward, at least for Steve. The couple right in front of him didn’t seem to share the sentiment which made Steve feel even weirder.

“You don’t want to sit down and have another glass of wine? As a thank you for helping us out. Maybe there is even some cake left.” Arnþórr’s suggestion sounded indeed nice, but Steve didn’t get much of a choice anyway since James instantly agreed with him. “We totally are doing that. I think there’s still a bottle of the red that you like so much in the cellar. I’ll go and get it. Be back in a second.”

Arnþórr received another kiss, Steve a pat on the shoulder and then James was out the door. Which left Steve alone with James’ boyfriend which was kind of absurd. “Come on, let’s move back to the living room. I’ll fall asleep standing here.”
They did just that and Steve had to admit that Arnþórr had done a decent job cleaning up the place. Sure, everybody would still be able to tell that they had had a get-together, but the last traces would be easy to get rid of tomorrow. “Your place is really nice.”

“Thanks. You’ve already said that when you got here.”

“Right, but then it was full of people. Now I can actually see it. It’s nice.” Steve smiled, wishing for James to get back here this very second.

“I really can’t do much to make you feel less uncomfortable around me, huh?”

That was so straightforward and blunt that Steve instantly tensed up. “What? I am not uncomfortable around you. I… Honestly we don’t know each other that well, right?”

Arnþórr shrugged softly as he leaned back against the couch cushions. “You know, at the very beginning I wasn’t sure if it is the typical way any Midgardian gets overwhelmed the moment they actually dive a little deeper into our society. Or if it’s about James. Sure, you are still completely bewildered and I’ll never understand what your deal is. Not yours but Midgardians in general. Anyway, what I want to say is… that I know that you like him. It’s rather obvious. Perhaps not for you since you are Midgardian and all. Thinking in boxes and labels. When I was younger I always wondered if it really worked liked how I was seeing it happening on TV. Identity crisis, people defining themselves about who they kiss… It’s so strange. I’m digressing again. You like James. That’s okay. He is gorgeous, sweet… Sure, he could work on his sense of humour, but I guess that’s just another Midgardian thing. Damn, makes me sound a little bit racist. What I actually wanted to say is – stop thinking so hard. Or stop thinking at all. It’s not something special.”

For several seconds all Steve could do was staring at him. Caught up in disbelief that this was happening to him. That James’ Asgardian boyfriend had just told him that he thought he liked James. Which he did. In some strange way that Steve hadn’t dared to define yet. That didn’t matter anyway, because people didn’t just say those things out loud. Wasn’t that common human decency? Pretending that the elephant wasn’t in the room until it finally went away.

“Are you implying that I am in love with James?”

Arnþórr shrugged. Casually. Like this was an utterly normal thing to talk about. Even so, didn’t he care? Shouldn’t it be upsetting or at least annoying him?

“I am not implying anything. I told you that I know. For a rather simple reason. Tomorrow evening he is getting on a plane and he’ll be gone for quite a while. All I want to say is… while he is gone you might end up going through something familiar again. With someone else. Who is not in a relationship. Then maybe you could be… less Midgardian about it. Enjoy it and stop trying to give it a name or to understand it. This is Asgard. Nobody gives a shit. We care about who your parents and ancestors are, but not who you sleep with. As long as they aren’t in another relationship.”

The door to the apartment was soundly opened and it was hardly loud enough to be heard over the sound of Steve’s heart beating. “So, I got the wine. All we need are some clean glasses and that could be a challenge.”

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“What were you talking about right before the prince’s collapse?”

Loki couldn’t. Not anymore. No more questions, no more accusing gazes, no more whispers. They’ve been at it for more than an hour and by now the lack of sleep was unable to hide anymore.
His eyes were hurting, it was a strain to keep them open, but closing them held the risk of falling asleep. The last thing that Loki wanted.

The interrogation, they called it an interview, but it was an interrogation was slowly rubbing him raw. Only the anger on the Jotun lawyer’s face had something relieving. Either he was not able or not trying to hide it. Obvious rage. A proof that the cared. He cared about what had happened to Helblindi. He thought Loki responsible and wanted to rip him apart for that and Loki found that this was the only man he had talked to during the last 24 hours that he didn’t despise. No attempts to swipe something under the table or to clean up this mess. Just wanted to find out what had happened to his prince and to take apart whoever was responsible.

“He was agitated… After the talk with his brother. I tried to talk him down. I didn’t succeed. I’ve already told you that. I have said everything over and over again and I am not going to say anything else.”

“I am sorry, your highness, but we are not done.”

“The prince just told you had he will not answer any more questions. He was incredibly forthcoming and supportive. I am sure you have all the information you need. Thank you very much gentlemen. Somebody will help you on your way out.”

Loki didn’t bother to look as they were all ushered out. Lawyers, the intelligence service, the Jotun delegation. All of them. Propping his head up in his hands Loki eventually did close his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of his phone against his thigh. Nothing. It did neither ring nor move. No indication of a new message. No update on Helblindi.

“Your highness.”

Somebody gently touched his shoulder and Loki wanted them to fall over and die.

“It is time you get some rest.”

Sleep. The mere thought had Loki almost in tears. Right now he did not have the strength for another protest, so Loki complied by getting up and sleepwalking out of the room. All the way he had his hand on his phone, but Doctor Strange didn’t contact him. Didn’t tell him that Helblindi had woken up and asked for him.

As Loki opened the door to his rooms he spotted his mother in his salon. The second she noticed him Frigga got up to her feet, her face and eyes drenched in sorrow. Another thing that Loki couldn’t take. There was no way for him to deal with his own grief and fear. Seeing his mother wear the very same expression was too much to take. Loki didn’t want to say a single word. He wanted to move past her, fall onto his bed and stay awake for the entire night, so he could jump up and run as soon as his phone was going to ring.

Frigga had other plans. “My dear boy.”

No. No pity or despair. The lawyers, the investigators, Helblindi’s family, Thor, Odin and now Frigga. Loki could not do it. “Mother, please, will you leave me alone.” There was no strength in his words. By now he was closer to tears than to yelling.

Every mother with somewhat similar to a heart in her chest had no other choice by now. As Loki stood there completely helpless and vulnerable Frigga walked up to him and pulled him into her arms. Tensing up Loki raised his hands to push her away, but as she ran one hand through his hair and whispered into his ear that she was sorry and that everything was going to be alright, Loki
couldn’t hold on any longer. A single sob passed his lips and then the tears were silently running down his face.

Why was he here? At home in the arms of his mother. Talking to lawyers, the intelligence service who was trying to bend the truth into whatever shape or form they needed to. Loki didn’t need any of this. The country and Loki needed the very same thing. Helblindi. Loki needed to be at the hospital.

“I am sure he is going to be fine, Loki. He is being taken good care of.”

Loki knew that. At the moment nothing could happen to Helblindi, because it had already happened. It was everything else that was driving Loki up the walls, weighing him down, drowning him. His mother’s embrace did nothing to make him feel protected or safe. It merely reminded him of how everything had gone wrong. “Did father do this? Or Thor? Both of them?”

It was desperation that made him ask the question and whatever the answer might be, it would bring about more despair. His mother tensed all over, it was impossible to miss. For a fleeting moment she wasn’t actually holding him, just standing there. Then she gently stroked her hands down his back. “I don’t know, Loki.”

His very soul was threatened to be ripped apart by this answer. Frigga thought that it was possible. She should have shouted at him, asked him if he had lost his mind, if their ancestors had stopped talking to him. Suspecting his own flesh and blood, the man who had bestowed on him the gift of life. Who had helped creating his soul.

Now both him and his mother didn’t know anymore what they were dealing with. Because Helblindi had entered the equation and had changed everything. That was the only thing a man like him could do. Someone as brilliant and dedicated.

Loki could not have him lose just the smallest bit of that beautiful mind.

“What if he is not going to be okay? I had Doctor Strange run down all the possibilities. He could… He might end up not being the same person anymore…”

Frigga pulled back far enough to look at him, cupping his face and brushing the tears away with her thumbs. “That’s not going to happen. He is a descendant of Ymir. These men are strong, fierce and capable of overcoming every imaginable hardship. It is in his blood. He is going to be fine.”

Loki wanted to reply that he wasn’t so sure. That there was no way of knowing. His ancestors couldn’t possibly protect him from everything. It was not possible. They hadn’t protected him until now.

The vibrations came first, then the ringtone and Loki’s breathing sped up. Quickly and rather clumsy he freed himself from Frigga’s hands and answered his phone with shaking fingers. “Doctor Strange?”

To those who had come before him, to the creators and keepers of his souls. Please

“Your highness.” Strange’s voice seemed to be worn thin, jaded. “No change in the Lord’s condition, but I thought you would be interested in wearing that at the moment nobody is with him. His brother fell asleep an hour ago, his father told him to catch some sleep. Then his father stayed with him for a while before he left too. Nobody is in his room now, but if you are planning on sweeping in there as some romantic gesture… there are bodyguards all over the place.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” While hanging up Loki was already heading for the door and his mother was
calling after him. “Loki, where are you going?”

“Seeing my fiancé.”

“Your father will not allow you to leave.”

“I don’t care.”

It took him over an hour to get to the hospital when it should have been 15 minutes. Fortunately it had not been his first time sneaking out of the palace and Loki had his suspicions that Frigga had helped to clear the way for him. It didn’t matter anymore as soon as Loki had set one foot into the hospital. The entire floor was full of Jotun security, so Laufey should be informed within a heartbeat. Luckily their own guards were also here, since Loki had little doubt they would have thrown him out otherwise.

Strangely enough for once during the last eight hours Loki didn’t feel afraid. All of that horrid sentiment had been replaced by determination. Cold and fierce. Loki didn’t want to see Helblindi. He needed to. Like he needed to breathe and he was going to fight for it the same way as if somebody tried to block windpipe.

The adrenaline was rushing through his body as he saw Týr standing in front of the door to Helblindi’s hospital room. Loki was getting in there, one way or another. The bodyguard’s stern and malicious face was a testimony to how little it pleased Týr to see Loki. How he would gladly break him apart for ever breathing the same air as Helblindi and bringing him into this situation.

“I am here to see my fiancé.” Loki was talking the same way he would be talking to a minister or anybody when it came down to politics. Stating a fact. No wasn’t a possible answer. The word ‘no’ did not exist.

Týr’s eyes were drilling into him, letting Loki know about his disdain for him without saying a single word. “Nobody is seeing the prince. Except his father and brother.”

Balling his hands into fists Loki took his time to take a breath. Shouting was not going to help. He was walking on very thin ice. Jotun and royal guards all around them. The latter ones weren’t going to hesitate to use any form of violence if their duty to keep Loki safe demanded it. Týr could not lay a single finger on him without all of them launching at him. The presence of Jotun guards promised a disaster that could throw back their entire country centuries.

As if the attack on Helblindi hadn’t already done that.

“I am his fiancé.”

“Not officially so that does not mean anything.”

The only way to stifle a scream was biting the inside of his lip. Physical pain didn’t mean anything. Nothing against this insult of clearly stating their Helblindi’s relationship to Loki didn’t mean anything.

“You have been looking after him since the day he was born. You know him. You also know that he would want me in there.”

Týr ever so slightly cocked his head. “I would never have the insolence to assume I know what is on the prince’s mind.”

With every word is was getting harder to think straight. Loki had to think of all the lawyers and how
everything they had said had made his skin crawl. Thor pretending that he gave a damn about what had happened about Helblindi. His father who was only interested in keeping Loki’s name and reputation spotless. Rage was threatening to overwhelm him and Loki might just all spit it into Týr’s face. “I will see him and there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

In response Týr spread his shoulders, trying to make his body broader as if to shield the entire door from Loki’s mere presence. Gritting his teeth Loki made another step forward and he could feel every guard’s eyes burning into his back. Perhaps he should use them after all. Have them all arrested and thrown away for standing in his way. Damn the consequences for everybody else. Loki was the only prince here. He merely had to snap his fingers.

“Let him in.”

Glancing over his shoulder Loki recognized Laufey standing there, his expression empty. Looking like nobody special. Definitely not like a father whose son had been severely hurt. What did Loki care as long as he opened the door for him?

Reluctantly and with obvious disdain Týr stepped aside and vanished from existence. Loki more or less fell through the door and stopped dead in his tracks. Some monitor was beeping except for that the room was cold and almost empty. The sight of Helblindi knocked the air out of Loki’s lungs. He was lying on his back. Not once before had Loki seen him like this. Helblindi was always sleeping on his stomach or on his side. Looking beautiful and at peace. There was nothing peaceful about this.

White bandages didn’t allow any false idea of why Helblindi was here. White, grey and black. Those were the only three colours. White bandages, black hair and grey skin. A hole had opened up, swallowed Loki’s anger and fear had reclaimed its old place. An empty chair was standing next to the bed and Loki slid down onto it.

As he took a hold of Helblindi’s hand almost violent relief had him shedding new tears. Helblindi’s skin was warm and Loki had no idea why he had expected it to be cold.

“I am so sorry I let this happen to you. I should not have…” Loki stopped, because he wasn’t sure what Helblindi would think if he could hear him or see him like this. A mess. Whimpering and so self-conscious. It just didn’t fit.

Gently running his thumb over the back of Helblindi’s hand Loki brought it up to his lips, pressing a kiss onto his knuckles. “I promise I will find out who did this and then I’ll make them pay. You just concentrate on getting better. I’ll keep you safe. Just please… you gotta still know who I am when you wake up and you still have to be you.”

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What the hell was he doing here? They had said their goodbyes yesterday. Steve had no right and no reason to be here. He didn’t even plan on looking for them and even less so approaching them. So why had Steve got into his car and drove to the airport?

Because James was going to get on an airplane in about two hours and Steve was haunted by what Amblórr had said to him. Still not able to make any sense out of it. In general Steve had no idea what was happening to him today. Was he going mad? Could easily be. At least Steve should try and stop pretending that he was here for another reason. Sitting here in the departure lounge, reading in some magazine an article about Stark Expo for the third time. Steve couldn’t remember a single word of it.

This was ridiculous. What was his sub consciousness planning to do anyway? Holding a speech? Some grand gesture? God, Steve had no idea if they had already got here or if James had already
passed security. Him being here was all shades of wrong.

“You are such an idiot…” Tossing the magazine away Steve got up from his chair and headed towards the exit. Various people were walking past him, chattering as they dragged their luggage behind them. For a second Steve wondered where all of them were leaving to. If some of them were going to get on the same plane as James.

As he stepped outside the fresh, cold air and a setting sun were greeting him. Stopping Steve was already playing the thought of turning back around. A loud bang put an end to that. The sound of windows shattering and people screaming. The scent of ashes in the air. Alarm sirens went off before anyone had the chance to understand what had happened.
The most important thing in life is to always make a big show out of your entrance. People had to remember you, because usually they were sheep and little idea of what was actually going on. You had to grab them from the very beginning. More serious and so called professional businessmen would contradict him on this. Tony thought they were ridiculously boring. Just because they were presenting a new, clean energy force and not a video game didn’t mean they couldn’t have fun. Whenever Stark Enterprises came up with something new it was a guarantee for fun. Unfortunately and for some strange reason, people didn’t expect and didn’t want fun when weapons were involved. That had forced him to miss out on so much and Tony was going to make up for it on the next Stark Expo. A stage barely big enough for the kind of showmanship that Tony was going to put on display. It was going to be marvellous. One of the rare things that Tony actually enjoyed planning.

Therefore it should be a definitive crime to interrupt him, but then again, it was Pepper’s job to not do what would make him happy. It wasn’t at all like her not to knock. “Mr. Stark, you should turn on the TV.”

“What is this? Is the world coming to an end? For once I am actually working and you want me to stop and watch TV instead? Pepper, I am sorry, but you are seriously slipping. Do you need a couple of days off? Holidays can never be overrated.”

Pepper’s face should have been the first indication that something was wrong. It was all gaunt and tensed. Normally that only happened when Tony had once more committed complete PR suicide. Like sneaking out of an important conference to fool around with a model in the backseat of a car. Right in front of the building where the conference took place and where Tony was supposed to hold a speech.

Granted, not Tony’s most glorious hour, but he had been a golden poster boy during the last couple of weeks. Or had it been months? Tony had never been good at keeping track of time.

“I really do believe that you should see this, Mr. Stark.” Pepper walked past him and turned on the television herself. Switching a couple of channels and then there it was. News footage from a plane going up in flames. Or what was left of it.

“It has been confirmed that two men have been arrested by the police, but the identity of whoever is responsible for the explosion of the royal family’s private plane has not been revealed to the public yet.”

Shit. “When? Somebody got hurt?”

“It’s all rather confusing. First they thought it was a terror attack on the airport. Somebody blew up
their Air Force One. It’s odd, because there was no flight scheduled. No member of the Royal Family was even near it. Several airport employees got injured. It’s probably the same network that attacked the crown prince.”

“Damn it, prince charming. What shit did you get tangled up in now?” Tony muttered under his breath, dropping the pen he had been holding until now. “Turn up the volume.”

The news report continued and Tony uneasily chewed on his bottom lip. Bad news from Asgard weren’t that much of a surprise, but during the last couple of weeks it had become rather quiet. Which was a good thing. Now shit was going down again and exactly there where Tony wanted it the least.

All the information provided on television seemed confusion and out of context. Royal airplane had been blown up. Two men in custody. Couple of airport employees hospitalised. Critical condition. Whole thing rather confusing since very member of the royal family is sitting cosily at the palace.

“That country is turning more and more into a complete shitshow. Has anyone given a statement? The crown? The terrorists? Anyone?” Tony shot Pepper a questioning glance, but she shook her head. “Nothing that I heard of, but the bombing was very recent, perhaps they still have as little of an idea of what is going on than the rest of the word.”

“I wouldn’t hope so.” Tony muttered absently. So much about Prince Charming fixing the country’s crisis. Technically it could still be the work of two crazed out individual, but the timing was off. Not that long ago somebody had tried to put a bullet into the crown prince’s head.

“Thanks for the heads-up, Pepper. Keep me posted. I’ll keep working on my notes.”

After Pepper had left him alone Tony grabbed his phone and actually had troubles to figure out what to write. It was not an everyday situation after all. Sorry somebody tried to blow you up? What the hell is going on in that country of yours? Didn’t feel very appropriate.

Eventually Tony settled for ‘Hope you are doing okay. You should level up your airport security though

In this kind of situation it could take hours or even days to hear from the prince again. If they hadn’t once again changed his number. For now it would be smart thing to do for Tony to sit tight, wait, watch the news and go over his notes made of awesomeness. It took him a few minutes to get back into his rhythm, but then the thoughts flew just as easily as before. The TV continued to run with the volume turned down low and Tony only fleetingly glanced at it. At least until the words ‘breaking news’ were uttered.

“We’ve been noted that only minutes ago a statement as been published on the internet, claiming responsibility for the bombing. The author is the terror group Frjáls which has also orchestrated the attack on crown prince Thor only a few weeks ago. According to the group this has only been the first act of retaliation. Within this message Frjáls accuse the royal family of Asgard of trying to murder Helblindi Ymirson, the son of the Lord of Jotunheim. According to the information given by the terrorists the son of the Lord has been poisoned at the royal palace in Valhalla and is now at the main hospital of the city fighting for his life. At this time we are not able to confirm or deny any of this information. Before the publication of this message there has been no word about the heir to Jotunheim being hospitalised or poisoned. We hope to be able to give you more information on this rumour. During the last ten minutes social media has been flooded with speculation and outrage over Helblindi Ymirson’s alleged condition…”

They had shown a photograph of him. One that would make the Jotun world-famous in a matter of
seconds. Having royalty trying to murder you could do the trick and with that face whose only purpose was to give a meaning to the word beautiful. Tony ran one hand down his face, trying to make sense out of the flood of new information. Things had gone from worse to Dante’s inferno in a couple of minutes.

Tony had already been out of his depth when thinking about what to write after a private plane had gone up in flames. Accusations of murder were something else entirely. Time to go on Google.

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The conference room resembled a beehive when Loki walked inside. People talking over each other, moving around rapidly as if there was something they could do and although Loki was perfectly able to understand that there was no better time to lose one’s head, he still couldn’t fight the feeling of disgust rising inside of him. Despite their anguished and nervous faces Loki could clearly read their actual intentions and thoughts between the lines. Barely hidden at all.

Once more this wasn’t about a reckless danger that had been asleep among them and which was now waking up to devour them all. Or about protecting the innocent lives which might fall victim to that storm which already seemingly beyond their control.

No, it had never been about Helblindi and now it wasn’t about the poor souls who had woken up today and had gone to their job at the airport. Once more this was all about them. The royals and Loki in particular. This entire room was busy with finding ways to wash that stain off their legacy. Something as tasteless as an attempted murder.

Not the first one. That’s what Helblindi would say. He was clearly the smarter one.

Everybody was caught up in whatever they were doing that almost half a minute passed before Valkyrie spotted Loki. “Your highness, we’ve been waiting for you. Quite eagerly.”

Eager to clean up this mess. Loki’s guts were clenching and the disgust threatened to make him nauseous. He had to swallow it down though. There were matters way more important at hand. Loki wasn’t willing to overlook the immense suffering that was looming right above their population. Ready to strike them at any moment. Desperation and anger were dangerous motivators, everybody had witnessed that not long ago. A man pushed far enough into complete, all-consuming despair was capable of almost everything. A man trying to defend and protect something he adored and cherished couldn’t be negotiated with. There was nothing more perilous.

There was nothing dearer to any Jotun than Helblindi. Their love for him was without limits and conditions. Now the same people who had stolen him his rightful throne had also tried to kill him. Loki could see their point. Watching a buildings going up in flames suddenly appeared like a beautiful prospect. Yes, a heinous and through and though egoistical idea, but in these exact moment it was so easy to understand. “What’s the damage?”

“Crucifixion on social media. Not a single person is interesting in the bombing anymore. Everybody wants to know what happened to the future Lord of Jotunheim. His last public appearance was over a week ago and Jotun voices clearly believe the accusations made by Frjáls. The rest of the country is still debating what is really going on. There has to be a reaction and it has to be fast if we want to regain a little bit of control.” Valkyrie’s eyes were fierce, she was living for these kinds of scenarios. Only the spirits knew how bored that woman had to be every single day writing casual statements about a diplomatic visit. This was an opportunity to die for. A political scandal that only came one in a lifetime. Something quite extraordinary since no scandal was as common as the political kind.
Their mutual dislike didn’t make the situation any easier. Control. That was all this was about. Saving their reputation and eventually their own skin.

“The time window we are dealing with is extremely narrow. Rather sooner than later Laufey is going to confirm every file rumour floating around the internet and then it will be too late for us to do damage control.”

Loki merely glanced at Thor. There was that word again. Control. Right now his brother repulsed him the exact same way as everybody else in this room. “I do not give a damn about controlling anything whatsoever. Helblindi was poisoned and therefore is still in hospital. It’s a fact that cannot be changed and too many people know about it. We have to act on behalf of the entire country. A big part of the population is already convinced that one of us tried to kill the person they love most. One plane going up in flames is not going to be the end of it. There are going to be riots. Worse than the ones we’ve had before. People are going to die, so we have to use all our power to stop that from happening.”

The slight nod that his brother gave in agreement should do anything but enrage Loki further. That was all it did. “Exactly and therefore we have to emphasise that the rumours are not true.”

“They are not?” It should have probably scared Loki how much hostility he was able to feel towards his own brother, but none of it was an issue. Quite the contrary. Almost reassuring.

Thor was the one who was scared. Or at least taken aback. So much that he was merely capable of pronouncing the other’s name in response. “Loki…”

Ignoring his brother Loki turned back to Valkyrie. “We need a direct message to the Jotun population. Telling them that what happened to Helblindi is an atrocity, that their outrage and anger are completely justified, but that their prince would never condone any kind of violence. That he has gone to great lengths to protect them and improve their lives. They owe him as much as not jeopardizing everything he has accomplished by turning to violence and unleashing chaos. We need to put emphasize on the fact that he is going to be fine. That he will tell them himself what has happened soon enough. He is protected by Jotun guards, his family is with him. That’s important. Everything might be lost if they believe they still have to fear for him. I want several drafts in half an hour. I will come up with a few ideas what I am going to say myself.”

A hand was touching his arm and Loki wondered if he even should be fighting the urge to violently shove Thor away. “You? You want to give a statement? Father said that he didn’t think that is a good idea and I agree. You are too emotionally involved.”

Rage was running through his veins, becoming one with his blood and with Loki himself. Images flashed in his mind. Loki could see Helblindi lying in the hospital bed. Quiet and vulnerable. Two things that he should never be. He saw the Jotun guards, felt their hatred towards him and their shared love for the patient. It was going to burn them all and leave behind only ashes. Thor understood none of it. He didn’t feel a thing. “No one but me should make that statement. I am not only the logical choice, I am the only choice. Even a person who doesn’t know who you are only has to take a single look at you and they would know that you wouldn’t shed a tear if he died.”

Familiar blue eyes looked at him and they were filled with sadness and disappointment. Loki couldn’t bring himself to feel a thing. “You cannot seriously believe that I have had a hand in what has happened to him.”

“We don’t have time to talk about that. Every second that we lose is a second that a Jotun comes closer to the decision to take revenge for his prince by spilling blood. Frjáls is not going to wait for an explanation either way. Half an hour, Valkyrie.”
Before doing as she was told Valkyrie sent Thor a glance which clearly stated that she would have clearly preferred doing his biding, but the crown prince remained silent. When she was gone Thor made another attempt to negotiate, his voice softer than Loki had expected. It didn’t do anything to slender his disgust. “Loki, please, be reasonable. It’s not just your involvement, but your position. Until now the Jotun population has been more or less in favour towards you. You risk losing all the goodwill that you’ve earned if you are suddenly associated to what happened. It was in your rooms after all.”

“I am going to talk to them. If you wish to stop me from doing so, you will have to tell father to order me to do so. An order that I will ignore.”

It was a blessing to start working on his statement, now he didn’t have to look at Thor anymore. Loki sat down in the room next door and tried to not think of Helblindi while he was writing about him. Only a few minutes could have passed when the door was ripped open and Loki faced a member of the PR team. He looked out of breath as if he had run down the main street.

“What?”

“Young highness, armed civilians are gathering up in the streets of Útgarðar. They seem to be heading toward the government district. There is also a crowd forming in front of the palace. Also five minutes ago there was a tumult in front of the town hall, here in Valhalla. A Jotun attacked a guard, several more people got involved. The police was able to resolve the situation, but…”

Loki nodded and made a quick, dismissive gesture. Of course it was already happening. Still, Loki had hoped that they would have had more time. If people were already arming themselves then they were in a worse dilemma than a couple of weeks ago. This time the protests weren’t going be limited to within Jotunheim. Loki did not have half an hour.

Standing up Loki walked back into the conference room. “I need the drafts now! Get me a camera to be ready in 15 minutes. Live broadcast. Now!”

Everything happened in a blur. Loki remembered asking a staff member if they were insane or just stupid when they brought him his uniform to wear for the broadcast. “I do not care if it’s the traditional attire for such an occasion! This is not a declaration of war! Get me something blue! Mix it with another bright colour, so they won’t feel like I’m patronizing them.”

17 minutes later Loki was sitting behind a desk in front of a camera with his heart racing inside of his chest. Helblindi and him had worked so hard on a peaceful solution, it couldn’t fell apart now. Loki was not going to let that happen. On the outside he was as calm and composed as he possibly could be. On the inside he was screaming.

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“Please, just wait until there is an official confirmation. It has all been rumours until now! They blew up the usurpers private plane! What do you think are they going to do with a Jotun who happens to walk into Valhalla just now?”

“The same that has been happening for the last 500 years and it’s going to end right now.” Aðalherr kept frantically cramming clothes into his bag, then he also ripped off the zipper when he closed it.

Úlfarna put a hand on his arm, but her usual soothing touch was completely lost on him. “Don’t believe that I am not going through the exact same rage as you do. If the situation were different, the both of us would already be out of the door, but there are two little kids upstairs. We have to think of them before doing something rash.”
Shouldering his bag Aðalherr spun around and watched the beautiful face of his wife. None of the anger that was eating him up alive was directed at her. She wasn’t responsible for the grief that threatened to overwhelm him. No, she was the love of his life, the person his ancestors had sent to him and who was going through the exact same turmoil right now. So Aðalherr wasn’t yelling at her, but he was yelling nonetheless. “I am not thinking about anything else but them! About their future! Their home! They tried to kill the only person who was going to make sure that they will have it easier than us! Better! It’s for our two kids that I have to go!”

Her blue eyes looked straight back into his own. “I know and I would not ask you to stay if we could be sure. It’s all rumour and…”

Shaking his head Aðalherr told her what he knew. What atrocity the usurper had dared to commit now. So much worse than anything that had happened during their lifetime. “Nereiðr told me.”

The mentioning of their friend had Úlfarna tensing up and shock was paralysing her features. “What?”

“Yes… the message was passed through several channels. Highest ranks. His cousin confirmed it. He is one of the guards at the hospital. The prince was brought in there last night. He hasn’t opened his eyes since.”

Úlfarna gasped. A horrible sound filled consternation and despair. It cut so deeply that she quickly covered her mouth with one hand. Aðalherr simply nodded and was overcome by the need to comfort her. Which wasn’t possible, but he had to do something. So Aðalherr pulled his wife into his arm and he felt her hands clawing at his sweater. “Is he going to die? Did they kill him?”

“No yet and they aren’t going to get another shot at him. I have to go.”

This time he could feel her nodding.

As Aðalherr let go he was ready to walk upstairs and kiss both of his kids goodbye before heading for his train. Before he could take another step he glanced at the TV which had remained unnoticed until now. The usurper’s son was on screen. The good one.

“Look.”

Quickly Úlfarna turned up the volume and they heard a son of Búri talking to them in Jǫtnar. “…with deep shame that I have to make this statement. It is indeed true that the son of the Lord of Jötunheim, Helblindi Ymirson, has been hospitalised during a stay at the palace in Valhalla. Unfortunately I can only offer you the little information that I have. Due to unknown circumstances the young Lord fainted and hit his head as he fell. At this time he is in a Valhallan hospital where his head injury is being treated. His father and brother are with him. At this time I cannot give you any more details since I do not possess them, but in few days Helblindi Ymirson is going to give them to you himself. He will give you the explanation that you crave and deserve. Until then all I can do is to ask you for forgiveness. The young Lord followed my invitation, he was my guest. I was responsible for his well-being and I failed. I am well aware of the rumours that are floating around and I know that I am not the person to tell you that they are false. Helblindi Ymirson is going to do that. Until then I am asking you to wait. There is no way for me to understand your anger or the grief that you are feeling. I will not pretend to ever be able to comprehend how much he means to you, but I have to ask you to please believe me that he is dear to me too. Your prince and I share the same goal. We’ve worked together and we still are. I know that there is nothing between the sky and the earth that means more to him than his people. All of you. He wants you to prosper, to live healthy and happily. The last thing he would want is people turning to violence. Your prince is at the hospital, recovering from a head wound. He cannot talk to you personally yet. He will and I don’t
think he will want to wake up to see everything that he has worked for undone.”

***

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Stephen lowered the chart and shook his head. The prince’s blood was clean, no trace of any drug of any kind. That didn’t help anybody. Only made it look a lot more like an attempted murder. Which was giving Stephen a headache. Walking up to the window Stephen glanced outside. More people than the last time. Flowers and candles. Lots of black hair and blue eyes. Well, it was definitely better if they riled up in front of the hospital to pray than blowing up planes or buildings.

“Would be a good time for sleeping beauty to wake up.”

For once God or the spirits or some greater power was listening to Stephen. His pager went off. When he arrived in the patient’s room, the entire family was already there and Doctor Lorenzen. Stephen really began to loath royalty, they were so much harder to throw out. It didn’t matter much at the moment. Not when the patient’s eyes were open. Lorenzen was leaning over him, softly talking in Jötunar and Stephen was tempted to clear his throat.

The father was as stoic as ever, the brother looked still like he was about to burst into tears at any second and the patient resembled any other patient after a moderate concussion. Unfocused, beat, with eyelids that weighed tons. They’d probably have only a couple of minutes with him before he was going to fall back into his slumber. Stephen would like to get a word in, to have something to report to his employer. Also he didn’t feel at ease when another doctor was talking to his patient and Stephen didn’t even understand what they were saying.

A soft sound passed the patient’s lips and a slight movement of his head was probably supposed to be nod. Lorenzen checked out his eyes and Stephen moved closer. A few more words were shared, then his eyes slid shut again. Moment passed. Great work.

Immediately Lorenzen started conversing with the Ymirsons and Stephen was sick of it. “Excuse me? May I also hear what my patient had to say?”

He was ignored for another 30 seconds, then Lorenzen pulled him aside, talking in a hushed voice. “The prince has no memory of the last couple of days.”

“That was to be expected. Moderate concussion. It will come back to him. What else?”

Lorenzen ran down his report and Stephen listened. Afterwards he remained in the room a little longer, watching the family. Then he excused himself and went into another room to call the prince. It took less than five seconds for him to pick up.

“Doctor?”

“He woke up. For about a minute. He was able to articulate and respond to questions. The next time he wakes up we should be able to have an actual conversation with him.”

“Thank you so much…”

“Your highness, we are worried about his eyes though.”
Hello everybody,

Let’s see if Loki’s speech did anything to help,

Have fun :)

“These are the days that make me regret that I stopped smoking.” Arnþórr dribbled his fingers against the steering wheel probably since there wasn’t anything else he could do. Bucky just nodded weakly and kept looking out of the window. Until now he hadn’t been aware that Arnþórr had been a smoker. Such a trivial piece of information that nobody really needed and Bucky couldn’t even concentrate on that at the moment. Now the last couple of hours seemed like a blur, one that he was never going to be able to make sense of. A couple of hours ago he had been ready to get on a plane to leave this country and now he was still here. Not because of some spontaneous and miraculous change in politics, but terrorism. Bucky didn’t know how he was supposed to feel in this situation. None of this was completely unfamiliar, but it has always been bound to work and to a stay in a war ridden country. It had nothing to do with his private life. Until now.

After the attack on the royal airplane all the flights were cancelled and the airport locked down. It had taken them hours to get out of there, spending some of them not knowing where that explosion had come from and if others were to follow. Now it was pitch-black, they were back in Arnþórr’s car and Bucky’s luggage was in the trunk. He hadn’t been able to get in contact with the embassy yet and Bucky had to admit that he wasn’t too eager to do that.

“Hey… you’re okay? You haven’t said anything for a while.” Arnþórr put his hand on Bucky’s who therefore turned to look at him. “Just been staring at this endless line of cars and thinking about how I cannot imagine you as a smoker.”

“Merely for a little more than a year. It’s impossible to maintain a smoking habit in this country. Have you looked at the prize of a cigarette pack?”

It was a weak attempt to make conversation, just to say something. To ignore the obvious. Which wasn’t going to work out anyway. “It must be a rather big manifestation. We’ve been standing here for how long? 40 minutes? Nothing is moving.”

“I guess that’s what you get for living in the city centre…” Arnþórr mumbled absently and Bucky sighed, deciding to cut the chase. “Are you worried?”

“Damn yes, I am. There was an explosion at airport. That kind of thing doesn’t happen in Valhalla. It never has. In Jotunheim maybe. Not here. That simply does not happen.”

Slowly Bucky nodded, rubbing his thumb over the back of Arnþórr’s hand. “I am sure things will work out…”

“Come on, you work for the embassy. You know that things like that don’t just work out or go away. Somebody blew up a plane! We’ve been stuck here for ages, because people are out in the
streets. In fucking Valhalla.”

“I know… Let’s just hope we’ll get out of here before midnight.”

Both of them fell silent again and Bucky didn’t feel the need to restart another conversation. They were tense, balancing on the edge and a little thing might be enough to make them snap. The car in front of them did not move and the silence weighed heavily. When there was finally some movement Bucky could make out that some of the cars further down the street were u-turning. Perhaps they’ve had enough of not moving for an eternity. At least Bucky thought so until he saw two police officers down the road that were communicating with the drivers, clearly instructing them to turn around. That alone wouldn’t be too concerning. Except that they were wearing SWAT gear.

“Damn, we can’t go back. It’ll take us ages to get home…” Arnþórr sighed and didn’t turn the car around until they were the first ones in line and the officers right next to them. “Sir, you have to turn around.”

“But my apartment is just down…”

“The street is closed. There is no coming through for the next couple of hours. Turn around now.”

Arnþórr was clearly gritting his teeth as he did as he was told. “That’s going to cost us at least 15 minutes.”

Bucky nodded, but he knew that neither of them really cared about the delay. While Arnþórr steered the car slowly through the city Bucky kept looking out the window, but not really seeing anything. Eventually they slowed down again and Bucky heard Arnþórr huffing. “That can’t be true.”

“What?”

“I start to think that this is the end of the road.” Arnþórr muttered lowly and Bucky spotted two more officers. Even more SWAT gear.

His boyfriend turned out to be perfectly right, the officers told them that they couldn’t continue on this street and had to turn around. They were about to set up road blocks. “My apartment is like 200 metres away. Please, if you could just let us…”

“Sir, the street is closed. Just like every other street that leads up to the Slóð.”

“All serious? My apartment is in one of those streets. How are we supposed to get home if you are blocking all the roads?”

“I am sorry, but there are no exceptions being made. Now please turn the car around.”

By now Arnþórr was oozing with frustration and Bucky felt the need to calm him down, although he wasn’t in a much better state himself. “Come on, this is no use. There are definitely people on the street, protesting. They’re not going to let us through. Let’s just park the car and walk. We’ll leave my luggage in the car for tonight.”

“What other choice do we have…” Arnþórr muttered under his breath and they succumbed to their fate. Since it was late, it was a chore to find a parking lot, but they eventually made it. Tired and worn out they got out of the vehicle and Bucky shouldered his back bag before sliding his arm around Arnþórr’s waist.

“I definitely wanted you to stay, but I still can’t wait for this day to be over.”
In response Bucky half-smiled and tilted his head to press a kiss on Arnþórr’s cheek. Everything about this situation was making him uneasy and he had convinced himself that he would feel better as soon as they were in Arnþórr’s apartment, hopefully finally able to sit down and put this day behind them. The sounds in distance only made that desire more urgent.

“It’s ridiculous, you know?” Arnþórr’s voice was strangely hushed, like he didn’t dare to talk louder. “Like the royal family would ever do anything like that. Like anybody would do something like that…”

“I guess it doesn’t matter that much what actually happened. At least for today. Let’s just get home.”

Bucky was definitely ignoring the unpleasant goose bumps. The distant noises were still hard to make out, but they were getting louder. Closer.

“I don’t feel good about leaving the car so far away from the apartment.”

“Me neither, but we’ll get it first thing in the morning.”

They turned around a corner and Bucky could see some kind of orange light at the end of the street. Shadows seemed to be dancing in front of it. Before Bucky even had the opportunity to squint his eyes to make out what he was seeing there, a loud bang had both of them flinching. Then another one. The screaming and yelling of several people that had mingled into one. Not like at the airport. Not afraid and fearful, this was aggression. Now it became obvious that those dancing shadows were people.

“James, we probably shouldn’t continue.”

“We just have to turn around another corner…”

“We’re like 300 metres away from the Slóð which leads directly to the palace. The protests probably spread across a couple of streets. The police closed them off for a reason.”

That was most definitely true, Bucky didn’t doubt that, but they were so close. Down the street and then they only had to close the door behind them. “Let’s just go down to the curve and take a look.”

Arnþórr was chewing lightly on his lower lip and Bucky almost expected them to say no. The answer was a slow nod, then Arnþórr grabbed his hand and they continued to move forward. It was clearly the wrong decision. With every step Bucky felt more like they were heading into a warzone, a situation that he had been trained for. Screams, yelling, sirens and more detonations. At least not loud enough to be shots.

How much simpler could it be? Only a few more steps and around the corner. Except that they were standing at the crossroad into complete chaos. The orange light turned out to be the product of flares. The black shadows were people dressed in said colours, their faces mummed. Some of them were holding flares in their hands, others were carrying stones, sticks and whatever could easily be turned into a weapon. Somewhere among the shouting Bucky could hear glass shattering. One of the black figures was spray canning something onto the wall of a building.

“James!” Arnþórr jerkily pulled at his hand, forcing him to almost stumble a step back.

With a common, unified roar the people started launching forward, running towards a line of policemen that Bucky had noticed only now. Riot gear. He thought he could see a paving stone being thrown through the air.

“Let’s get out of here.”
“All access to the Slóð has been cut off, but it’s still filled with protesters and rioters. They are unorganised, so police forces are able to keep things in check, but the rising numbers of the protesters is nonetheless alarming. According to our men they are highly aggressive and use violence against our forces. Your grace, we perhaps should grant the police more leeway in dealing with the rioters.”

Loki saw Odin shaking his head. “We are not going to use guns against our own people.”

“I understand, your grace, but given the information that we have it’s doubtful that the situation will cool down during the next 24 hours. We will have to deal with more people and then protests probably cannot be contained to the Slóð. If we do not want the military to get involved, we will have to give the forces more options.”

Loki thought he could hear his father answer. How excessive violence was not an option, because then they could never even hope to regain control of the situation. That was true, Loki completely agreed, but he still didn’t answer. The prospect of someone answering him was unbearable. He obviously didn’t know any better than anyone else. Or at least he wasn’t capable of expressing himself the way that he should have. His words had sounded so good in his head and even when he had said them out loud. Yet they had been merely words. Lots of letters in a certain order. A boy born and raised in Valhalla speaking Jǫtnar with a heavy accent and who couldn’t roll his Rs. How was that supposed to fix anything? It was clear as day how much good it had done.

After so many years when every protest had been limited to Jotunheim, all the anger and the pain had finally made it to Valhalla. Without build-up or a slow start. They were facing street battles, looting and Valhalla’s main avenue blocked. It was a spontaneous rearing up of the people, who knew if there was even a point to it. A goal. Were they trying to do something or was this just a way to express anger and helplessness? Maybe for most of them. For Loki there was no doubt that somewhere in the mass of people was more than just one who wanted to march down the Slóð to the gates of the palace, tear them down and get revenge for what had been done to Helblindi.

Despite not having eaten anything for hours Loki felt like his stomach was twisting and turning, trying to get rid of something foul and rotten. Perhaps it was the presence of all these men who had already forgotten what had brought them all here. His father and Thor who had every reason imaginable to want Helblindi to disappear forever. Misery and pain. That’s what Helblindi would cause him, his father had said. When had the idea of his father trying to protect him become frightening?

The crisis squad continued to discuss what kind of measures should be taken now and Loki was not going to listen anymore. In this moment he lacked the strength to do so. Therefore Loki got up from the table and walked out of the room. The whole palace was making him nauseous. Heavy steps led him down a corridor until he stopped in front of one of the windows. Even the darkness of the night wasn’t quite enough to cover up what was happening. Smoke, the lights of flares and the constant growling in the distance.

“Loki?”

Thor’s voice was a reminder of how little Loki wanted to talk to him. It felt more like punishment than anything else. It was a necessity though. “This is not going to stop. Nothing that we can do will stop it. Not without bloodshed. If we just fire one bullet, then Laufey will all the perfect justification to gather his own forces and Russia would jump right in. Your precious Americans would love that, wouldn’t they? Another reason to get involved. We have no means to end this. I’ve tried and I failed. Who knows. I even might have made things worse.”
“You didn’t make anything worse. Things were spiralling out of control as soon anything about got out.”

There was a desire to say something, to hurt Thor with his words, to cut him. Instead Loki remained silent, hoping that Thor would feel it anyway.

“I know what you have in mind and you are right. Only he can get them off the street.”

The accusation was lying on Loki’s tongue. That a couple of things should have been put into consideration before trying to kill the one man that gave Jotunheim hope. The one they trusted without condition. The one they loved so fiercely.

“But he can’t talk to them. Another Ymirson has to do it.”

“What would be the point? I believe that we’ve been lucky that Laufey hasn’t said anything now. I honestly don’t understand why. He would rather die than say anything in our favour. He is convinced that we…”

Thor trailed off as Loki finally turned to look at him. No veils or masks. Loki let him see everything, everything that going through his mind. The fury, the disdain, the disappointment. Why should Loki hide it when still doubted that Thor was even able to understand? Or was he underestimating him? Because even though Loki had no idea what his brother could read in his face, it was no trouble for himself to decipher the shock.

“That’s not true. You seriously cannot still… I thought if you had some time to think about it... Is that what you think us capable of?”

To Loki it seemed like Thor was made out of glass and that glass was breaking into a thousand pieces right in front of him. No need to touch him for that. One look had been enough. Loki couldn’t bring himself to feel sorry for it. Instead he had to think of their archives. The letters, documents, treaties, contracts and even diaries stored there. “It would not be the first time that we killed one of them.”

“By all the spirits, Loki…”

“I will talk to Laufey.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“You are right, I should not. I should talk to Helblindi, but I can’t. I cannot even leave this building to go see him. So I have to do what I can do.”

His brother remained at the window while Loki walked away. It was getting easier to breathe. Probably not for a long time though.

Leah did her best, Loki knew that, but it still took them almost an hour to get the Lord of Jotunheim on the phone. Nonetheless impatience couldn’t be further from Loki’s mind. It was paralysed by fear and worry. If Laufey wasn’t on the phone he was in Helblindi’s room. Had he woken up again? Had they had the possibility to check on his eyes? Loki’s skin was starting to feel too tight and he sat down, afraid that his legs might not carry him.

Inside his chest his heart was definitely beating too fast when he heard Laufey’s calm and deep voice at the other end of the line. “Your highness. What is it that you want to talk about?”

“I… I didn’t thank you for letting me see Helblindi. I want to let you know that I am very grateful.”
“Is that all?”

No, Laufey could never make it easy for anyone. Especially not for Loki. “No, I… I need to ask you a favour, my Lord.”

“And what would that be?”

Taking a breath Loki just went for it. “Valhalla is drifting into chaos. Our Jotun citizens are endangering themselves and very other person that is living in this city. I understand their helplessness and their rage, but there is no point in what they are doing. No other than an escalation in violence. I have tried to talk to them, but I did not succeed. I know they want to hear from Helblindi, but at the moment that is not possible. You are their Lord. I ask you to talk to them, to get them off the streets until Helblindi can talk to them himself.”

Laufey let him wait and when he answered it was in the same, quite almost monotone way. “You are making the same mistake again.”

“What mistake?”

“Do you know why they didn’t listen to you, your highness? There was a chance for you to be successful, but you made a mistake. Do you know which one?”

Loki shouldn’t care, but he did. “What? What did I do wrong?”

“It was a good speech. Talking in Jötnar, immediately accepting some of the blame. Not mentioning the engagement. It was all very smart and the best you could have done. Then you went wrong by assuming that you know what Helblindi would want. You claimed not to be talking for him and yet you were talking for him. Every single living Jotun would walk over glass for Helblindi, they trust his word and all they know is that he has been taken from them. They did not need you to tell them anything about he thinks or what he would want. They might respect you, but they still don’t know you.”

Balling one hand into a fist Loki tried to keep his calm, but he was just barely holding on. “They know you though. They trust you. You need to talk to them.”

“I will not.”

“Why? You cannot be in favour of what is…”

“Because I do not know what my son wants or what he thinks. I haven’t had the opportunity to talk to him yet. Or do you want me to say what I think? That my son was perfectly healthy and beautiful when he left his home and that I now have to sit next to his hospital bed. Waiting for him to wake up, so I can tell him that the fall probably did damage to his eyes. Is that what you want me to say?”

Loki didn’t respond and Laufey obviously didn’t expect him to.

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For once Stephen turned out to be a lucky son of a bitch. He wasn’t aware why both the Lord and the constantly crying son had both disappeared at the same time, but he didn’t care as long as the result was in his favour. It definitely had something to do with the entire city going to hell. Stephen didn’t doubt that they were still in the hospital, however, for now there was no one sitting next to his patient.

Stephen was doing what every doctor did when they were stalling. Checking vitals that he knew by
heart and pretending to read the patient’s file. This time it was worth the effort, because there was only Stephen present when the patient’s eyelids began to flutter. About time.

“My Lord, do you hear me?”

A soft groan was uttered before he opened his eyes and they were indeed as blue as they were on television. “Who is that?”

Stephen stepped closer, leaning over patient whose eyes darted around the room. First they landed on the light, then on Stephen.

“My name is Doctor Stephen Strange. Do you remember the last time that you woke up?”

His voice was hoarse, not like it was supposed to sound, Stephen was sure of that. “I was at a hospital. You are not the doctor that I spoke to.”

Good. Short-term memory seemed alright. “That’s right, but I was present. Don’t be startled, I am going to shine a light into your eyes.”

The Lord’s son didn’t move as Stephen did his little check-up. Pupils reacted normally. No indication for swelling or bleeding. One had to be grateful for little favours. “Good. How are you feeling?”

“Horrible. I can’t see you properly. It’s all blurred.”

Like expected. “Can you make out the light? Can you tell where I am standing?”

“Yes. You are right in front of me. I guess you are tall, but I cannot even tell your hair colour. What happened?”

The prince should be more than content now Stephen even got to be the first one to break this down to Helblindi. Just in case the patient’s father would want to share his own version of the story. Misunderstands were so easy to happen. Stephen instead stuck to the facts. Dangerous mix of alcohol and drugs. Fell down, hit your head. Looked pretty bad for a little while, but you’re going to be okay.

“Are you taking on any kind of medication? Anti-depressants? Meds against anxiety? Anything?”

“No. None of that. Where is my father?”

“At the hospital. Your brother has been sitting next to your bed for hours. You chose the one moment to wake up when there is nobody here but me.”

Stephen noted that the patient closed his eyes again. “Which is strange, because you are not Jotun. My father would insist on a Jotun doctor.”

Speech wasn’t slurred, but it was getting slower. Stephen didn’t believe that he had much time left. Better had to get to it. “He did. I am Prince Loki’s personal physician. He told me to look after you.”

“I see. Where is Loki?”

Not only slower but quieter.

“At the palace. Your absence is causing quite a stir. I am sure he will be here as soon as he hears that you’re awake.”
“But I want to sleep…”

Right, Stephen was wasting time. Quickly he reached into the pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a syringe. “My Lord, I need a blood sample for further testing.”

What he got in response was a barely noticeable nod and a soft “Alright.”

There, consent, perfect. That was all that Stephen needed. By the time Stephen slid the needle into the patient’s skin, he was already asleep again. As soon as he was done Stephen hid the blood sample in his pocket. He would have gladly left immediately, but he couldn’t afford to arise suspicion. So instead Stephen contacted Doctor Lorenzen and told him about the patient waking up. A detailed report and then Stephen used an excuse that he despised severely. Claiming that he needed to get some sleep like everybody else. His secretary brought him an overnight bag from his office and when she did, Stephen secretly slipped the sample into her hand. “Take it to my lab. Not a single word to anybody.”

Stephen didn’t dare to properly breathe until she had left again. At least now they had a sample of which Stephen knew exactly where it had come from and that was never going to see another doctor’s hands. With a bit of luck they would not need it.

This time the Lord’s son stay asleep for long. When he woke up again the room was filled with his family and two doctors. It took two ridiculous seconds until the word ‘poisoned’ was thrown around. The Lord’s son listened, although he was clearly having trouble keeping up with what was being told to him. He remained silent most of the time until his weak voice made a very firm wish. “I want to see Loki.”

“What? You cannot… It happened in his room! He was there! When you were…”

The little brother got ignored and the patient repeated his request. “Get him here. Please.”

Stephen watched carefully as Laufey gave a soft nod. “I’ll have Týr call him, but only after your eye exam.”

“Thank you, father.”

For some reason Stephen was taken aback by the sudden sign of affection as the Lord leaned down and kissed his son’s forehead. The patient visibly bit his lip and tilted his head to the side whereon his father put a hand on his cheek.

“Can I talk to Helblindi alone? Just a minute?”

Everybody’s eyes went to the Lord, not even the patient. Again Laufey nodded. “Doctors, would you please give my sons a little privacy.”

So they all left, but Stephen looked over his shoulder before the door fell shut. Little brother had his arms wrapped tightly around the patient, silently crying into his hair.
I love you

Chapter Notes

Hello,

I thought it would be amazing to have the great climax in the 100th chapter... didn’t work out, but close enough :)

Have fun

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Bannaðr! Bannaðr! Bannaðr!”

It was an easy word to chant. A rhythm that anyone could fall into naturally. A choir that made out of a faceless crowd one thunderous voice. One strong enough to drown out anything that Loki or anyone else might have shouted in their defence. Nothing that anyone could do. It made people realise how small they were faced with hundreds of others who weren’t just passing you by on the street. Or who wouldn’t part like the sea if you only raised your hand. No, they were one giant body, with the same feelings, desires and fears. In this case they were united through their anger.

They were not even looking at Loki. They could not see him. Yet they were chanting for him. For all of them. All of his family that was living in that palace made of Jotun gold.

Liars. Thieves. How easy it had been to get used to these names. While the term ‘murderer’ had Loki shivering.

From his window the city had been shimmering in orange light. Flares, actual fire and artificial light to help the police forces doing their job. Shots had been fired. In another district. The news had been coming in at the same time that Loki had received the call from the hospital. “The young Lord has woken up and wished to talk to you.”

At that time there only been one way to go, because whatever was happening in the streets of Valhalla and the people that Loki’s family was responsible for, in that hospital only 20 minutes was the man who could make it all right again. Not just that, perhaps he would allow Loki to properly breathe again.

Any other time Loki would have felt bad for it. For thinking about himself and his personal feelings when they should be so much less important than the immediate crisis their people found themselves in. Or maybe Loki had just become one of them. He was scared for the very same reason. That beautiful man in a hospital bed who was the answer to just everything.

So no, Loki hadn’t stayed to find out who had shot who or what exactly had happened. Instead he had called his security and told them that he needed a car to get him out of here instantly. To the hospital. This is time he wasn’t going to ask for permission or even announce his plans. Loki would go to see his fiancé and then they would put an end to all of this together. No more shots, flares or people calling him a murderer for his family name.

The moment Loki had stepped outside, into the usually so quite patio, he could hear the chanting.
Every repetition of that Jotnar word was a hit with the hammer. Blunt and with full force. Beaten and battered Loki led a security detail lead him through another door, back inside through long dark hallways. Tunnels. To an adjoining building of the palace where a SVU waited for him. Loki didn’t say a word during the entire drive. The streets were desert and quiet. A perfect illusion since the team knew perfectly well which way to go, how to avoid the chaos and the rioters. How long until this nightmare wasn’t going to be limited to a few selected streets?

Despite all of that Loki could feel the pressure inside his chest going back the closer they got to the hospital. Again, no main entrance for him. Too many people, too many like him who were praying for the one they trusted. Security was still all over the halls and Loki could feel eyes on him with every step that he took. They didn’t matter. What mattered was that Týr might have narrowed his eyes at him, but he opened the door without hesitation for him.

Helblindi wasn’t alone. Býleistr was sitting next to his bed and the hostility in his expression would have had Loki shuddering if it wasn’t for the fact that Helblindi wasn’t lying in his bed but sitting. “The Duke of Glaesisvellir is here to see you. I will leave you alone.”

Clearly he had been talked into this beforehand, every single movement with filled with reluctance. Loki barely dared to breathe until Býleistr had walked past him and left the room. Then Loki rushed forward, he could see the immaculate blue of those eyes. Taking a hold of Helblindi’s hand Loki brought it to his lips and kissed it. “Hey, how are you feeling? Are you okay? I was so worried…”

“Hello to you too. Shit, I feel like shit.”

The softness of his voice had Loki uttering a single sob as he slid down on the empty chair. Helblindi’s fingers weakly curled around his own and Loki saw the faint smile on his lips. “You’re so easy to recognize since you still cannot properly pronounce an R.”

The lithe, bright joy that was running through Loki’s veins threatened to freeze as Doctor Strange’s call came right back to his memory. His eyes. The clearly most Jotun thing about him. Trying to shove down the so prominent fear Loki searched his face. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t see you. You are all blurred.”

It did not feel much different from the chanting and the blows. “Did… Did they check on your eyes?”

“Sure. Results aren’t in yet.”

Biting his lip Loki tried to keep a clear head. Losing his composure wouldn’t help either of them. “Have you talked to a sage?”

“I will later today. I first wanted to talk to you.”

“No, you cannot wait on this one. I’ll get one right…”

Helblindi tugged at his hand and Loki had the feeling that he wanted to shake his head. “No, I need to talk to you. It’s important. I have no memory of the last couple of days. I don’t know what happened. Everybody is throwing information at me and I can’t keep track of it. What I can tell for sure is that my brother is losing his mind. I’ve never seen him like this. I need you to tell me what is going on.”

Loki swallowed hard and his very first thought was so totally unlike him. He wished for more time. A fleeting moment, an illusion where he could still pretend that there were no underlying problems. It was already gone. The short yet overwhelming relief that Helblindi still knew who he was and that
he wanted him here. That was all that Loki had got. “What did they tell you?”

“Two versions of the same story. My father says that your father and brother poisoned me. My brother believes that you were in on it. “

That opinion coming from a hurting young man filled with resentment wasn’t surprising. Yet it pained Loki that anyone would think him capable of ever inflicting pain on the man that his ancestors had sent to him.

“You collapsed. In my rooms. You…” Loki tried to tell the story like a movie, like a book he had been reading. Not an event that he had witnessed and that had shaken him. “… lost consciousness and when you fell your head hit the edge of the table. I panicked. My guards reacted to the distress signal and came for you. They brought you here. The doctors found sleeping medication in your blood… mixed with alcohol. You were very upset after a fight with your brother, I told you a drink would calm you down. You’ve had two glasses of wine. You didn’t get to finish the second one. I am sorry…”

Loki finally found absolution in a simple gesture. Helblindi’s thumb softly caressed the back of his hand and Loki choked back a sigh of relief. “I’ve never taken any sleeping medication…”

“I know that. The dosage was dangerously high. Your father was the first one to suggest a poisoning and since you neither drink or… It makes sense.”

“I am still alive, so I guess I should be thankful that your brother is such a screw-up.”

Helblindi was hoarse and Loki wondered if talking was actually hurting his throat. Whatever pain he was in, Loki wanted it. Not only because he wished to relieve Helblindi off it, but he also wished that someone else’s pain would outweigh his own. Thinking and pretty much knowing that his family was responsible for Helblindi’s state had been worse enough. Almost as if they had poisoned Loki too. Now hearing Helblindi say it was different though. Another person, not just his own mind. The implications were overwhelming and for the first time Loki found himself tempted to plead their case. That it couldn’t be. That the trúa demanded of all of them to value life, that they had no right to take it. That his father and brother loved him too much to take away the one his ancestors had sent to him.

“We don’t know if he has anything to do with that.” How pathetically weak his own voice sounded.

Helblindi’s thumb stopped stroking the back of his hand and to Loki it felt like something much more important had been taken away from him. “You are not naïve. Don’t pretend to be.”

“I do not know what happened, Helblindi. I just don’t know. You are safe here and we will get to the bottom of this. You have to get better first. That’s what matters most to me.” Those words were the truth and they shouldn’t be. The people outside were most important. Every single one that Loki had never and would never meet personally. They should always come first. Yet Loki was sitting here and he couldn’t imagine leaving this room for anything in the world. So Loki leaned up and brushed his lips over Helblindi’s. They were warm, soft and they opened ever so slightly for him. Instead of pulling back completely Loki rested his forehead against Helblindi’s, trying not to think about his beautiful eyes and what might be wrong with them. “I was so scared for you. For a moment I thought I had lost you.”

Helblindi didn’t respond, but he tilted his head enough for their lips to meet again. Loki almost trembled at the feeling of the other’s breath mingling with his own. Both of them were alive and Loki swore to himself that he would spend all that was left of this life with Helblindi. Like their ancestors had meant them to.
“I am a son of Ymir. We don’t die easily.” Helblindi mumbled softly and for a split second Loki wanted to remain sitting here and cry. It was so unknown, overwhelming and beyond Loki’s control. Exactly what he had wished for and none of it was political.

Loki played the thought of telling him. How it had torn him apart to sit in the golden palace and not being allowed to be with him. To fear the possibility of not being remembered or not being important anymore. That Helblindi would turn away from him. How Helblindi had changed just about all of him and how it scared Loki that he had ceded all of this power and how it was exactly what he wanted.

When words finally left Loki’s mouth, they said all that, but in a much shorter way. “I love you.”

His heart almost jumped out of his chest and honest had never been as hard as when Helblindi huffed. “You jerk… You are only saying that now, because I cannot see you.”

Loki swallowed a heartfelt laugh and felt at least one of the heavy weights that he was carrying falling off him. Instead he let his head drop onto Helblindi’s shoulder, gently nuzzling his nose against the exposed part of his neck. “I am saying that, because I couldn’t sleep…”

No more explanation necessary, Helblindi would understand. There was no doubt about that.

“I am sorry. I don’t want you to be scared. I am scared now and it’s not pleasant. Not all.”

“You’re going to be alright. Your eyes are going to be fine. You’re going to talk to a sage. You’re going to be better. Your luonto is going to become strong again and you’ll see me just fine. Then I’ll tell you again and even before that. I love you. We’re both going to be fine.” Loki simply had to believe it or he would go insane.

Helblindi’s fingers gently played with his hair ad Loki could hear him mumbling “I wasn’t going to be mad at you for not being here. No need to worry about that.”

Although Loki hadn’t actively thought about that, he couldn’t deny the relief he was feeling. Now would be a good moment for time to stop. Loki wanted this to linger, without the world outside forcing them to take the backseat. If they all could just freeze and allow Loki to relish this. Helblindi alive with him, holding him. They couldn’t though.

Pulling back Loki put his hand on Helblindi’s cheek and studied his face. The thought crossed his mind how odd it was that his eyes were as beautiful as ever although there was something wrong with them. “I need your help, auðr.”

“Then you better get to it fast, because all I want to do is sleep and I still need to talk to the sage.”

“We could not keep it a secret that you were hospitalised. Then somehow the information got leaked that… Word went out that you were poisoned. It’s the protests all over again. Only worse. People are riling up in front of the palace. They are attacking police forces, there are fights in the streets. People are getting hurt. Before I got here there were first reports about shots being fired. Maybe someone is already dead. I tried to talk to them, but it didn’t do anything. Because I am not you. They need to know that you are fine, they need to see you. They need to hear you tell them what happened.”

Helblindi’s hand came up to cover Loki’s. “I cannot do that.”

Just a minute ago Loki had wished for it and now that he did freeze it was entirely different. “What are you saying?”

“I cannot tell what happened, because I do not know. I don’t remember. They said that I would,
eventually. At the moment I just don’t know what happened and therefore I cannot say anything.” Helblindi’s words had a certain calmness to them that made it harder for Loki to listen to him. Hadn’t he just explained what was happening in Valhalla? To their citizens? How could Helblindi, of all people, refuse to help them when he was the only one who could?

“Auðr, you don’t know what is happening out there. Not just in Jotunheim but right here in Valhalla. You know what you mean to them. How important you are. There are rumours out there that you are dead. They only have my word that you are not and it’s not doing much. We need to protect the people and there’s only one way to do that. They need to see you.”

Sighing softly Helblindi closed his eyes and Loki felt the bitter taste of guilt for having to put him through this. To be so adamant.

“I know you want me to tell them that your family had no hand in this, but I cannot and will not do that. I will not lie to my people. I don’t remember what happened… which does not change that I am convinced that your brother did this. He is foolish enough for such a coward attempt. Do you want me to say that?”

There it was. Everything Loki had wished for before actually being with him. The challenge. The stubbornness. Someone who wouldn’t back down and not let himself be overwhelmed by Loki’s own hothead. Helblindi was all that and more. So at the moment Loki was overcome with admiration although he might also be seething with anger. Yes, this was all Loki wanted and yet it was almost too much to take in the context of a national crisis that might end up costing people their lives.

“I don’t want you to lie. I would never want you to do that, but you have to understand what is happening out there. Rumours are floating around that you might be dead. Who better than you would know what that means to the Jotun population? Your father and brother haven’t made a single statement yet. How long do you think it might take some radical wing inside of Frjál’s to do something radical and irreversible? I do not care about an empty plane that goes up in flames. I care about people. Before I left to see you, there was news about shots being fired in the city. The protest has already become a riot. A riot that’s soon being out of control and if the aggression against the police continues like that, we’ll have to allow them to respond with violence. All of that could be happening right now. They need to see you. I lived through a nightmare when I was sitting in the hallway, not knowing if you were going to live or die. They are still going through it. Please, Helblindi.”

As his fiancé closed his marvellous eyes Loki wondered for a moment if they might look different now that there was something wrong with them. Helblindi’s thumb drew soft circles on Loki’s palm while Helblindi’s other hand gestured at himself. “Like this? I am far from looking okay. I know that although I haven’t seen myself. My head is bandaged and I can’t deliver a speech. They’ll see me and the questions will remain, because I will not lie.”

With his heart racing Loki nodded. “But they’ll know that you’re alive. That’s what matters. You tell them that you are safe. That you don’t want anybody to get hurt. That’s it.”

“I cannot say something that I don’t know or that I don’t believe myself.”

“I don’t ask you too. I…” Pulling back slightly Loki grabbed both of his hands. As he was about to ask Helblindi to look at him, he remembered that he couldn’t and Loki tried to push down the paralysing fear. “Do you trust me? Do you believe that I can be the person to cherish you most and who will consider your advice as the most valuable one there is? Do you want me to be the same for you? Then we could put this country back together. For a second time. The both of us. Do you trust me?”
It was one thing to ignore the worry about Helblindi’s wellbeing, so Loki could still function. As it turned out the mere idea that Helblindi might not feel the same as him was equally tantalizing. Or worse? Loki had gotten so lost somewhere along the way and it should be the same with Helblindi. After citing the trúa so many times and not actually believing that Loki could find that other person, it was all right in front of him. Not just that, he was Jotun. The heir. It meant something. Helblindi had to feel it too.

Opening his eyes Helblindi looked at him and it was definitely more for Loki’s sake than for his own. “Yes. I trust you.”

Loki smiled mostly so he wouldn’t cry and Helblindi moved in to kiss him shortly. “Do you remember what I said about the two of us? Ruling the world? I think we should still do that…”

Laughing softly Loki nodded, leaning in for another kiss. “First the sage though… Then we can make a short video for Twitter.”

As Loki moved to stand up Helblindi tightly grabbed his wrist, holding him back. “Whatever my father or my brother said… I’ll let Týr know that you can always come here. Anytime.”

Relief was washing over him and Loki squeezed his hand back. “Come on, we really need to get you a sage.”

Another kiss before Loki left the room and went to look for Doctor Lorenzen. Unnecessarily as it turned out. The moment he walked out a sage passed him to see Helblindi. Good. That was good. They were going to help him and his eyes would turn out okay, eventually. Until then Loki had to make sure he was going to be fine. After a short exchange via phone Loki headed for the restroom and waited there until Strange joined him. The doctor looked tired and Loki decided that he was going to avoid the mirror himself.

“Your highness.”

“Did you get it?”

Strange nodded. “A bit sketchy though. He was not really capable of giving consent.”

“I’ll tell him as soon as he is out of the hospital. Where do you have it?”

“At my own lab at the university.”

“Good.”

“May I ask why we’re stealing the blood from your fiancé who also happens to be the son of a Lord who isn’t going to take that lightly.”

Except that Loki didn’t care what Laufey had to say about anything. “Because now we have proof that has never been in the hands of a doctor associated by Laufey. I merely want to make sure that we have a counter argument if they suddenly find something else and I want… I don’t trust his family. I don’t trust them to not make this into something even bigger. Into something that it isn’t. The substances in his blood… Could there still be traces? Today?”

“Possible.”

“Could you check? Please. I just want to be sure that… we know everything that is going on.”

Strange didn’t share his thoughts and told Loki that he would do so as soon as he got back to the lab.
Left alone again Loki took a moment to breathe and closed his eyes. What a bizarre state that he found himself in. Everything that was happening beyond the hospital walls had him scared and definitely vulnerable. At the same time he only had to think of Helblindi reaching for his hand and his lips were forming a smile.

Alive, still the same stubborn bastard who refused to compromise his principles. And he still wanted to be with Loki. They were going to be fine, he just knew it. As soon as Helblindi was fine he would go back to Jotunheim and Loki would go with him. Screw the engagement period, screw their families. They should get married by the first chance they got. It would help stabilize the country and my all the spirits and his ancestors forgive Loki for feeling so incredibly selfish, but he also just wanted to be married to him. Having him sleep next to him, talking and laughing with him, having sex with him.

Loki shook his head as if he could stop his thoughts from drifting away. There were more important matters first. The country.

Nonetheless Loki’s lips weren’t giving up their smile.

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“… therefore plead you to go home to your families. There is nothing to gain for any of us…”

Stephen exhaled loudly as he turned off the video. One could only hope that this was going to do the trick. Their beloved prince, definitely alive, telling them to go back home and stop fucking up the city. The only problem Stephen could see with this was that his patient obviously didn’t look fine. There was the bandage still wrapped around his head, he looked pale even for a Jotun. Well, what to expect from a bloke who had just suffered a head injury.

And a poisoning, but a single word was said about that. Strangely enough. No confirming. No denying. Nothing at all. Stephen didn’t know if that was a good idea. Then again, he was a better doctor than a politician or strategist. As a doctor Stephen could also tell when he was suffering from a severe lack of sleep. Blurred vision, delayed reflexes. Time to go to sleep. Well, that time had been 18 hours ago. Too bad that he couldn’t leave things unfinished.

Stephen continued his work under the harsh artificial light, so he’d finally get the results. Something that even the worse intern at any hospital could do. Here was Stephen, doing that job.

Honestly he was feeling rather frustrated about it. So much that he would have liked to snap at the prince and tell him that he was a medical genius and definitely too damned qualified to do a simple blood analysis.

Until he held the results in his hands and all vital oxygen was pressed out of his lungs. Suddenly he was caught up in a bizarre paradox. The results couldn’t be right and yet Stephen never made mistakes. So what was going on here? None of it made sense, because if Stephen hadn’t made a mistake and those results were accurate, then the prince’s little video wouldn’t matter the tiniest bit. Nothing would matter. Everything would just go to hell.

Stephen hadn’t been tempted to smoke in years and now he was suddenly craving a cigarette. Also the tremor in his hands started to act up a lot more than usually.

“Let’s do it again.”

At least Stephen was learning something new about himself today. He was okay with making mistakes. God, he hoped that this was a mistake.
Chapter End Notes

"Banamaðr" - Murderer

"auðr" - beautiful
Hello everybody,

Can you believe that for a second I was afraid that this chapter might end up too short?

;)  

Part of this chapter is written from Helblindí's perspective. That was been a while :

Have fun

Dirt was mingling with cleanser creating a brownish liquid that was running down the sidewalk. White foam was swimming on top of it and Steve could watch how it turned dark within seconds. Soon enough it was all going to be washed away. So this was it. Shockingly easy to get rid of the traces of a few nights filled with violence and terror. At least the ones on the surface. As he continued to walk down the street Steve watched people trying to scrub off the paroles smeared on the walls. Most of it was written in Jotnar, so Steve couldn’t actually read them. Which didn’t mean that he didn’t have a good idea.

Two entire days he had spent holed up in his apartment, watching a live ticker online set up by one of the major newspapers. The messages which had been rolling in had all been awfully similar, but that didn’t mean one could get used to them. Police officer being attacked. People building barricades, setting them on fire. Some poor soul had even tried to climb the fence to the royal palace. That had led nowhere and had ended badly for them.

Nobody had had any idea how long this might be going on and more importantly how it would end. On social media there had already been talk about state of emergency, the military coming in and so on. Thankfully it hadn’t come to that. Nevertheless things were not settled or over. The aggression and the pain still lingered, floating over this city like a poisonous grey fog.

Now was the morning after that video was posted on the official site of the young Lord of Jotunheim. Having a definite sign of life had obviously been enough to get most people of the streets. Not before dozens of arrests were being made. The viciousness and debate had continued on Steve’s computer though. Objectively speaking that Jotun was a beautiful man. Therefore the effects of what had happened to him were standing out even more. He looked bad, beaten up, tired and he clearly had trouble talking. After that video Steve googled a speech of his to have a comparison. It was night and day. So he got it. Of course it was good to have him telling people to go home and stop trashing things, because they thought he was dead. No, he was very much alive, but he had been hurt and nobody knew how or why. People weren’t going to accept this lack of information for very long.

This could all start over again. Steve prayed to God that it wouldn’t, but no matter how efficient and fast the clean-up was going to be and how fast people would roam this road again to do their daily business, they still would remember what had happened here. Newspapers were full of it anyway. International ones too.

Steve wasn’t worried. Not really. During his training he had somehow expected or at least prepared for a stay in an unstable country. Asgard was still far from being on that list, but that definitely made
the latest events worse. People who were used to feeling safe wherever they were going suddenly had that safety torn away from them. Protests and riots brought out the ugliest side of people and it was impossible to unsee it once it had been bared. This wasn’t Steve’s home, he hadn’t grown up here, so it didn’t hit him as hard. No, it was in no way imaginable for him how actual Asgardians were feeling about this.

Well, Steve knew somebody who wanted to make this his home. Now that his thoughts were back to the reason why he was here at his hour, Steve felt his hands getting a little sweaty. No, no more thinking about that, he had done that enough the last two days.

The reminders of the riot became more prominent the further Steve walked down the street, but at least the cold morning light was covering some of it up.

A young woman was just leaving the apartment building which gave Steve the opportunity to slip inside without having to ring first. For some reason he found that immensely reassuring. His steps upstairs were getting constantly slower as he forced himself to wonder about all possible things. About how old most of the buildings in Valhalla were. They were gorgeous, robust, big and without elevator.

By the time Steve had reached the right floor he was feeling a bit light-headed and nauseous. Good chance that he was going to pass out before having said a single word. If he wanted to Steve could wait outside that door forever, but he had made up his mind and rang the doorbell immediately.

With a bit of luck nobody would open and that was still the worst thing that could happen. The footsteps were audible instantly and Steve barely had time to lick his dry lips before the door was being opened. James was wearing a black t-shirt and sweatpants, evidently still in his sleeping clothes. His hair was messy, because it was too long for any agent. Though in this moment he was blinking the surprise away like anybody else would have. “Steve? Damn, it’s good to see you!”

Complete honesty and actual joy. Steve felt a little unsteady as they hugged. As James pulled away he also stepped aside to let James into the apartment. “Come in. I’m making coffee.”

“No, wait. I’d rather… This isn’t going to take long and I’d rather not come inside.”

“Okay?” James was confused and he looked concerned. He’d go about this as planned. Quick and painless.

“Uhm… is Arnþórr here?”

Of course he was, it was his apartment for god’s sake. “Yes, he’s still asleep. You’re sure you don’t want to come inside?”

“Positive.” Steve had no idea what to do with his hands, so he stuffed them into the pockets of his jacket. “Listen, James… Unlike you I am horrible at expressing myself, but I’ll give it a try. I’ll spare you the long and embarrassing story how I came to this conclusion, because it has been taken me ages and I fear I don’t look too good in this story. The last two days were horrible for pretty much everyone who lives here and it was the first time that I actually wished you wouldn’t be here anymore. Because then I didn’t have to worry about you and that was really an atrocious feeling. You sent me a message, so I kinda knew that you were fine and still… All I did those last two nights was thinking about you and… I’m not sure if I know what that means, but I came here anyway to tell you about my best guess, because I think you should know. I think I am in love with you.”

No great relief, no feeling of horror. There was merely James who was staring at him with a slightly
dropped open mouth.

“That’s it. All that I wanted to say. I am not expecting anything, not even you saying anything right now. I know how this country is looking at these kinds of things that that is important to you. I guess I just when I came to this conclusion I just wanted you to know. That’s pretty much it. I don’t know if you already booked a new flight, but if you want to talk before that, just give me a call. I hope you have a great day. Bye.”

Steve didn’t dare to breathe until he had rushed down the stairs. No, still no relief. Crap.

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“I said I didn’t want any disturbances.”

Not that there was much time for them. Loki was zipping up his bag. Admittedly he was no expert in preparing his own luggage, usually the staff was responsible for that. For now Loki had only thrown the most important items in there, just in case. Eventually he would call Leah to take care of his bags and have them sent after him. For now this had to do.

The knocking didn’t subside and Loki felt the little flames of anger flare again. This was not wise. At the moment it didn’t take a lot to send Loki into frenzy. No, that wasn’t going to happen, he was concentrating on the good things. Like Helblindi. Being awake and wanting Loki with him. That was the most important thing.

“No disturbances!”

Against his wishes the door was being opened and Loki turned around to hiss and claw. His father was standing in his rooms and as Loki was looking at him he felt strangely numb. Odin hardly came personally. He had Loki summoned. But here he was and Loki straightened his posture, ready for the inevitable fight.

“I was informed that you called off your appointments for today. That is unacceptable, Loki. You have responsibilities and if you are not physically ill, then there are no excuses.”

It was already happening, Loki felt his blood heating up in his veins and he bit his lip to buy time before actually answering. “I am going to see my fiancé who is still in hospital. That is more important than any appointment.”

Odin took a slow step towards him and Loki couldn’t help but think that he needed a cane. That he was an old man who should not try to mess with the lives of the younger. Not as a king and not as a father.

“Loki, there hasn’t been a single moment in my entire life where I have doubted your intelligence. You are too smart to be thinking that there is still a chance for that engagement to happen.”

Balling his hands into fists Loki told himself that he could not start yelling. Since when was it so easy for him to lose his temper? For once he felt no need to be witty or sarcastic. All he wanted was to make his father understand that even the spirits themselves or his ancestors couldn’t stop Loki from going to see Helblindi or from marrying him.

“A marriage only needs the agreement of two people. Me and Helblindi have agreed. I am going to see him. There is a good chance that his father will have him transferred to Jotunheim the first possibility he gets and then I am going with him. I am not going to leave him until he isn’t cured.”

“Son.” His soft tone was unbearable. “I’ve allowed you to leave the palace before so your soul could
find an escape from the torment it is going through. There is a line. After an attempt on your life you
will not…”

All his life Loki had thought himself so tough and strong, able to stand anything that another person
might verbally throw at him. He wasn’t able to take this. “Not my life! His life! I am not lying in a
hospital bed, he is! I wasn’t poisoned, he was! Stop trying to make me believe that this was meant for
me! Thor hates him! He told Helblindi that he would have him killed! You warned me repeatedly
that he would only cause me misery and pain. Maybe you think you had to protect me from him. I
don’t know if you did this to him, father or if you just didn’t stop the one who did. I would like to
think that neither of it is the case, but I simply do not know. I know that I am going to the hospital
right now.”

The eyes of his father weren’t angry and Loki might have preferred that to the sadness. “Loki, listen,
I understand that the last two days took an emotional toll on you. That’s why it’s not hard to forgive
you some of the things you said. Now a little time has passed and I urge you to think clearly. To
understand what you reproach your own family of.”

A dry laugh passed Loki’s lips as he shouldered his bag. “Oh, I am perfectly aware. The biggest
violation there is of the trúa. What am I supposed to believe? He got hurt after he came to our home.
After every member of this family except mother acted as if I was crazy and was downright
disgusted by my choice even if it was only for the country. It’s not just that. I don’t care if he is Jotun
and an Ymirson. I love him. Do you hear that? Perhaps that is your worst nightmare. How much
power I grant him over myself. Well, it doesn’t matter. I’m valuing the principals of the trúa. I trust
him. I want to be with him and therefore I am leaving now. If he’s being transferred today, don’t
expect me back. If he’s staying at the hospital, I’ll be back for dinner.”

When Loki tried to walk past him his father’s hand tightly grabbed his arm. Not strong enough to
hold him back. By now means. “Loki, please, I am not losing you over…”

“If you didn’t hurt him, you’ll only lose me if you don’t let me see him immediately.”

Odin stared at him and Loki realised that his father had no idea what to do. That he couldn’t stop
him. Loki would leave either way. For another moment his father kept holding his arm, looking at
him as if Loki was already running from him. Eventually his grip loosened and his father’s fingers
fell off him, defeated. Loki didn’t care, he had a place to be.

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“You are not even in the state to make any kind of decision. That’s why I am going to ignore you.”

Helblindi knew that normally he would have shut down Býleistr minutes ago. Normally. With that
constant headache and heavy eyelids he didn’t feel up for it. For now he had decided to keep his
eyes closed, it was more comfortable and there was no use anyway since his brother was only a
blurred spot of colour. He was wearing something dark. Helblindi guessed that it was blue, but he
couldn’t be sure.

Taking a long breath Helblindi tried not focus on the dark fear rising inside of him that could
instantly turn into panic. No, this was something he could not give into. Despite popular words and
rhymes money could almost buy everything. It could certainly buy you the best doctors around and if
there was one thing that his family had more than enough of, it was money. Therefore Helblindi had
better chances than anybody else in his situation. If it didn’t work out, there would still be enough
time to freak out. Now was the time to explain to Býleistr that he wasn’t going to make decisions for
him.
“You’ve never ignored me. Not even for a single second.”

“Why are you being so stubborn? They tried to kill you.”

Again, there was that desperation in his voice that made Helblindi feel blindly for his brother’s hand. Býleistr grabbed his instantly, seemingly eager to break his fingers. “Now who would ever be so crazy to try that again with you sitting next to my bed all the time.”

“Don’t even start. Are you not planning on kicking me out of the room when he shows up here again? How is that supposed to keep you safe? When you’re still letting him in?”

The pain behind his eyes wasn’t throbbing, but it was a constant sting. That together with Býleistr was too much to handle. “Little brother, listen… because I have a head injury and I do not want to repeat myself or talk much more… Loki doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

Why was it easier for someone to interrupt you when you weren’t looking at them?

“How do you know that?! He wanted you to come to him and this happens! He is definitely the reason for this!”

It was harder to keep track of what he was saying as sleep was already luring Helblindi into his arms. Tugging at Býleistr’s hand Helblindi indicated him to come closer. Maybe the distance was making it hard for him to understand. “Just listen… Loki is a zealot. He gets all moody and judgemental when you make a joke about your own ancestors. He would never violate the trúa by betraying the person he is with. He is not capable of doing that. Please, trust me on this. Like the trúa obligates him to trust me.”

Helblindi could hear his brother huff even though it was very soft. “Sometimes the trúa demands too much for us to live up to its standards.”

That was a very rational thing to say and yet an unpopular opinion. “See, Loki would snap at you for saying that.”

“Enough to kill me?”

Sighing deeply Helblindi wanted to shake his head, but that would only bring back the nausea. “He didn’t do anything. It was his oaf of a brother. He’s the one who despises us. Not my fiancé.”

Abruptly Býleistr let go of his hand and Helblindi could hear him getting up. That was nothing new, he would never sit tight when he was angry. “I cannot understand what is going with you! I am wondering if you have lost your mind! You are the smartest person I know and you are acting like a naïve child. Whatever plan you have, it is not worth it.”

Even more tired than before Helblindi let himself sink deeper into the cushions. “I do not have a plan. Not a new one at least. Except for getting married and making our home an even more beautiful place. That’s the plan.”

“How can you even stand him?”

Helblindi wouldn’t try anymore to explain. He had the feeling that they have already gone over this and he just couldn’t remember. “You want to hear something funny?”

“What could there possibly be to laugh at?”

Irony. “I’m probably going to be married to the King. His idiot brother tried to kill me. If the
investigation can prove that… or if the suspicion is strong enough… There is no way he can take on
the crown. Then it falls to Loki.”

“I can’t even listen to you. Please, just let us take you home!”

“No. I’m going to sleep now. Loki is coming to visit me later. Be nice to him.”

Býleistr muttered something under his breath, but Helblindi felt himself already drifting away. Not
thinking about his eyes or how there was indeed no guarantee that somebody might try again to
come after him. For now he was only thinking about sleep.

It was somebody’s gentle touch that woke him up. Fingertips were caressing his lower arm and
Helblindi opened his eyes out of reflex although it turned out to be quite useless. Somebody was
sitting next to him. The silhouette was tall and lean, dark around the head which definitely meant
black hair. It could be both his father or brother, like this they were impossible to tell apart. The touch
though gave him away, Laufey wouldn’t touch him at all and Býleistr would go for his hand. This
was different.

“You woke me up.”

“Can’t say I am sorry about that.” Loki leaned in and kissed him softly which left a tingling sensation
on his lips.

“Did you kick out my brother?”

“We’ve had a short conversation.”

Incredible that they hadn’t woken him up, that had had to be a yelling match. “Must have been
pleasant.”

“Doesn’t matter. How are you feeling? What did the doctors say?”

Helblindi reached for where Loki’s hand had to be and curled his fingers around it. “A lot of
technical stuff that I don’t want to bore you with. I need surgery. They’re positive they can restore
most of my vision.”

Loki’s thumb dug almost painfully into his skin. “That’s not… What is that supposed to mean – most
of your vision?”

Thinking back to the eye specialist and his dry tone Helblindi bit his lip again. Surgery, fine. Glasses,
lenses, alright. Nothing that money couldn’t buy. Except that it didn’t have to work and Helblindi
really wanted see things clearly again. Easily differentiate between colours, making out straight lines
and being able to tell Loki apart from his brother would also be nice. Most of all Helblindi longed to
see his expression. Not that he was particularly eager to see worry or concern. Those two emotional
states didn’t do anything for nobody’s face. Helblindi wasn’t fond of them. Yet there was so much
else that he might miss. Reading faces came so easy to him, understand what was going on between
the lines, in the little spark of their eyes, the curling of their lips. Loki’s face was so wonderfully
expressive. Anger, admiration, interest, exaltation, love even. He was passionate about all these
feelings and Helblindi liked how he could read them in his eyes before changing them.

Helblindi would like to see them. It almost physical hurt how much he wanted that.

“The doctor said that it’s very unlikely that I regain 100%. Even if the surgery goes well, I’ll need
glasses.”
Loki lifted his hand to his mouth and brushed his lips over Helblindi’s knuckles. “I think that glasses will look good on you. With that face everything will look good.”

It was easy to hear the slight tremble in his voice and Helblindi still wanted his face. “Yes, because I am so worried about my looks.”

“Listen, you’ll get the best eye specialist there is and your luonto is going to do the rest. Fuck the glasses. I’ll love the glasses if they mean that you can actually see me again. I’ll love them if at the end of the day they’re the only thing that reminds us of what happened.”

Those were only words to make him feel better, definitely just as much about Loki as about him. Nonetheless it worked. At least Helblindi felt like he didn’t have to fight down another wave of fear.

With his other hand Helblindi reached up, running it through Loki’s hair. “Thank you. I mean it. This is awful. Not as much when you’re here. Still can’t wait to get out of here though.”

“About that… where are you going to have the surgery? Here or in Jotunheim? Your father definitely cannot wait to get you out of here and the more I think about it… I think I would feel better too if you were not in Valhalla anymore.”

Despite the headache rising up again Helblindi felt his lips forming a smile. “Eager to get rid of me?”

“No, eager to know that you’re safe. Nothing is going to happen in Jotunheim and… Yes, that would make me feel better.”

Loki wouldn’t say the obvious, but they both knew and that was more than enough. Helblindi knew how to appreciate it. “With Týr and the entire Jotun guard hanging around the door I am as safe as anyone could ever be. They don’t want me to move around just yet. My father is running down the list of the best surgeons and then we’ll have the surgery in Jotunheim. That’s not happening in the next three days. Until then you’ll be stuck with me.”

“Even then you’ll have to deal with me. No way I am going to let you go alone. You will have to share your room with me.”

The sweetness about it was so hard to deny and Helblindi wanted to kiss him. That was one of the rare things that he could actually do, so he did. That was something else that tasted sweet and although the possibility of not ever seeing things clearly again, Helblindi enjoyed it to blindly let his fingertips travel over Loki’s cheek. Discovering, then tracing it. “You shaved. You were all scratchy yesterday.”

“Like you are the one to talk.” To prove his point Loki put both hands on his cheeks and Helblindi was reminded that he hadn’t trimmed his stubble in a couple of days. One might even called that a beard now. “Damn… a little more than scruff. Does it bother you?”

“Not yet.” Loki smiled, Helblindi just knew that. There was a sharp sting in his chest, because he couldn’t see it. So he’d rather kiss him. Which he did.

***

The coffee was hot, almost burning his lips, but Stephen didn’t care that much. If he could he would shoot the caffeine right into his veins. It seemed only like a small step towards a heroine addiction. Maybe that would help to calm him down. What a funny attempt to kid himself all the heroine in the world would not help to get his mind to work differently.

Too bad that he had never been a smoker and that drugs were only for people not strong enough to
handle their own problems. This wasn’t even Stephen’s problem. All the power was within his hands. His useless, shaking hands. Stephen had trouble picking up his coffee cup. The tremor hadn’t been this bad in years. Which didn’t make sense, it was a physical issue. Nerve damage that had nothing to do with his emotional state. Yet they were trembling.

A simple decision to make. Yes or no. Theoretically Stephen could take all his time in the entire world. Not like during a surgery. Hell, Stephen could even decide to do nothing at all. When had he ever had that opportunity with a tumour? Sure, it turned out to be inoperable and he was forced to do nothing. That would end up in a lot of pain meds and ultimately death.

This was no life or death question. Or maybe it was? The consequences lay in complete darkness and Stephen didn’t want to be the one responsible for light being shed on them. Did he have the right to tell? Did he have the right not to? Morally there was only one way to go. It was as simple as that. No complicated question. The execution was something else entirely.

If he was honest, Stephen had known what he was going to do the second the results had come up. Which didn’t mean that it was easy or that he felt good about it. Actually Stephen felt like even more coffee or like cutting an aneurysm out of someone’s brain. He could really use the endorphins. Lots of them.

For now coffee had to do. Checking his watch Stephen made another decision. Not the one that he needed to make, but he was getting there. His own morality didn’t matter in the big picture. This wasn’t his culture. As much as Stephen valued some parts of it, other seemed alien to him. Yet he understood enough that walls and foundations were going to crumble if he opened his mouth. In the end, it came down to the trúa and the prince’s faith in it.

The last bit of burning black liquid was running down his throat as there was a knock on his door. Princes knocked? Fine, Stephen wanted to get it over anyway. “Come in.”

“Doctor Strange, I hope you know it’s not a good idea to order a prince around.”

No bite, no nothing. Damn, he was even smiling.

Stephen gestured at one of the chairs before sitting down behind his own desk. That gave him the feeling of being professional. Which he was. This was still a job. “I am sorry for asking you to come here this late, but I felt we should be talking in person.”

The smile froze as he sat down. “Is there something wrong with the blood sample?”

Doctors didn’t lie and Stephen didn’t. “No, it’s all good. Everything like in the official report, if his father decides to start mudslinging on false information, we’ll have counter arguments. I wanted to talk to you, because I need to ask you a few questions.”

No more smiling, now he was frowning. Almost annoyed. “Doctor Strange, you know that at this time I am an even busier person than usual?”

“Yes and honestly I do not care, because this is equally important. We’ve gone over this before, but why did you hire me? You said because you needed someone you can trust. Are you distrusting someone?”

The prince slightly raised an eyebrow and then crossed his legs. Good, at least he wasn’t going to run away immediately. “With all due respect, Doctor, you weren’t interested in that until now. Actually, you were very happy not be bothered with details.”

“That was before the most loved and adored person in this country ended up poisoned and guards
kicking down my door or me pretty much stealing his blood. Anything else that I should prepare for?”

“Believe me if I had had any idea about any of these things were going happen, I would have done something else about it. To answer your question, I am sure I have tons of people that I cannot trust, but at the time I hired you…” The prince sighed before softly shaking his head. “No. I wanted to regain some control over my life, because I felt like my mother was intruding. None of this. Did you really make me come here for this? Because if you did then…”

“Your highness, all publicity and public talk aside, do you believe in the trúa?”

The prince’s head flung up and Stephen felt like he made have slapped him. It certainly looked like it. When the prince spoke up, he was sizzling. “Are you questioning my faith?”

Wonderful, Stephen had started this the absolute wrong way when this was probably the most important conversation he was ever going to have with a patient. If Stephen was going to open that door, he had to do it slowly and with care. Not his field of expertise, but he was the only one to do it.

God, how badly he wanted to cut open a person and repair their nerves. Not going to happen.

Swallowing softly Stephen decided that the door could be opened both ways. “You’ve read my biography. You know what happened to my hands.”

At first the prince frowned before he eventually nodded. “You had a car accident.”

“Accident is a nice word. Does it still count as an accident when you have your eyes in medical files and not on the road? Anyway, my hands got completely messed up. The nerve damage was irreparable. Tell that to a neurosurgeon. The worst part of it was that I was sure that I could have fixed them. Never got the chance to. So I searched somebody else to fix them. I searched all over the world. Any doctor. Any therapy. Nothing helped with the pain or the tremor. Hell, I even went to Nepal and almost joined some strange cult, because they promised healing. I had pretty much given up all hope and jumping off a bridge got more and more tempting.”

A pause was necessary, because Stephen remembered the pain and the despair all too vividly. The prince was listening though, quiet and interested.

“Asgard was very far down on my list. It’s still frowned upon. Mysticism in medicine. Doctors working together with sages. The trinity of the soul and the belief that the body cannot heal if the soul is still damaged. The idea of a fylgja seems downright ridiculous if you are not born here. The first time I talked with a sage I called him an idiot and walked out.”

An amused smile flickered across the prince’s face.

“But then… it was the only thing that ever helped me. The tremor got better. The pain faded. I still cannot operate, I’ll be never able to do that again. Asgardian medicine cannot work miracles, but it helped me. I was never a real Christian and I cannot say that I believe in everything the trúa says or that I even understand all of it. Nonetheless I have a lot of respect for it. I am familiar with its principles and I don’t ask you to provoke you or to question your devotion. All I want to know is if the public perception of you is correct.”

The skepticism wouldn’t leave the prince’s features and Stephen thought that he had messed it up once more. Until he started talking. “I cannot imagine being in your place. Being born somewhere else. Not finding the comfort in…” Despite stopping he smiled again. “The last couple of days were a nightmare. Given that my family might want to kill my fiancé, it’s still a nightmare. I cannot
imagine what it would have been like without praying to my ancestors. Without searching comfort and advice, knowing that no matter what I am going through, one of them has already been through something similar and that it is in my blood to overcome everything. Sometimes I look at my brother’s fiancé ask myself how she can even do it. How any Midgardian can do it. Without the knowledge that there is your own blood looking out for you, loving you… guarding and guiding you. That there is nothing, no matter how dark and upsetting that you cannot share with them in a letter without being judged. That is what the trúa means to me, Doctor and now I would appreciate it if you told me what is going on.”

Stephen made a decision. One that felt forced upon him and still right. The thought of the prince going home to the palace of gold, smiling at his mother and writing a letter to his ancestors about how thankful he was about his fiancé’s healing process was too much to take. Of a cruelty that he didn’t deserve.

Putting his hands on the table Stephen ignored the increased heart rate and the eerie feeling in his stomach. You were supposed to give them all the necessary information, in a serious and even tone. Not harsh, not gentle. Don’t leave any room for misunderstandings. False hope was not the worst that could happen, it was uncertainty.

“Your highness, since you wanted to be prepared for all eventualities I decided to rerun a couple of tests. Not only with your fiancé’s blood but with your own. For example to make sure that the wine indeed wasn’t the source of the poisoning. Nothing came up related to that. Nevertheless I discovered something rather unexpected and I swear to you that nobody outside of this room knows or will know about it. I reran the test to be absolutely sure. Helblindi Ymirson and you are related. He is your half-brother.”
Hello everybody,

So finally Loki’s reaction. It took quite a while.

Have fun

The worst about it was that he wouldn’t pass out. Despite the harsh taste of acid left in his mouth from throwing up bile and his stomach still clenching so hard that he was in physical pain, Loki’s body stubbornly refused to give up consciousness. It didn’t matter how desperate his longing for a black-out was. Slipping into comforting darkness that was home to nothing at all. That would allow his body to rest and his mind to flee. It didn’t happen. Loki stayed right where he was with a burning throat that hurt even when he swallowed. His stomach started clenching painfully again and Loki helplessly curled his fingers around the toilet seat as he threw up whatever fluid was still left in his body. This time the burning wouldn’t subside and Loki spit, trying to rid himself of the acid taste.

Resting his forehead against the porcelain Loki wanted to fall asleep. To stop feeling like his body wanted to separate itself from him, like it was crumbling into pieces. Also sleeping meant that his thoughts would come to a halt. No more thinking. Nothing but darkness. The burning sensation spread to his tongue and Loki tried to spit again which turned out to be in vain.

An arm slid around his upper body and pulled him up into a sitting position. He was coaxed into leaning against the wall and then Loki felt the hard edge of a glass being carefully pressed against his lips. “Loki, you have to drink something. Little sips. Slowly, but you have to drink.”

Without a thought of his own Loki reached for the glass and swallowed a gulp of water. Then another one that he immediately spat back out into the toilet. As the bitter, harsh taste was washed out of his mouth all distraction disappeared. The feeling that his body didn’t belong to him anymore remained. Loki wanted to slip out of it, because his skin was itching, it felt too tight and the idea of ramming his fingernails into his own eyes was tempting. To dig deeply inside until he had reached his brain where the ache had settled down. Where it was torturing him.

Loki brought the glass back up to his lips and as the water touched his lips he lowered his hand again, not knowing what to do with it. He thought of Helblindi and his insides were cramping. His throat seemed to be closing up and as Loki became aware that breathing was getting harder, he needed something to focus on or he would lose his mind. Unsure his eyes darted to the doctor who had sat down opposite of him.

“Are you sure?” The same question he had already asked before. Now just in a different way. First in confusion, then he had yelled, thrown around accusations and then Strange’s stern and stoic face had told him what he needed to know. As the implications had started raining down on him Loki’s body had fought against drowning and then himself. Which left him here on the cold floor of the adjoining bathroom to Strange’s office.

Strange who was still wearing the same look on his face. “Without a doubt. It is not a difficult thing to test or to prove. You share a parent.”
The back of his neck began to feel so cold while he felt like his ribcage was burning up. Bright spots
dancing in front of his eyes were messengers of threatening nausea and out of the blue Loki
remembered the feeling of Helblindi’s mouth brushing over his throat. Loki threw the glass against
the wall. Strange winced as it burst into dozens of pieces and why couldn’t Loki do the same with
his own mind? Reduce it to useless shards that weren’t able to think or to feel. To remember
Helblindi’s kisses that had been bestowed on so many more places than just his lips.

His chest was clenching with disgust and then with shame. Ashamed of what they did and even
more ashamed of feeling this way about it. There was no shame when you loved someone and Loki
almost choked on how much he loved and wanted Helblindi. How could he even love him? How
was he supposed to not want him? After so many times of talking to his ancestors about him?

That thought had everything else stopping. This time the nausea hit him with full force, wrapped
itself around his head and his lungs seemed to be closing down. As he gasped for air Loki wanted to
run. Anywhere. Some place where this couldn’t follow him. Useless. It had already dug its claws
deeply into his flesh and it hurt. Too much to take. Desperate to distract himself from the pain and the
shame Loki tore at his own hair. “No. No. No.”

That was the only word he could think of. It just couldn’t be. He couldn’t be…

“No!” Loki’s fist connected with the wall behind him. “How could she do this?! Why would she
ever… Destroying her own soul.”

Strange’s voice came to him like through a deep mist. Far away but the only thing that Loki could
possibly concentrate on and hold on to. “Your highness, listen to me. We do not know if your
mother was the one who… At this time it is just as likely to assume that Helblindi Ymirson was born
out of wedlock.”

The sound that passed Loki’s own lips was alien to him. Within a few seconds several scenarios
flooded Loki’s mind. As absurd and insane as they might be, still so much better than the most
probable explanation. Adoption, a mix-up and none of it made sense. No matter how hard Loki tried
to hold on to it, all he could see were Helblindi’s perfect blue Jotun eyes. Then he thought of his
own and he closed his eyes in harsh despair.

“Have you ever really looked at him?”

Strange hesitated and when he spoke up, it sounded strangely gentle. “Yes, your highness.”

“Have you seen pictures of his mother? Laufey’s wife.”

“No. I haven’t.”

For a second Loki pressed his teeth as hard as he could against his bottom lip. Nothing went away.
Not the shame, not the disgust, not the blatantly obvious.

“He’s got his mother’s eyes. Just even more… blue. His features… He looks like both of them.
Me…” Loki stopped, because he couldn’t. At this time it could all just stay in his. Deny it to himself
until he didn’t know himself anymore what was real. Which was already happening right now.
Because this could not be real. Loki couldn’t be…

Just stand up, tell Strange to forget about it and leave. Go back to the hospital, hold Helblindi’s hand
and continue his life like it was meant to be. Except that it was stolen. That Helblindi deserved better
and Loki had to know.

“I look nothing like my father.” Loki opened his eyes to stare at the grey tiles on the wall. “I never
thought much of it. Thor looks exactly like him when he was young. I got my mother’s eyes. Knowing what you said and thinking of my reflection… it seems rather evident what happened.”

Strange didn’t reply and Loki remembered Helblindi’s fingers lazily tracing his spine. It was still a warm, utterly pleasant feeling and that realisation had Loki shuddering.

“There is an easy way to completely sure.”

Weakly Loki shook his head and slowly picked himself up from the floor. He felt like he was going to be sick again, so he put a hand on his stomach. Out of nowhere an arm slid around his shoulders, steadying him. “Your highness, I don’t think that you are in the right state to leave.”

“I am in no state to do anything.” Loki muttered in response and shrugged Strange off.

“Your highness, this really…”

“Don’t call me that!”

The doctor took a step back, let Loki have his will and the later one jumped at the opportunity to flee from the room, then from the office. For sure he would have wondered aimlessly through the university campus if his security detail hadn’t waited for him in front of the door.

“Your highness?”

Loki merely stared at him, his mind seemingly wiped. Finally. Not knowing what to do Loki pushed past him and thankfully his way led directly to the car. As he was sitting in the backseat, now forced to hold still Loki had his thoughts catching up with him. Thor and him as children, having to sit for portraits, looking so completely different. Yet inseparable. Only a few nights ago Helblindi had slept with his face nuzzled against Loki’s shoulder. Even now Loki remembered the feeling of his breath ghosting over his skin. In vain Loki tried to shake the memory off, instead the pain was closing in on him as were his surroundings. The backseat of this car was way too small, there was inexplicable pressure on his chest and it was once more getting hard to breathe. Out. Loki needed to get out. Out of his body and even better out of his mind.

Right now it only went one way, taking Loki back to that night, to the sensation of Helblindi’s mouth against his. Their breath mingling and those lips sliding down his neck with just a hint of teeth. Loki wanted to rip his own throat open with his blunt fingernails. For now it had to suffice to pull at his hair and squeezing his eyes shut in hope of being able to create the next image himself. Anything.

The gardens covered in snow. The smell of his favourite book. That poem he had always had trouble learning for school. Thor and him running through the corridors and smashing a statue. There was no holding on to any of that, Helblindi’s smile pushed it all aside and Loki felt his fingers in his hair, tugging a little too hard and Loki remembered being completely lost in pleasure and still wanting him so much. Wanting him in a way that it could never be enough.

Loki pulled harder, but the pain wouldn’t cover the memories nor the repulsion. Least of all the longing.

When the car slowed down Loki didn’t wait for it to come to an actual halt. His feet carried him without Loki setting any kind of direction. He ended up in one of the main corridors, in front of a window. Despite looking outside Loki didn’t see anything. The darkness outside and the one inside of him had swallowed every thought in his head. It should have been peaceful, a moment away from the harsh truth that was weighing him down. Except that it wasn’t. Loki still felt like he was falling,
trying to hold on to something, but his hands were only grabbing thin air. It had him feeling so helpless that Loki started craving the very second he would hit the ground. His bones crushing and piercing his skin now seemed to him like bliss.

“Loki?”

His name was uttered softly and with immense care, yet Loki flinched. Like having a knife thrust into his shoulder. Falling Loki didn’t have the courage to turn around. The mere idea was absurd and impossible to put into action. Behind him there was the evidence of what had happened, of what Loki had turned out to be and there was no coming back from that. Outside the window there was merely darkness and while Loki was drowning in it with his lungs burning he still preferred it to the alternative. All he could do was staying exactly where he was, desperately hoping that the early morning light would burn it all away.

“My dear boy, what is wrong?”

Her voice was coming closer, therefore Loki made a step to the side, the urge to run away almost overwriting all of his other senses.

“Please, just tell me what happened.”

Something suddenly ignited a new spark within the shadows. Too small to give any kind of warmth or even heat. Nevertheless it was there and it would grow. Loki knew that much. A spark of anger that would develop into a raging fire to consume him. Just the thought of it had Loki craving for it. Anything to make him stop feeling like this.

Perhaps it would take a hold of him if he turned around after all. If he looked at her. So Loki did. As slowly as he possibly could.

Frigga was standing close to him, he would only have to slightly hold out his hand to touch her. Not far behind her there was Thor, but Loki wasn’t looking at him. He saw the unutterable concern on Frigga’s face and especially in her eyes. They were green, a little bigger than usual, filled with trouble and they were exactly like Loki’s.

“My dear…”

Her hand touched his lower arm and Loki jerkily jumped out of her reach. That alone wasn’t enough. Since he couldn’t stand her touch Loki drew back and his eyes darted to Thor. His brother was staring, not understanding what was going on and the sight of him had Loki sobbing. Both of them were entirely unlike him. He was something else.

“Loki.”

Once more she tried to touch him and Loki stumbled back in panic. Scared of the person in front of him who he had never really known. Scared of what she had made of him. A soulless act could only ever spawn something equally as despicable. Something without luonto or a Fylgja.

Like in Doctor Strange’s office Loki felt his lungs closing up, refusing to take in any oxygen. Desperate tears were running down his cheeks as he tried to breathe. As he took his next step his legs seemed to be giving in and two strong arms caught up, pulling him in a gentle yet strong embrace.


Thor was talking to him, probably trying to soothe him, but Loki had trouble making out his words.
He could feel his strength as he held him. How Thor wanted nothing but to help him breathe.

As his vision blurred Loki’s tormented mind showed him Helblindi who slid an arm around his chest and kissed his temple. His lungs were burning and Loki still screamed. Because he couldn’t have him. Because now he couldn’t have anything.

“Come on, Loki you have to breathe. When you are feeling better we’ll skip dinner and head for the library. Like when we were kids and I would annoy you until you would read me my favourite book, because I was too lazy to read it myself. I cannot remember the name. Can you tell me? Do you remember?”

Loki shook his head, gasped for air and then there was only one thing on his mind.

“The hidden…”

“What?”

“The hidden tree.”

Thor’s hand was stroking over his hair and Loki could feel him smile. “That’s it. The hidden tree. I remember now. I loved that book. I guess it must still be around. I should take a look at it sometime. Or you just tell me. You must still know it by heart…”

Loki thought that he might. A short succession of little stories. Cute, predictable, totally innocent. Thor had loved it and Loki had loved that it was one of the few things they had all for themselves. Growing up together. Knowing each other like the back of one’s own hand. Like brothers were supposed to.

His body was shaking with the force of his sobs when Loki wrapped his arms around Thor, burying his face in his shoulder. Though his brother was holding on to him, Loki still felt like he was drowning.

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_Hey, there is no getting through to you and I am definitely not used to that. I get it, with terrorism going on, it makes sense to change numbers. What doesn’t make sense is that your secretary is not giving me a chance to get the new one._

_Look, I know we have not talked in a while and shit has been going down at your place which means you definitely have important stuff to do. Anyhow, I would like to hear from you. To make sure that you’re okay. I won’t even annoy you. Except you want me to, I am always glad to be of service._

_How about you give me a call. I would like to hear that you are alright._

_Take care,_

_Tony_

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“So far everything seems fine, my prince. We will schedule your transfer for the day after tomorrow.”

It was strange to hear somebody talking to you when you had no idea how they looked like.
Nonetheless it was easy to tell that Doctor Lorenzen was smiling. He wasn’t moving, kept standing next to Helblindi’s bed as a blurred, bright shape. Most probably he expected Helblindi to reply.

“Thank you, Doctor Lorenzen. Those are good news.”

“I am glad that I could be of service, my prince.”

Helblindi gave a soft nod and let relief wash over him as the doctor stepped away. There was no logical reason for not feeling better about leaving Valhalla as soon as possible. Back in Jotunheim he was untouchable and as safe as he ever could be. The worst had already happened. Curling his fingers around the edge of his blanket Helblindi slightly pulled it up to look at it. An indefinable white mass. Letting go Helblindi raised his hand and brought it up in front of his face. By his sight alone he wouldn’t be able to tell that he had five fingers.

Swallowing softly Helblindi closed his eyes and forbid himself to think about what it would be like to never see clearly again. Of course it was the only thing he thought about. Not being able to read anything. Novels, notes, anything. Ice seemed to be spreading in his chest and Helblindi wanted to run his hands through his hair like he often did when he was nervous. The bandage stopped him from doing that and Helblindi balled one hand to a fist.

“You don’t have to be scared.”

Instantly opening his eyes Helblindi took a look around and there was a dark figure standing in the doorway. Only by his voice Helblindi could identify his father and that fact alone had him gritting his teeth. “I can’t see anything. How I am supposed to not be afraid?”

Laufey was walking over and Helblindi was sitting up straighter, because he couldn’t fight the always present urge to not disappoint his father. To not show any weakness in front of him.

“Because you are a son of Ymir. Strong and fierce, capable of overcoming every imaginable hardship. And not just that.” His father stopped next to him and gently laid his hand on Helblindi’s. “You have all of our ancestors looking out for you. Your Fylgja is going to protect you and your eyes are going to be fine again.”

Helblindi wished that they shared the same optimism, but he couldn’t deny that his father’s attention and care made him feel better. “I am still scared.”

Laufey leaned down and softly kissed him on the forehead. “You will be fine and soon enough you will be ready to crush the ones who did who did this to you.”

That should raise another sensation than complete indifference, but it didn’t. Helblindi mumbled a soft “Thank you” before he decided that this could not wait. That his father had to live with it. “Can I ask a favour? Would you please get me my phone?”

“Who do you want to call?”

“Loki.”

There was a telling silence and Helblindi already regretted doing this. He didn’t have the power for a fight. Especially not with his father. Right now he only wanted to talk to Loki. Telling him about the transfer and hearing him say that things were going to be alright. Because it was different when Loki said it.

“You want me to call for you?”
Helblindi told himself to worry not being able to even use his phone another time. “Yes, please.”

A small solid object was pressed into his hand and Helblindi brought it up to his ear. The phone kept ringing and nobody answered.
Hello everybody,

I just saw Endgame last night and somehow that resulted in a new chapter written in record time

Have fun although it's everything but funny

Strands of black hair were falling into Loki’s face and Thor carefully brushed them behind his ear because of the ridiculous idea that they might tickle him, eventually wake him up. His breathing remained deep and low and Thor pulled back his hand. As for now he had no idea how long he had been lying here next to his little brother. It had been more than 15 years since the last time he had crawled into Loki’s bed for them to talk the entire night, imagining stories about themselves as knights in times not as boring as the 21st century. Loki would come up with the most intriguing and confusing tales that would have them fight for honour, Asgard or just their family. Thor always had focused more on the fighting part, dreamt about swords, bows and arrows. Things so much more elegant and honest than fire arms. The next morning they would both be worn out, too tired to do their duties properly and sometimes Frigga would scold them while Odin would smile.

Right now Thor missed these times so much that a cold hand seemed to close around his heart. It was the very same bed, the same room where they had created monsters in the darkness to kill as heroes. Loki was right next to him and when Thor thought about how he had got him here, he wanted to pull him close and protect him from whatever monster seemed to be haunting him.

After he had been able to somewhat help Loki through his panic attack, one of their doctors had given his little brother pills that were supposed to help him sleep. Thor gritted his teeth thinking about how willingly Loki had put them into his mouth and swallowed them. How he had closed his bloodshot eyes and for a second he had looked almost at peace. Because now he could sleep.

Thor didn’t know what had happened and for now he did not really care. Loki had to get better and then they would take care of it. Still there was no denying how much Loki’s deplorable state scared him. Loki with all that passion who would never allow himself to show that kind of weakness in front of anybody. Yet something had broken him completely and Thor lacked the ability to imagine what that could be. It had to be related to the Ymirsons, Loki had come back from the hospital. Sadness mingled with anger, but Thor wouldn’t allow himself to draw anymore conclusions without having talked about it with Loki first. The risk of hurting him even more with false accusation was too high.

Also both of them couldn’t have forgotten about the rift between the two of them. One that had never been there before and which didn’t mean anything right now. Not when Thor saw his brother lying next to him, traces of dried tears on his cheeks. For now Thor just kept lying there, making sure nobody was going to come to disturb him. This was his duty, to protect Loki and Thor wouldn’t change it against anything.

It had had to be hours, no light was coming through the windows. Loki stirred and Thor sat up instantly, giving him some space. His brother’s green eyes opened and there was that moment. That
state between dream and reality. Waking up and not knowing where you are or what life had
bestowed on you before you had fallen asleep. In that moment when Loki didn’t know his were as
vivid as they were supposed to. Then a grey veil was pulled over them and Thor’s chest was
clenching. Not sure what to do he reached out and touched Loki’s wrist, feeling relieved as he
wouldn’t move away as he had done with their mother. “Hey little brother…”

“What are you doing here, Thor?” Loki’s voice was strained, but he was talking. Not crying, not
captured in a nightmare that paralyzed him. At least Thor liked to think so.

“I am watching over you. How are you feeling?”

Instead of answering Loki closed his eyes again, but it was too late to stop the tears from escaping.
Thor didn’t know what to do. Silent desperation didn’t fit his brother. He was the one to scream, tear
down walls and to try to fight anguish with his bare hands.

“Loki, I don’t know what happened, but I promise I will try and help you to take care of it.”

Then Loki opened his eyes again and Thor’s breath hitched when he was confronted with all that
pain. How? What could ever be powerful enough to do that to Loki?

“There is nothing to take care of.” Loki was sitting up and Thor thought that was definitely better
than anything else so he did nothing to stop him.

“How about we get you something to eat and then maybe we could talk. I really want to talk to you
before we have a doctor looking at you again.”

Turning away from him Loki got up from the bed, his movements slow but steady. Perhaps he
hadn’t even heard him speaking. “I am going to talk to mother.”

A sting of most egotistical disappointment, but Thor forced himself to shake it off. Loki talking to
their mother was a good thing. “Sure, I’ll call her, so…”

“No. I am going to see her.” Loki was walking towards the door and Thor rushed to stop him. “Wait.
I am sure she is still awake and she’ll gladly come here, so you don’t have to leave.”

“Thor, please. I need you to step aside. Just let me go. I need to talk to mother. Alone.” Loki held his
gaze with ease and there was such a desperate urgency in it that Thor made a hesitant step back. He
couldn’t shake off the feeling of having made a severe mistake as his little brother slipped out of the
room. For a second the thought crossed his mind to go and see Jane, but it quickly became
unbearable. Therefore Thor sat down on Loki’s bed and waited for him to come back. As long as it
would take.

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With steady hands Loki slowly pushed open the door and closed it behind himself before even taking
a single look around. He could feel her presence anyway.

“Loki…” Frigga softly breathed his name and Loki noticed that she wouldn’t come closer, didn’t
take a single step towards him, sensing the distance he had put between them. It had to be nighttime,
her was wearing a light blue morning coat, her long silver hair tied in a loose braid. One her face the
expression of a woman who knew that she just might lose everything, but was also willing to fight
for it at all cost.

It was that look alone that gave Loki confirmation and with every second it was getting harder to
recognize his mother in her. “What am I?”
He already knew, the way she parted her lips but didn’t voice a sound said it all. The fact that she refused to answer him finally had that little spark causing a wildfire. In his mind Loki grabbed her, threw her against the wall, just to get her to answer him. Balling his hands into fists Loki tried to stay where he was, because he thought he just might. He thought it would grant him a little form of release. Rage and despair was clawing at each other, wrapped up in a merciless fight that could go either way, since none wanted to give up its dominance over him. In that state, caught up between the two of him, Loki screamed. “Tell me!”

Frigga remained mostly calm, only her face gave away that the way he talked to her was hurting her and Loki wanted to laugh. As if she had any idea what pain actually was.

“You are Loki. My son. My special prince.”

Another time Loki would have gritted his teeth, but rage won and it consumed him. Leaving behind only ashes. “And what else? Do I have a soul?”

“How could you ever…”

He wasn’t able to stand her voice as long she didn’t tell him what he needed to hear. The truth and since she wouldn’t, Loki had to himself. The words seemed to cut his own throat as he pressed them out. What had been a scream only moments ago had turned into a whimper. “I am Laufey’s son.”

Like Býleistr. Like Helblindi.

Frigga slightly raised her chin and Loki noted in disgust and fear how softness settled on her features. How she smiled at him like she always had. With the same love and adoration. “You are the son of a king. His firstborn. The descendant of a long and proud line. The heir to all of Asgard. You are the most precious thing in my life. The Jotun Prince that will eventually take back his right. You are the son of the true king, Loki. An extraordinary prince.”

It felt like his chest was threated to shreds as the words that made him feel special and loved as a kid were suddenly twisted into something dark and vicious. Forever tainted. Breathing hard in an attempt to not break down under the eventual revelation Loki shook his head. The woman in front of him seemed so strange to him, cruel and yet he recognized her as somebody he adored. Had adored. “Why? Why would you destroy your own soul?! How could you do that to yourself? Or father?”

His voice was cracking, his fists were shaking and Loki had to stay where he was, otherwise he could not guarantee for what he would do.

At least she wasn’t smiling anymore, but she was still talking in a gentle voice and so calm, as if any of this could ever be explained or justified. “There are things between the sky and the earth that are greater than the trúa. My soul was wittering away with very day that Odin sat on the throne and his son was growing up to continue that forsaken line of murderers and thieves. I looked at Thor’s face and he was the spitting image of his father. At times it was too much to bear. Knowing that I had helped the oppression going on by giving Odin his long awaited heir. I could feel how it was tearing me apart. Every day. That knowledge was destroying my soul. Having you saved it. You gave me back my strength and hope. Creating you was the best and most honourable act I have ever done. How could something like that ever entail destroying my soul?”

Loki listened in horror to those words that were deprived of all sense and sanity. That person in front of him could be anyone. Taking a step back Loki felt his back hitting the door. “Laufey… does he know?”

The gentle smile on her face made Loki’s skin crawl and he would have fled if he didn’t need to know. “He was there when you were born. He held you in his arms even before me. I am so sorry
that you had to grow up without your father and I will never forgive myself that you couldn’t have the markings. Or that you had to learn your own language in secret. Nobody could know though. Not even you.”

Too many thoughts were running through Loki’s head, causing it to ache and he brought his hands up as if he could shield himself with them. Lies. All of it. Every single moment he had ever lived. The very markings he had traced with his fingers for hours on Helblindí’s arm. Ragna singing him Jotun lullabies. It was too much, he couldn’t make sense of it and only snapped out of it when a hand touched his arm.

“Don’t! Never touch me again!” Loki moved away and gritted his teeth and for once Frigga looked hurt. “Loki, please, let’s sit down and I will tell you all of it. Let me explain, so you will understand.”

“What is there not to understand?! All my life you lied to me! To father! To Thor! I was born out of a selfish and cruel desire for power! A pretender! A son of the Jotun Lord groomed at the court of Asgard as the king’s son! This is madness! All of it! How could you…” Loki stopped, felt the tears once more striking down his cheeks. “How could you let that happen? How could you let me fall in love with my own brother?”

Desperately Loki tried to read her face, to see if she was ashamed, but he didn’t know her, so he couldn’t tell. Her gentle tone seemed to leave a thousand little cuts on his skin. “I am sorry, Loki. I tried, I didn’t know how to… But you have to understand what you are actually feeling. A part of you deep down has to have recognized him as your family and you love him. You didn’t know, so you misunderstood and took that love for your brother as something else.”

A jolt ran through Loki’s body and his fingers twitched with the desire to physically hurt her like she was hurting him. “Nothing that I feel for Helblindí has anything to do with brotherly affection! I desire him! I slept with him. He is the person I want to give myself completely to and it scares me how much I want to possess him. He is not my brother! Thor is!”

Finally Loki could see that what he was saying wasn’t completely lost on her. That it did have an effect. Darkness was creeping over her face as it turned to stone. “I know and there is not a single day that I do not wish that he wasn’t.”

The world stopped as Loki whispered a single word. “What?”

“He was a mistake. The result of a stomach flu and bad timing. I wept when I found out that I was pregnant when I entered this marriage to make sure that the fake king would remain without a son. After he was born I had to force myself to hold him. There were nights I was standing beside his crib, watching him sleep and all I could think about that I help creating a new one. Another Búrison to carry on the line and to bestow suffering among the Jotuns. Yet he was my son. I had carried him under my heart. Born him and when I held him in my arms, feeling him grow and thrive… I could not bring myself to hate him like I should have. Nonetheless I could not allow him to become king.

Then I had you, Loki, you have no idea how much I’ve loved you from the very moment I first felt you move inside. How much I prayed that you would be a boy. Then you were born and I thought I would die from happiness when I first saw your face. Tell now, Loki, how that any of that be wrong? How can so much love felt by a mother for her child be wrong?”

Loki was numb. Unable to run away from the nightmare he had become. “So that is my purpose? Born out of hatred and hostility to steal my brother’s rightful throne?”

“It was never his throne. It’s yours. You are the firstborn son of the rightful king.”

“I am a bastard.”
“What does it matter when…”

Overcome by his disdain for her Loki turned away, not standing the look of her. The madness that had taken a hold of her wouldn’t let her see it. The only thing that mattered and that outweighed everything else. Nothing she said about love or right or wrong had any meaning. Not anymore.

“I am a barn-svíkja.”

As he said it Loki felt his legs about to give him and he braced himself against the wall. Behind him Frigga moved closer and her calm was vanishing into thin air. Loki thought even to hear a hint of panic. “No, Loki, please don’t. Don’t do that to yourself. It’s only a word. It doesn’t…”

“I don’t have a soul.”

“No. No! The trúa doesn’t even say that. You can’t…”

Not listening to her Loki smashed his fist against the wall, otherwise he would have hit her. He didn’t feel anything. “The trúa doesn’t say it, because nobody should have to think about it. Because there should not be a single one!”

“No, Loki. You are…”

She touched him and Loki forcefully pulled away. “A soulless act can only result in what?! What good can ever come from it?! I am… My whole life I’ve prayed to ancestors that aren’t mine. I wrote them letters about what I long and hope for. I asked them for advice and I am not their kin. I was born to destroy everything they’ve build to steal their real descendant’s right and I prayed to them! I am cursed and without a soul…”

“Please, don’t. You are…”

Shaking his head Loki tore his hair, the shame too deep to look at her. He thought of his father, holding him. Reading him a story. Telling him how he was proud of him. Thinking of his own desire to make Odin proud of him. The entire time Odin had sheltered a barn-svíkja. A demon created to destroy him and his real son. Loki choked as his thoughts drifted to Thor who had watched over him as he had slept. Who was his brother. Who had would give his life protecting this soulless shell created to steal his life.

And Helblindi. Who had kissed him, loved him and it was all built on lies, because how would he even look at Loki if he knew. That they shared the same blood, that Loki was a barn-svíkja. How would anyone be able to stand the look of him? Loki knew that he couldn’t do it himself.

“Loki, please, listen to me…”

Violently pushing her away Loki ran. He fled. Kept running and running although he didn’t know where to. There was no place to go for him. Not here or anywhere else. His life had not been stolen from him, because it had never been his in the first place. Nobody to talk to or ancestors to pray to. The void was opening up beneath him and Loki just fell. With bleak nothing all around him.
Hello everybody,

So... happy times? No? Too bad

His eyes were sliding closed again for the fifth time now. Fatigue was a loyal friend, obnoxiously so. By now it has stopped being a reminder of Odin’s age, it was a constant state of being. Taking off his glasses Odin rubbed both hands over his eyes, cursing the soreness that just wouldn’t leave. There was no putting these documents away. Reports on all the incidents of the last two nights. Everybody who had been arrested and who was sitting in a cell now. Who were they supposed to let go, because they were a weak victim of mob mentality and who was something more. A member of Frjáls who had wanted to use the chaos for a darker purpose. There was no waiting on this.

Doubts were creeping up on him that maybe he should not have insisted on checking all of them out personally. Pride or duty. Odin took another look at the file on top. A young man hurting a police officer by throwing a beer can at him. Just another sign of the chaos. 22 years old. A Jotun mother, father from Vanaheim, born and raised in Valhalla. Perhaps he had nothing to do with Frjáls, perhaps he had been born into it. Just another victim of mob-mentality? Or has he had the same reason like so many others of them?

Helblindi Ymirson.

A single man for who huge parts of the population were willing to endanger themselves and even worse for who they would pick up weapons and use them. A lot of them were acting out of ideological fervour, being loyal to the man they considered to be their rightful king. Not all of them though. Odin had their words in these statements. Tearful testaments of anger and grief. People being overwhelmed by the fierce strength of their loss. Believing that a loved one was murdered and being torn apart by the need of retaliation.

Odin wished that he couldn’t understand. That wouldn’t make sense. Except that it did. Perfectly. It was scary to think that a man was so adored that merely the rumour of his death had civilized people sink into chaos. The thought of what they might do if he asked them to. Would it be different than when Laufey did so?

The ache in his eyes spread to his entire skull and Odin was left with a desk full a work and country in need that seemed too much to handle and not for the first time. There was a faint desire to walk away from it and let things go the way they were supposed to. Yet that wasn’t an option, because Odin could not leave Thor to crumble beneath the rebellion, riots and whatever was going to happen if the people didn’t get an answer to the question what had happened to Helblindi soon. Or even worse, when Laufey’s son decided to talk to the public without holding back the suspicions which he definitely had. The calmness and peace at the moment were only borrowed, the entire framework could collapse any second.

Up to now this had been his responsibility and it always would be. Putting it into someone else’s hands at this time due to old age or fatigue was not an option. At least not now.
A knock on the door offered him a chance to at least flee for a moment from his dilemma. “Yes?”

He had barely raised his head when the door was already being pushed open. Thor stepped through it and who could it not be him? Not when Odin had been thinking about him. “Son?”

“Loki is missing. We cannot find him anywhere.”

With a slight frown on his face Odin indicated Thor to close the door. “I already know that he didn’t attend lunch, Thor.”

There was a jumpy uneasiness in Thor’s movements that sparked worry inside of Odin’s chest. Usually Thor expressed his uneasiness by being loud and with big gestures. Something he had always been told to work on. Right now nothing of that could be seen. Instead he was shifting around, as if his body was refusing to stand still for long, because there was something else to do. Something that needed to be done or Thor would fall apart right on the spot. A cold shudder was slowly making its way down Odin’s back, concern that couldn’t be fought was showing its ugly head. Nonetheless Odin was going to stay calm, because he did not know anything at the moment. Thor had history of reaction too fast, too harshly.

“I am not talking about lunch. He vanished from the palace. His phone is in his rooms and nobody knows where he went. All of his security details are here. None of them was told a word.”

“Your brother has most likely left to go and see the young Lord of Jotunheim.” It pained Odin to admit that this was most probably the place where his son would run to. Feeling so very similar like thousands of other people of this nation, slipping more and more from Odin’s grasp. Becoming more and more alien to him. Not only once had the thought crossed his mind to lock Loki up, to hide him away from anything that could harm him, but Odin knew that he would have a better chance to lock the door behind Thor. Loki was like smoke or liquid, he was simply going to slip away and Odin would lose him forever.

Therefore if Loki wanted to be with Laufey’s son at the moment, there was nothing Odin could do. He had had to learn the hard way that force would only result in Loki pushing back even harder. They would have to talk though. As soon as possible. Because there had to be a way to make Loki understand. Understand that Odin could never let him go to Jotunheim. Not with Laufey being there. Laufey who wasn’t going to stop at anything to get his own son on the throne.

“No, father, you don’t understand.” Thor was walking up to his desk, his eyes bigger than they usually were and an almost unknown urgency lay within them. “I contacted the guards we still have the hospital. Loki was there hours ago and then returned to the palace. He hasn’t come back to the hospital since. We have no idea where to look for him.”

Still, Odin refused to feel troubled or afraid. After all, he knew his son. “It would not be the first time for Loki to completely disrespect the protocol and all security to simply vanish. He has done so before. He might have done so again.”

“No. No, he always slipped away to meet up with his lovers. The man he claims to love is still in hospital and Loki is not there. Father, you don’t know what happened beforehand. We wanted to tell you when things had calmed down and… Something is wrong with Loki. I do not know what happened, but… the doctor said that he suffered a panic attack and…”

Odin held up his hand to stop Thor from continuing his ramblings. There was no point anymore in trying to be reasonable and calm. “Thor, please, I need you to start at the beginning. Tell me what happened.”
Thor did and every single word was drenched in regret and self-loathing. For not altering Odin sooner. For not staying with Loki the entire time and making sure that he was saved and watched. “When he woke up, he wanted to see mother. He went to talk to her. She told me that he was distraught, he had received bad news from Helblindi and… he ran away and we cannot find him since. Father, I have never seen him like this. To me he wasn’t even Loki. During his attack I could barely calm him down and later…he wasn’t talking. You cannot imagine the look on his face. He was… I don’t know. I was so scared seeing him like that. Now he is gone and I honestly have no idea what he might do.”

None of that reminded Odin of his son, but Thor had said so himself. Loki wasn’t himself and Odin felt helpless having brought this information to him and not knowing anything. “Are you implying that your brother is a danger to himself at this moment? This is Loki we are talking about.”

Thor ran one hand through his hair and shot him a pleading glance. “I don’t know what happened, what he is feeling or what he might do. I merely know that I have never seen him like this. I held him in my arms and I swear to you, it was like I could feel him falling apart. He had that desperate stare. Like parts of his Itse were leaving him and… Father, we have to find him.”

A cold hand seemed to be reaching into Odin’s chest. The idea of his son’s soul falling into imbalance was tormenting. All the pain that he might be going through with nobody there to help him. “We will send someone to all the places he might be. The stables, the university, every residence. Heimdall will go to the hospital and I need someone to get in contact with Tony Stark just in case.”

“Thank you, father.”

“How is your mother doing?”

Thor swallowed softly. “Bad. She won’t stop crying. She… makes me more scared for him than I already am.”

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“I am so tired of people knocking at my door in the middle of the night.” Muttering under his breath Stephen slowly walked down the corridor, trying wipe the last traces of sleep off his face. It was close to midnight and this time he would have ignored whoever was harassing him at home. If he hadn’t shattered somebody’s life completely today and when it was most definitely the prince himself wanting to talk to him. Probably still in denial, wishing that Stephen would tell him something different this time. Or to make sure that Stephen’s lips were sealed. That everybody involved was going to remain silent about this, so they could avert the catastrophe that this single piece of information would lead to.

The Jotun Lord would be done for, same for the queen and Stephen didn’t dare to even assume what it could mean for the prince. How the public would react him being a child that should not be. Something that did not actually exist in Asgardian society. That should have already answered the question. Even if one took that very huge factor out of the equation, there was still an incestuous relationship that could never get public.

Stephen knew about all of these things and hence wasn’t surprised that there was still a lot to talk about. He was taken aback though when he opened the door and in front of him wasn’t the prince. Instead a man in his early forties, with pitch-black hair and blue eyes was standing in front of him. Evidently Jotun which had Stephen confused and feeling uneasy. “Yes, can I help you? It better be good, because I happen to be extremely cranky at this time of the night.”
The Jotun offered him a smile, it looked nice enough, but it was mostly professional. Stephen had used the very same expression a lot as a surgeon. “Doctor Strange, I am sorry to disturb you in the middle of the night, but it is a matter of greatest urgency. Would you mind if I came inside for a moment?”

“Unfortunately I am not the most hospitable person when a stranger interrupts my sleep. Thank you, good night. Make an appointment with my secretary.” Stephen moved to close the door, but the Jotun put his hand up against it which had Stephen scowl at him. “Step back.”

“I am sorry for the inconvenience, Doctor Strange, but this is most urgent. After the Duke of Glæsisvellir left the hospital today he dropped by at your office at the university. I would very much like to talk about what you discussed there.”

Stephen felt his body tensing up as he quickly tried to remember seeing this man before. Among the guards, at the hospital or even in the prince’s presence. Nothing and Stephen’s memory had never betrayed him before. “Who are you?”

“I am in the service of the Lord of Jotunheim. Please, I promise this will not take long.”

“If we’re going to be done so quickly, why come inside in the first place?”

The Jotun cocked his head, now looking a lot more serious. “Do you believe that this is a matter that should be discussed in the hallway?”

Stephen was gritting his teeth, feeling unsure what to do, but he always wanted to be the smartest person in the room. Only this way you could stop other people from walking over you. This was an entirely new dimension, something that Stephen hadn’t wanted to be pulled into, yet here he was.

Stepping aside Stephen let the man inside, but then he made no effort to lead him into the living room. They could discuss this in a hallway after all. “Alright, I am listening. What is it that you have to say? Still in the middle of the night while I am standing here in my pyjamas.”

“Although it is of course none of the Lord’s business what you discussed with your employer, he nevertheless asked me to talk to you. To make sure that you are also aware of your duties. Sure, as a doctor you must honour the medical confidentiality, but you have only been in the service of a member of the royal family for a very short time. Therefore it might not hurt to remind you that some secrets are more important to keep than others.”

Friendly but firm tone. Stephen’s eyes travelled down the man’s dark coat, carefully scrutinising the pockets. Did he carry a weapon? In his coat or on his body?

“You are right. This is clearly none of the Lord’s business. Time for you to leave.”

The Jotun didn’t move. “Doctor Strange, you helped saving the life of my prince and therefore I am immensely grateful to you and it makes me rather uncomfortable to bother you. Nonetheless I am here on behalf of my king and I cannot leave until I hear you say that you understood. That there are secrets that need to be kept, because revealing them to the wrong people may have abhorrent consequences. You are a smart, capable man, the Duke definitely chose you for a reason. Therefore it cannot be hard for you to understand. Isn’t that right, Doctor Strange?”

This man was an employee of Laufey Ymirson. Who was aware of Loki’s conversation with Stephen and more importantly of the content of their conversation? He had also known where to find him. In the middle of the night. Stephen bit the inside of his cheek as he cursed himself. For being too proud and feeling too important to tell a prince to find someone else to do his job. For being
naïve. A character trait that Stephen had never associated with himself.

All of this had led him here. To being threatened in his own home by a man who was staring him down and who, despite his calm demeanour, was radiating with danger. And Stephen had let him in.

“I have been working as a doctor for over 20 years and I have not once have I violated the trust of my patient. I have to disagree with you though. Any patient’s secrets are equally important. I wouldn’t share a single one, no matter how small or unimportant they are. Now that I’ve answered your question, I want you to leave. Instantly.”

The Jotun tilted his head to the side, his blue eyes still capturing Stephen’s in an intense glare. Stephen began to think that he wasn’t going to leave and he thought of his phone, lying on the nightstand. Then suddenly the Jotun smiled again and bowed his head in a respectful manner. “Again, I am deeply sorry for having disturbed your sleep. Thank you very much for honouring me with your time. Good night.”

Stephen didn’t say anything, he was eagerly watching the Jotun walk out the door and his heartbeat changed his rhythm as the dark-haired man stopped and looked over his shoulder. “By all the spirits I almost forgot. The king thanks you immensely for taking such good care of his son.”

Even when the Jotun had got into the elevator and was no longer to be seen, Steve was still staring into the empty hallway.

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“By all the spirits, I am merely trying to talk to him! Tell him that I wish to speak to him. He is your prince, isn’t he? He should make that decision for himself, shouldn’t he? Or are you authorized to make decisions for him?”

Thor was seething with anger, only fuelled on more by desperation. The Jotun on the other end of the line finally hesitated. One moment ago he had had the audacity to tell Thor that the so called prince wasn’t going to be harassed with his call. Fine, if they were going to hang up on him, Thor would go to the hospital personally. They would have to drag him out by force if they wanted to keep him from talking to Helblindi. That wasn’t going to happen. Thor was going to find his little brother.

“Please, wait for a moment.”

The voice talking to him was anything but friendly, but Thor couldn’t care less. All he needed was Helblindi on the phone who would hopefully be able to tell him where to find Loki or at least tell him that his little brother was perfectly alright. Which he couldn’t be. Thor still felt the smaller body in his arms, shaken by the force of his sobs, clinging to him like Loki never had before. He also saw Loki leaving the room and Thor not going after him.

The guilt continued to hit down hard on him and Thor was thankful that there was rustling at the other end of the line and eventually he heard a familiar voice. “Are you calling to gloat? To have confirmation of the damage that you’ve done?”

There was no time for this. “Helblindi, this is not about you or me. I need to know when you last talked to my brother immediately.”

The Jotun replied with a sneer and Thor was sure that he never used that tone around Loki. “Are you giving me orders, son of a thief?”
Closing his eyes Thor fought with all of his strength the urge to yell at him, to let him exactly know what he thought about him and how Thor was perfectly aware of how he was poisoning his little brother’s thoughts. It would probably give him a lot of satisfaction and helped him to calm down, but Thor couldn’t. Helblindi would hang up and Loki would still be gone. So Thor gritted his teeth and prayed to his ancestors for the strength to go through this. “No, I am asking you an important question. I would like to know when you talked to my brother for the last time.”

“How are you not asking Loki yourself? If he doesn’t answer you, why should I? Why won’t he talk to you? Because of what you did to me? Your idea of retribution?”

Thor’s fist was shaking and the only thing that stopped him from snapping was the weakness that he recognized in Helblindi’s voice. Of course, his bite was still there, but it couldn’t covered out how worn out he seemed to be, nevertheless willing to fight.

“Please, can we just for a second leave all of that aside? I was merely trying to ask a question and I would like an answer. Then we can both gladly end this conversation.”

“What is going on? What is going on with Loki?” Another change in his voice and Thor pondered his options. A prince missing was highly confidential information and Thor couldn’t risk it leaving the palace. Even less so he could risk handing it Helblindi as a potential weapon.

Then again, what were the chances that he didn’t already know? Thor remembered Loki’s wild eyes, his accusations and his words. His frantic and honest claim to love Helblindi. Who else but him was even capable to put Loki in such a dangerous state?

“When my brother came home from visiting you, he was extremely upset. He was in tears and refusing to talk. It was necessary to call a doctor to calm him down. Since I have never seen my brother in such a state, I want to know if something happened to during his visit that could have distraught him in such a way.”

“What are you talking about? Loki was…” Helblindi stopped and for the first time in his life Thor wished to see his face, so he could guess what he was thinking. “Where is he now? I want to talk to him.”

“At the moment that’s not possible.”

“I swear to you by all my ancestors and all the spirits if you’ve done something to him…”

Thor cut him off rather easily. “Are you listening to me? Loki was completely fine until he went to see you. I do not know what happened, but I need to know what is going on with my brother to help him. So will you tell me what happened?”

“Nothing. None of your business. Now you will tell me what is going on. I haven’t been able to reach him all day. That has never happened before. What is going on?”

Thor shook his head, no he was not going to let this conversation take this turn. If Helblindi couldn’t help him, Thor didn’t have the time to lose. “Thank you for your time, my Lord.”

“Wait! Wait. Listen to me, if you have done anything to him or if you keep him from contacting me, I swear to you I will make you regret that. Nothing you’ve experienced until now can compare to what I can do to you and your rotten family if I should actually decide to. I only have to say the word. Are you aware of that? Do you understand me, Thor, son of Odin, descendant of Búri?”

The weakness had vanished, it had been replaced by calm and seemingly controlled rage. Thor thought he could feel the healed wound in his shoulder burning up, but it meant nothing to him. He
still had to find his little brother.

“I am sorry to have bothered you, my Lord. I wish you a quick recovery.”
As he slowly cracked his eyes open Loki fell into the tight embrace of a piercing headache that threatened to split his skull apart. The sweet release that the pain offered him faded away instantly when consciousness caught up with him. It was an onslaught of sensations and images that assaulted his mind and Loki pressed his balled fists against his eyes with the faint hope to increase his headache. Anything to make it stop.

Desperately missing oblivion Loki slowly picked himself up from the floor at the same time surprised and unbothered by the effort that it took. He walked across the cold floor, swaying ever so slightly. Something was cutting into his heel and Loki wished that the pain would be searing and agonizing, but instead it didn’t even make him flinch. When he reached the kitchen area Loki shortly leaned against the counter before rummaging through the fridge. He didn’t have to open it which meant he had left it open before. A quick search revealed that there were no other bottles left.

The faint thought crossed his mind to call Leah to get him sleeping medication, but then there would be a trail to where he was. With his back against the counter Loki slid down to the floor. There was a trail of blood on the white tiles. That much blood on the floor from such small cut from a shard. Loki wondered how much blood there would be if he slit his wrists.

Closing his eyes Loki waited for unconsciousness to take him away, because he needed it. So Helblindi’s face would finally stop haunting him. Not just his beautiful face, but also the feeling of his lips traveling down Loki’s chest or brushing along the inside of his thigh. Pressing his fingernails into the skin of his arm and the pain wasn’t enough. All Loki could think of was how much he had enjoyed it, how never anything had felt that good. When it shouldn’t have. Then there was Balder. Who had been perfectly lovely and beautiful. Who had given him everything he had asked for and it hadn’t been enough. With Helblindi it had almost been too much to handle. A storm of sensations, pleasure and bliss that he so willingly had got lost in. With his own…

Loki let out a strangled sound of agony. The disgust had him wanting to claw his eyes out and yet he could not stop himself from longing for being able to go back there. Increasing the pressure Loki wanted to draw blood, so he wouldn’t have to think about what was wrong with him. That question alone had him screaming.

Everything was wrong with him. What to expect from a creature born from cheating and without a soul. Naturally his mind would be twisted and abnormal enough to fall in love with his own blood. To feel attracted to him physically so long before discovering the beauty of character. Even now Loki had that burning desire inside of him to flee, to run right to him. A perverted fantasy that he still couldn’t let go, because of what he was. How was Loki supposed to be anything else?
"It’s been 24 hours since anyone has seen the prince. Nobody has heard from him either. At this time we have to acknowledge protocol and consider the possibility of a kidnapping."

Even before Heimdall had finished his sentence Thor was already shaking his head. It just didn’t make sense. None of it. Not after what had happened yesterday. “No, it’s none of that. Loki ran, he was scared, confused. Out of his mind.”

Heimdall looked at him and Thor felt that he was trying to be empathetic. “I am aware, your highness. Nonetheless we cannot risk to overlook any possibility by focusing on the wrong details. The people are still troubled by what has happened to the young Lord of Jotunheim. Tensions are still high though not as visible. The Duke of Glæsisvellir made a public statement, he showed his face and is therefore associated with what happened to Helblindi Ymirson. His disappearance could be tied to Frjáls. I am not saying that this is the case, but it would be careless to ignore this possibility.”

In theory Thor understood, but he had seen the state Loki had been in. Only hours later he disappeared from the surface of the earth. That was not a coincidence. “I see, but there would have been contact by now. A ransom demand. Or something way worse. Something happened to him yesterday. Something that… He ran away and I am afraid of what he might do. Loki knows the palace like the back of his hand, he’s perfectly capable of sneaking out. We have to find him. Perhaps we need more men on this. There’s got to be a trace of him. Everybody in this country knows his face, somebody must have seen him.”

“No credit card has been used, no money has been withdrawn from his accounts. He didn’t use one of the cars and the guards have checked all the apartments and houses that are property of the crown. Since the prince left his cell phone behind and hasn’t used one of the vehicles, we have no means to locate him via GPS. He is making it as hard for us as he can, but I can assure you that we will find him. The main difficulty is to keep his disappearance a secret. There are only so many appointments that we can cancel before the public catches on to something being amiss.”

Nodding Thor didn’t have an answer to this. He knew that the public being alerted would be horrible, but then again, what did he really care about other than bringing Loki home safely? Nothing else really mattered. “Get more people on it. We cannot lose any more time. Helblindi Ymirson is going to be transferred to Jotunheim tomorrow and there is no sign of Loki trying to seek him out. That is all I need to know that Loki is not doing fine. I am scared that… I don’t know. I’ve never seen him like this. Just find him, Heimdall.”

Thor was ready to get up and leave, to continue his own search, but Heimdall’s firm gazed was still fixed on him, loaded with unasked questions. “What?”

“Your highness, don’t you think that it’s time that I have a little more information on what caused the prince’s frenzy? It would be helpful to give us a better idea where to look for him.”

Of course. Thor couldn’t pretend that he had always understood what was going on in Loki’s mind, so many times he had been completely baffled by his actions or ideas. Nonetheless they had always been able to talk to each other. They had shared secrets, although the other one might not be able to grasp the idea, they still knew that they were safe with each other. They had always been. “I don’t know, Heimdall and that’s what scares me. It’s completely unlike Loki. Something happened and I don’t know what. I believe it is related to the Ymirsons, but I don’t know.”

“Helblindi Ymirson tried has tried to reach your brother several times during the last 12 hours.”
“That does not make me feel better. Just find him.” Getting up from his chair Thor left, heading for Loki’s room. There had to be something, just the smallest hint of where Loki had disappeared to. He had to keep himself busy, because he couldn’t start imagining of what might happen to his little brother if he didn’t find him soon. They would find him though, because they had to.

After opening the door Thor slowly stepped inside to be at the same time overwhelmed with Loki’s presence and absence. Everything was in perfect order, in its right place. So many bookshelves on the wall, because even though the library was merely two minutes away, that was still too far. Loki wasn’t here and Thor had to give up the foolish hope that he would find a sheet of paper with directions on it.

What kind of big brother had he become? Not able to live up to the responsibility to protect his little brother. Most of his life Loki hadn’t needed a shadow looming over him to make sure that he was going to be alright. Perfectly capable of taking care of himself. Then the one time when Thor should have been there, he had failed him.

Sitting down on the couch Thor ran both hands through his hair. No, no time to ponder. What was he doing? Thor wasn’t going to find Loki by sitting around. Thor was going to rest when his little brother had come back home safely.

As Thor stood back up he came to a sudden halt when he heard a soft whimpering. Confused and perhaps a little scared Thor walked around the couch to not find what he had been looking for, but stumbled right into the danger of being overcome by emotion. In front of him on the floor lay a puppy, looking up at Thor with sad eyes as it continued to whimper. Helblindi’s cherished engagement gift. Left behind, abandoned and forgotten. It was with this realisation that Thor thought that his mind might just crumble. Where was Loki?

“Hey, little one… You are Fenris, right? Come here. No point in the both of us being alone.” The puppy stopped whimpering when Thor picked it up and carefully stroked its soft fur. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll find him. He’ll be alright…”

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There needed to be someone to listen to him. To answer to his cries. The spirits wouldn’t. Never would they lend their ear to a barn-svíkja. An empty shell, without soul and real mind that wasn’t supposed to have a place in this world.

His ancestors?

Biting his lip Loki smashed his fists against his forehead as if that could distract from the shame. It made no difference. 28 years he had prayed to strangers. Had shared his thoughts, his fears, hopes and secrets with them. People who he didn’t share any blood with. He had told them about his almost unbearable desire to be heard, to make a difference and… he had asked them to help him stop desiring his own blood.

The disgrace was wrapped around his neck like a collar and it tightened by the second, stopping him from screaming no matter how much Loki wanted to. As if it wasn’t already too much to bear Loki thought of all the other unforgiving things that his mere existence had brought along.

So many times he had written letters to the Búrisons. Thor’s family. A name that Loki had stolen and he was supposed to steal so much more. Again and again he had asked for strength and advice when he had been born for the mere purpose to destroy their legacy and work.

Had that been Laufey’s and Frigga’s intention? Having Loki pray to them as the worst way to tarnish
their memory? Having the barn-svíkja who was supposed to be their downfall asking them for help.

The actual shrine of those who had come before him was in Útgarðar and not once had Loki been there. Not that it made any difference. They would not listen to Loki either, because they weren’t the creators and keepers of his soul. Nothing there to protect or cherish. Only a black hole. Loki could go there and none of his prayers would be heard. Unlike Helblindi’s who was praying at the very same shrine. Against his will Loki had once more made the connection with his fiancé, his brother and his skin remembered Helblindi’s firm grip around his neck, pulling him in an almost forceful kiss.

“No, no, no!”

Jumping up to his feet Loki walked up and down, trying to flee the memory which turned out impossible. Its grip was unforgiving and relentless, repeatedly telling him that it was useless. That there was no denying in how much enjoyment he had found in the other man and how that fact was proof of his madness.

When Loki took another step the pain in his foot finally became real. Sharp and harsh. It was the most pleasant relief. For a few seconds there was nothing but the searing, pulsing sensation before reality caught up with Loki and attached itself to his mind, unwilling to ever let go again.

A special prince. Doctor Jørgensen and Frigga had both called him that. Born for a purpose. Not out of love or even lust. No, Loki’s existence had nothing to do with that. He had been born out of hatred and spite. Born to be a thief. Or more than that.

Loki felt his skin turning cold like the winds of Jotunheim. The exact words his mother had used where lost on him, mingled into one and he didn’t want to recall them. Their meaning and impact remained. His was supposed to steal Thor’s birth right. The throne that his ancestors had chosen him for. Just how? Loki was the younger one, his claim would never be…

Unless. His heart was racing as he remembered the terrifying sound of shots being fired. Thor’s warm blood hitting his cheek. A better shot would have killed him and put Loki on the throne. The barn-svíkja. Such an easy achievement. Loki barely made it to the sink before throwing up.

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“This is outrageous! Gentlemen, you have no right to…”

“Mr. Stark, we are sorry intrude, but it’s a matter of major importance.”

Tony’s eyes darted from his notes to the two guys in dark suits who had just stormed into his room, the girl who was supposed to care of him right after them with her cheeks flushed and wild eyes. Couldn’t believe that this was happening to her.

FBI? CIA? No, they looked more like the secret service if it wasn’t for their haircuts.

“Well, you guys just proved that security at this convention is shit.” More annoyed than frustrated Tony lowered his cards and glared at them. “I have a very important presentation in about 15 minutes, so you guys have to wait for your autographs. Preferably outside.”

One of them took a step closer and Happy was there instantly. “You stay right where you are. This area is off-limits and there are about 30 seconds left before all of security is going to be here.”

Unimpressed one of them looked past Happy and directly at Tony. “We did not have the intention to intrude, but for the last 48 hours it has been impossible to contact you in any kind of way, Mr.
Stark.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ve told every single one of my girlfriends when I heard this complaint. I was busy with important, world changing stuff. Now see yourself out.”

Tony had already turned his back to them to show how little he cared when that changed. “We are members of the Asgardian embassy. Our king Odin desires to talk to you.”

Huh. Now that was a surprise. Had the old man finally decided to act like a parent to seek out the negative influence on his son? Not that Tony had done much influencing recently. Not his choice. Tony wondered how prince charming was doing. Was this about the shitshow their country was in? As much as Tony enjoyed making everything about himself, he didn’t see a role for him in this play. Unfortunately it was also rather unlikely that prince charming had told his father to call Tony, because he wanted to meet up. Still, a man could dream, right?

“What is this about?”

“There is an important matter that the king needs to discuss with you. Now.”

“What part about I have a presentation in 15 minutes didn’t you get?”

“We are sorry, Mr. Stark, but we are not going to leave until you accepted this phone call.”

Wow, those two definitely didn’t care about being in a foreign country and overstepping their boundaries. Insolence was something Tony had always valued. Even more so when prince charming was involved in any kind of way. Guess he would have to find out. “How about you stop getting on my nerves and hand me that phone?”

Ten seconds later Tony heard the voice of the grumpy old man who ruled Asgard. “Mr. Stark.”

“Hello your highness. Long-time no see. Well, technically we don’t see each other right now and…”

“Have you been in recent contact with my son Loki, the Duke of Glæsisvellir?”

Huh. Straight to the point. Not even those empty, polite remarks that men in his positon loved to throw around. So it was about prince charming after all. What had he done that they were now trying to blame Tony for? “Could define the word ‘recent’?”

“Mr. Stark, I am aware that you are a very busy man, but so am I. Save us the time and answer my question. I know that you tried to contact my son a few times during the last weeks. Three days ago you called an old number that is no longer connected to his phone and left a message that you wanted to talk to him. Did he reply?”

Tony needed to gain time. As much as the king tried to sound calm and determined, there was an edge in his voice. Very unlike all their negotiations. Something more personal. It had Tony’s heart skip a beat. “Now that’s a huge violation of privacy. How were you…”

“Mr. Stark, did my son answer in any kind of way?” Unyielding and hard as iron. This was unknown territory for Tony. Somebody who knew to shut him up. Not Odin’s words had done the trick, but his tone. It was more than enough for an uneasy feeling to sneak up on Tony. “Is something wrong with him?”

“I need an answer, Mr. Stark and as I hear you have places to be. When have you last heard of my son?”
Everything about this was wrong. In every conceivable way. “Weeks ago. I was coming on to him, he shot me down. Are you in need of a more detailed description?”

For the first time Odin didn’t answer immediately and Tony was confronted with unsettling silence on the other side of the line. “Thank you, Mr. Stark. I am sorry for the disturbance. Good luck with your presentation.”

“Hey, wait a second, what the hell is…”

The king of Asgard had hung up on him and Tony knew that his presentation was ruined.

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Frostgiant. That was the word Thor had used to describe Loki’s little brother. One of them. The one Loki hadn’t slept with. The one he hadn’t pulled down into the abyss alongside him. The one who wasn’t going to be overcame with contempt for himself as soon as he was going to find out. The one who wasn’t going blind.

Frostgiants. A name Valhalla had come with to turn the Ymirsons and all the Jotuns into monsters. Perhaps they had been right. Perhaps they were monsters. All of them. Some would willingly destroy their soul out of hatred and greed. Others were attracted to their own blood. Others tried to kill an innocent and good man to get what they thought was theirs when it wasn’t.

Others were born without a soul in the first place. There was no better definition of a monster.

Loki rolled over, pulling his knees up to his chest. Hoping that he could make himself so small that he would just disappear. Vanish.

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“We’ll be ready to leave in 15 minutes, my prince.”

Helblindi nodded and remained silent as he heard the doctor walking away. Inside his chest his heart was beating too fast. Leaving Valhalla made it all so real. That soon they were going to operate on him and then they would find out if Thor had done any permanent damage. If he had stolen Helblindi’s eyes.

Around him things were still visible. He hadn’t been plunged into darkness and yet he couldn’t see, so what was the difference? He was blind, tied to this bed and for the first time not in charge of his own destiny. The mere thought had him almost going insane with fear. As if that wasn’t enough.

Helblindi might not be able to see, but he could still tell who was here and who wasn’t. Turning his head Helblindi searched for a dark spot in the blurred mess of colours that made him want to scream. “Týr?”

He could hear him stepping closer. “My prince?”

“I need you to help me.”

“Anything you could ever ask for.”

Yes, Helblindi knew that and for the first time he thought that it might not be enough. “It has been two days since I have heard from my fiancé. His brother was acting strangely and… I need to know what is going on. I need to know why he isn’t here. I need to know what is going on in that forsaken palace. I need you to stay here and find out.”
“As you wish, my prince.”

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Thor hadn’t been talking about him, but he could have. Should have. He was going to as soon as he had found out. Them playing hide and seek in the corridors, sneaking into the other’s room, sharing secrets didn’t mean anything. Thor would recognize in Loki the very thing that he was. A pawn born to take everything away that was rightfully Thor’s and to eventually kill him. Thor had been right to call them monsters. Just like his father had been right to try and protect the realm from them.

The pain was racing through Loki’s veins, not going to let him forget that the man who had raised him, who had showered him with love and affection and who had always wanted him to be the best version of himself was not his father. He was one of the two men that Loki had been sent to destroy.

Struggling up to his trembling feet Loki tried to run away, to flee his own purpose. Every step that he took send waves of raging pain through his body, but it couldn’t compare to the poison that was crippling his mind.

With one hand supporting him on the wall Loki slowly made his way back into the living room. He did not see the trashed furniture nor the shards on the floor. Least of all the dried blood from his own feet. His eyes were fixed on the balcony door. The escape route. With weak, shaking hands Loki pushed it open and stepped outside. Evidently he was too numb to feel the snow against his skin. After walking up to the ledge Loki glanced down. Nothing compared to the penthouse, but it would do. At a certain point the height difference didn’t matter. Bones were going to break either way. Monster needed to be taken care of before they started hurting people. The ones he loved.

Love. How quickly that word had lost all of its meaning. For someone whose cradle had been made of dark and twisted feelings, there was no love. Merely rage and spite and Loki had to decide which way to go.

Into darkness or down.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: Huh, kind of surprise how well you are all dealing with the main character contemplating suicide... ;(
Hello everybody,

After two days of not being able to write a word it has finally worked out :)

Have fun :)
Frigga had held Loki, stroked his hair and how she had smiled whenever Loki had achieved a new skill or mastered a trick. Years ago Thor had stopped letting denial blind him and see Loki as what he was, their mother’s favourite. That was a sting which could never fade away completely, any son’s longing for the unyielding love of his mother was woven to strongly into the fabric that he was made of. Fortunately Thor had left jealousy behind with his childhood days. At least he liked to believe so.

Thor was the long awaited and hoped for firstborn. He was going to inherit the throne, the spirits and their ancestors had so many more plans for him than for Loki and it would never be fair to long for anything that was in Loki’s possession. Nevertheless Thor had gone to very dark place when Loki had first started working together with Helblindi. None of that mattered anymore now.

Uneasy Thor was standing in front of the door to his mother’s rooms, faced with two guards who reminded him of his father’s advisers. Not quite willing to look at him. “I came to speak to my mother.”

“We are sorry, your highness. Your mother doesn’t wish to see anybody until there is news of the Duke of Glæsisvellir.”

Thor didn’t like to do this, but he saw no other way than to take advantage of his rank. “Step aside.”

The hesitation was short lived, he was their prince, soon to be king. Both of them stepped aside and Thor entered the private rooms. Frigga was standing by the window, the bright light of day shining on her face. Despite the dire situation Thor came to notice that she looked as marvellously put together as always. A light blue dress, her long hair was gently falling over her shoulders in a loosely tied braid. Small, silver earrings were sparkling like the delicate necklace she was wearing. She was without a doubt beautiful.

“I demanded not to be disturbed.”

“I am sorry, mother, but this cannot be delayed.”

Frigga turned to him and Thor could clearly see now that only her outfit was in perfect order. Her eyes and face were a testament to several nights without sleep a tormented mind. Both, love and fear could be seen and Thor believed to recognize a little bit of himself in her expression. It was the same overwhelming anguish that one didn’t know how to tame. Thor felt the urge to pull her into his arms, but he wasn’t here to give or find comfort.

“Have you found Loki?” It was only a spark home, Frigga knew very well that she would have already received a phone call if there had finally been a sighting.

“No, which is why I am here. Mother, do you remember anything about your last conversation with Loki? Anything that he said that might help us find out where he is?”

His mother’s desolate eyes stayed on him. “What are you saying? Don’t you think that I would immediately have told you about it? If I had any idea where my son was, I would send entire armies to make sure that he comes home safely.”

“I know. I know that. Of course. It’s just… Maybe something was mentioned and you did not notice it at the time or…”

“I don’t know where he is! If I knew…” Probably to stop herself from shouting she turned away, Thor could see her shoulders trembling. The coldness inside his chest was hard to bear and Thor swallowed hard. First his father, now his mother. Both pushed to their limits by fear and anguish.
"If I knew he would be here with us. He would be safe. Nothing was said. Nothing that would hint at where he would run to. He was distraught, mad even. I should not have let him go. I failed him and so did you."

Thor froze. “What?”

“You are his big brother. He always looked up to you. You are supposed to protect him, but you didn’t. Like when you made him climb onto the tree and he fell.”

Thor was taller than her, so why did he suddenly feel like he had to look up to her? The image of Loki falling came back to his mind. The crying and the tears. His own despair because they wouldn’t let him see him. Doctor Jørgensen yelling at him and his mother shoving him aside. “That is not fair. We were children.”

“You are his brother. It’s your duty to look after him and you didn’t. Now he is lost and the only thing that matters is to find him.” Frigga turned her back to him and Thor knew that despair and the pain of ignorance had poisoned her words. They should not hurt him, but they did and so very effectively. He had come here with the faint and even more desperate hope that they had missed some clue, some important piece of information that ultimately might lead them to Loki. That mattered. Finding his little brother. There was no time for anything else. Slowly Thor straightened back up, to least have the impression that he hadn’t just lost all of his height. “I will find him and I will bring him back home.”

His mother wouldn’t grant him another glance and so Thor left, thinking it was rather horrible that everybody in this family tried to deal with their fear alone.

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After signing the last document Laufey carefully closed the folder and placed it on the small pile on the desk. Calmly checking his watch he realised that another hour had passed and there would soon be an update on both of them. Until now the lack of information had been unacceptable and therefore Laufey had shortened down the intervals. Naturally he had insisted to be informed of any change of events. Every 60 minutes the phone would ring or somebody would enter the room to tell him if there was any news. All men that he could possibly spare had the same task to carry out and although Laufey was patient, knowing that they would ultimately be successful, he was unable to deny that he felt a certain rush. Nobody could make wise and effective decision if they didn’t have all necessary information or at least more information than the enemy. Never had it been more urgent to know where all the pieces were located on the chessboard to come to the right decisions. Measures had to be taken, they should have already been taken four days ago, but it hadn’t been possible. Due to lack of information. It was better to wait though. Rash actions were only a testament of weakness. One always had to the consequences of one’s next step and therefore it had been forced upon Laufey to sit here and wait for a single piece of information that would tell him which way to go.

Sitting at his desk Laufey absently looked towards the window, seeing the blue of the sky slowly turning into a soft pink and gold as dusk began to settle. No clouds were visible and not a single flake of snow. A sharp contrast to Jotunheim, to where he actually should be. For centuries Valhalla had bestowed pain disaster upon his blood and this time more than ever before.

A vile series of events had been unleashed and to his great shame Laufey was incapable of telling where it had actually begun. At which point his watchful eye had failed him, so he was forced to wait until the moment had come for him to regain control of the situation. He would, undoubtedly, the scenarios were worked out, things ready to be set into motion. As soon as Laufey knew what point of departure he was dealing with.
The only thing he knew for sure was what was going to happen to the damned soul that had dared to make an attempt on his son’s life. The deed alone should be unthinkable, anyone being brave and reckless enough to realize such a treacherous ploy. Seemingly oblivious of the catastrophic consequences. Or perhaps they indeed were oblivious. Too arrogant to comprehend that a single cut in Helblindi’s skin was like a knife into the heart of this entire country. It was no surprise that a blinded and rotten servant of the usurper’s family would ignore the unyielding love that Helblindi had awoken in the hearts of the people. Not only the Jotun ones. Something that Laufey had hoped for, prayed for and he had never lacked trust in his son who had inherited every single powerful trait of his mother. Over all these years, from the very moment Laufey had first sat that little boy down to tell him the story of their ancestors, their own story, to his very first speech to the people, Helblindi had shown qualities to fulfil his father’s expectations.

Until he had surpassed them. Again and again to an extent that Laufey had not thought possible. Which should not have been possible.

Laufey had watched with pride and worry in small of corner of his heart how that sweet, charming and wickedly clever child had grown up into a dazzling young man who would claim himself that his ancestors had covered his bones with flesh to serve the people of Jotunheim. A dedication so fierce and honest that it bordered on dangerous. Helblindi turned out to be even more than that. With the incomprehensible ability to make everyone fall in love with him.

Anyone as Laufey had realized.

It was an extraordinarily vicious and vile act to try and kill such a man. Using poison also made it the work of coward. Retaliation would look quite different. There would be blood.

A knock on the door resounded and Laufey took his gaze of the window, still thinking about the snow that was falling on Útgarðar. If the spirits were kind and if their ancestors smiled upon him, they would have finally found him. “Enter.”

“My King.”

“Any news?”

“Not from our man, but I believe that will no longer matter. You have a visitor. The Duke of Glæsisvellir is waiting for you in the salon.”

Laufey raised his head and gave a soft nod. So he had come home finally. Their ancestors had led him back to the right path. A reunion that was not going to be easy. Not after this cursed turn of events had left him alone with the realization of his inheritance. Sent into motion by that maledict soul who had poisoned Helblindi and had who had left his firstborn’s fate in the hands of a foreigner who had had no idea what he had found.

“What state is he in?”

“Wretched. The guards at the door didn’t recognize him at first.”

With another nod Laufey sent the man away and placed his pen in the middle of the folder before standing up. Carefully he adjusted his jacket, brushed off the sleeves. Another time he cursed the ones who forced this moment on them, so very different on what it should have been on their own terms. They would suffer. As their family had suffered. Theirs had come to an end.

The Valhallan townhouse was small, hardly used. Laufey only needed to walk down the stairs and turn to the left, then he was standing in front of the white wing doors. “No interruptions until I leave
this room. For any reason.”

The guard shifted uncomfortably. “Sir, none whatsoever? We are still awaiting news from the prince.”

Laufey shook his head. “No interruptions. Stay where you are.”

Reluctantly the guard nodded and opened the door for him. As Laufey walked inside he could immediately see the tall figure standing in the middle of the room. Between the sofas, not bothering to sit down. Loki was wearing a grey coat that was wide open and too thin for this time of the year. The usual elegance of the expensive garment was lost on Loki as it seemed he had thrown it on himself without a care in the world. His trousers were stained with a red substance that might be blood. Laufey could see that he wasn’t wearing socks. His hair was unkempt and greasy and the skin that covered his cheeks seemed to have become a lot thinner and grey. Two green eyes in dark sockets met Laufey in an empty stare. The description hadn’t been wrong. That man in front of him didn’t remind him much of the beautiful and strong person that hadn’t been afraid to stand up to hundreds of Jotuns ready to stone him. Like a king.

“We have all been looking for you. I did not expect you to come home.”

Loki didn’t move, nor did his face show any kind of reaction. His entire appearance was unsettling, but most of it was just superficial. Something that could and would be corrected with a little help.

When he eventually talked his voice was raspy and it sounded as if it was the first time in years that he was using it. “This is not home.”

In agreement Laufey shook his head. “No, but it should be. It will be.”

“Words like home or family can never be associated with you. We have nothing in common. We share nothing. Everything you did is a violation of everything that is pure and right. How much I wish that there was nothing I have to say to you, so I would not have to breathe the same air as somebody who so willingly destroyed the most precious thing he would ever possess.” Every word seemed to gain a little more strength and yet his voice was quiet as Loki saw no need to emphasize any of it.

There indeed wasn’t. Laufey could feel his resentment and the cold rage, something that ran so deeply that it didn’t need grand gestures or shouting. His eyes were filled with it. Laufey could see himself inside his son. That realization had him unbothered that he was the target of Loki’s hatred. He was young, thrust into a traumatic situation and for days there had been nobody to help him.

“I do believe you would be surprised about how much we have in common. There are things that we share. My blood is running through your veins.” Loki shook his head, but Laufey continued talking. “I have watched you for so many years and I have seen the relentlessness with which you peruse your goals. To achieve what you know is right. How you continue to fight even though all odds are against you and how you sometimes have to go against the ones closest to you.”

“No. Stop it. You will not draw a comparison between the two of us. I am not here to hear that. I am not here to hear anything you say unless I ask you. I am nothing like you.” Loki’s hiss was quiet but firm.

“So what have you come to ask me?” Laufey knew he needed to be gentle. For all he knew he was facing a wild, hurt animal that had been cornered and which was now lashing out, threatening to rip anyone’s throat out who came too close. Even if the person approaching intended to heal its wounds.
For the first time during their conversation Loki turned his head aside, avoiding looking into Laufey’s eye. Like this the unhealthy sharpness of his cheekbones stood out even more prominently. “What did my father… Odin do to my mother? Did he hurt her? Was he abusive? Did he order the murder of someone she loved? Is there any reason to explain how she could betray him so maliciously? How she would be willing to destroy her own soul? For you. For me. For nothing at all.”

“Your mother is a woman of great integrity and even greater strength. The most selfless person I have ever met. Willing to dedicate her entire life to a purpose so much bigger than both of our lives. To you. The Jotun King who is going to take back what is rightfully his.”

In this moment Loki should be able to see himself like Laufey did, then all of his doubts and fears would turn into dust. No reason to cling to old traditions like small people when you were born to greatness.

This time Loki laughed. Drily and deprived of you. “I have never thought the Lord of Jotunheim to be a fool. Or are you just insane? I am a bastard. I have no right to anything. Not in Valhalla nor in Jotunheim.”

“You are my firstborn. The heir to Lopthæna. Her blood in your veins is what matters. Not the fact if your parents both wore matching markings…”

“How dare you. Is there nothing sacred to you? Something you wouldn’t toss into the dirt?” Feverish eyes were drilling through him and Laufey would not let him fall apart. The helplessness was radiating from Loki and he raised his hand in a parrying gesture as Loki stepped closer.

“You are. Sacred is not enough of a word to describe your worth. You are too important to be restrained or held back by ancient and too small concepts to ever be of any meaning to you. Rules of succession or legitimacy. Tradition. Ordinary people can be limited by that. Not you.”

Shaking his head Loki gritted his teeth. “Stop it.”

Laufey took another small step towards him. “Did your mother tell you I was there when you were born?”

Loki didn’t reply, just stared at him with the same fever.

“You cannot imagine what it felt like when Doctor Jørgensen put you into my arms. When I first saw you and your tiny hand wrapped itself around my finger. Of course it can be explained with sentiment, but I thought I could already feel your strength. The strength you would gain as an adult. I’ve never been happier than when I gave you your name. Loptr.”

His name had Loki visibly wince. “What?”

“You are named after Lopthæna. For it is your right to take back what was taken from her. I am sorry about all the things that you have to miss out on. You should have had your markings, but there was nothing to be done about that without endangering you. What I could do was to make sure you would always have a friend by your side. Someone to teach you your language, to look out for you.”

“Ragna…” Loki muttered her name absently, but immediately jumped out of his reach when Laufey tried to touch him. “Don’t.”

“Whatever you feel at the moment, it will pass. It is not the truth. You are as loved and as wanted as any child could ever be. I told you that there your father would be proud of you, but I have always been proud of you.”
Laufey wanted to reach out once more, but Loki’s contorted face told him that he was barely holding in something he wanted to let out. “You are not a father. What kind of a father would stay in Valhalla when his son is Jotunheim undergoing a surgery that will decide if he is ever going to see you again?”

“Helblindi is strong. There hasn’t been a challenge in his life that he hasn’t mastered. His luonto is strong and he has a long line of ancestors protecting him. I am needed here. My other son needs me.”

“The only thing I need you to do is to tell me if Helblindi knows.” Loki’s hands were slightly shaking, the calm despair audible in his voice.

Another turn of events that could not have been foreseen. Because Helblindi had always defied expectations. “No. Your brother is already going through enough at the moment.”

“How could you let that happen? The two of us. How do you even…”

“It never occurred to me that Helblindi could have the same effect on you he has on so many other people. Or that he would feel inclined. I was horrified when he told me, but the damage was already done and the both of you were insisting. It was not your fault. You had no idea.”

Then for a fleeting moment the corners of Loki’s lips formed a little smile. Equally sad and deranged. “It doesn’t matter after all. I know now and I still want him. That very feeling disgusts me and yet I cannot stop wanting him. It makes me hate you even more that I cannot have him because of you.”

“You are…”

“Stop talking!” For the first time Loki raised his voice. “Your words are poison and I will not have them. I don’t know if these lies are only meant for me or if you tell them to yourself too. I don’t care. They mean nothing. Whatever way you try romanticise my birth or my existence, we both know the truth. Whatever you tell me, it’s worthless. You cheated on your wife with a married woman and spawned a child that should not be. You gave up your own soul over 29 years ago. Not a word that passes your lips can be trusted. You can talk about blood and succession as long as you want. What you really did was creating a monster, because you needed one. You wanted one and you got one. Me. The Barn-svíkja.”

“Loptr…”

The sound of his own name hadn’t Loki flinching any longer, the fever in his eyes had spread to his entire face. “Today I was going to do the only thing that I could do. The only thing that makes sense. But when I was standing there and looking down, I saw you looking back at me. All of you and it suddenly began to make sense. My father was right about what you would do to gain a throne that isn’t yours. Creating a monster, because you are one yourself. An entire rotten family. A rotten people. I begin to see why the Búrisons did what they did to the people of Jotunheim. How else to deal with monsters?”

Laufey felt an unknown cold spreading through his body, while Loki continued the madness etching on his face. “So why should I be falling when the ones who did this to me walk away? When I can do anything to them that I want without having to feel bad for it? Without repercussions or anything. What else to expect from someone without a soul?”

“That is not true. It is nowhere written down that…” Laufey stopped at the sight of a shining blade being pulled from the inside of Loki’s coat. His own son was pressing its tip against Laufey’s throat. The expression on his face was completely alien. Haunted and beyond reason. “Who else knows? Who else knows what I am?”
Refusing to lose his calm Laufey answered slowly. “You are the heir to Asgard.”

Loki intensified the pressure and Laufey could feel the blade drawing blood. His voice had turned into a hiss. “Who else knows what I am? Tell me or I will cut your throat.”

“Me. Your mother. The late doctor. Ragna.”

“Nobody else?”

“No. Your identity needed to be kept a secret for your safety. Please, Loki, do not do this to yourself.”

The answer was a smile disfigured by its madness. “Oh, I will be just fine. I will discover that completely new freedom for myself. Knowing I don’t have to be ashamed for whatever vile and despicable thought that crosses my mind. The rules don’t apply to me anymore. What else is a child that should not be supposed to do than things that cannot be done by anyone else. Anyone who has a soul to lose. So I will do to your people what should be done to monsters. Soon enough you will be longing for a punishment as benign as the Language Act. You cannot create a monster and expect it to be your savoir. Because monsters only destroy. That’s all they can do.”

Finally the pressure went away and so did Loki, sliding the dagger back into his coat.
Running through the halls of the palace was nowhere noted in any kind of protocol. There should never be any kind of rush, never something important or urgent enough to make a monarch speed up his steps. Never in his life had Thor cared less something about any rule. Two minutes the display of his phone had lit up, revealing a short code word that had Thor finally breathing easy. They had found him. The call that connected him to security revealed that Loki hadn’t been found. He had come home, the guards had let the taxi behind the fence one minute ago.

So Thor had started running. Down the corridor, down the stairs and into the entrance hall. He would have stormed out into the court if it hadn’t been for the tall, almost gaunt figure standing in front of the door. Seeming a little lost and so wrong in this luxurious, elegant hall. Inside his chest Thor’s heart finally could continue beating freely, without ignorance and dread wrapping their chains around it and yet it broke all the same. For that man out of place was his brother and not anything like him at the same time.

“You damned fool, where have you been?” The hug was crushing, almost brutal. Thor held Loki as close to him as he could, driven by fear that he might slip away again. Loki’s arms were loosely hanging down his sides, he didn’t wince nor move in any kind of way. In that moment Thor didn’t care, because Loki was home. Even though no questions had been answered and there was clearly something wrong with his little brother, he had come home in a single piece. Right now that was all Thor could ask for. So he held him even closer, gently cradling the back of Loki’s head with one hand.

“Five days, you idiot. Without a word.”

Loki merely breathed against him and Thor didn’t dare to think of yet why he seemed so frail. Why his grey face told a story of hours, days without sleep or why not a single sound was leaving his lips. It took a lot of time for Thor to be willing to let go of him, unbothered by the eyes that were definitely looking around the corners to spy at them. Witnessing such non-royalist behaviour. Only now that the relief of seeing Loki alive and seemingly well Thor allowed all those other thoughts to catch up with him, to see the clearly horrendous state that Loki was in. His little brother, kind, snarky, defiant, arrogant and also vain. The man with a tailor-made blazer for every single day of the year and who was always made sure that the buttons of his shirt matched the laces of his shoes. The exact same man was wearing a coat that didn’t fit, stained trousers. His hair was a mess, uncombed, unwashed and Thor’s mind was flooded with dark ideas of what could have put Loki in such a state, one where he stopped caring about his appearance or about himself completely.

“What happened, Loki? You were gone for five days. We were worried sick. Where were you?”

His little brother raised his head and Thor swallowed at the sight of his eyes. They were hard and
empty. “I didn’t want you to find me.”

“Oh, we will talk later. You should…” Thor’s gaze travelled down Loki’s form and stayed on the
stains on his trousers. They were red. “By all the spirits… Loki, are you bleeding?!”

Almost detached Loki looked down at himself and then shook his head. “It’s dried. I had an accident
with a glass yesterday.”

“But you cut yourself. You need to be looked at by a doctor. Let’s get you cleaned up. Mother will
be so happy to see you.” Thor hinted at a smile, but it disappeared when he was confronted with the
mask that Loki’s face suddenly turned into. Stone. “I am not going to see her.”

“What? Loki, you’re…”

“I do not want to see her.” Loki stated once more and then walked past Thor. What was happening?
After five days Loki returned and now he wouldn’t talk to him? Walk away? Thor could be just as
stubborn if he wanted to. With quick steps he followed Loki and resisted the urge to simply grab his
arm and hold him back. Whatever had happened to Loki, Thor wasn’t going to make it any better by
ignoring the very clear signals that he was being sent. “Loki, please, all of us have been losing our
minds these past five days. We have to talk eventually and honestly, I just want to make sure that you
are okay.”

Loki continued to walk up the stairs, but at least he was looking at Thor. “I am not doing okay. I’ve
had the worst week of my entire life. I will take care of it. I am sorry for worrying you. That wasn’t
my intention. I am home now. There is no more need to worry.”

“Are you making a jest? You just told me yourself that you are not alright. As if it wasn’t already
perfectly obvious. I am not going to let you…”

“Please, Thor. At this time I only want to take a bath and that is all.”

Rather helpless Thor remained standing in the middle of the staircase, watching his little brother
climbing them. So he was back home, walking through the door as if it was nothing. Without giving
Thor the explanation that he was craving for, that he so desperately needed. Because whatever had
happened to Loki, whatever had robbed him off his fierceness and constant will to fight, how was
Thor supposed to stop that from ever happening again if he had no idea what he was up against.

His worst fears had not come true since Loki had come back, breathing and talking and yet Thor felt
that horror inside of his chest, weighing him down. The man he had just spoken to was his brother.
He looked and sounded like Loki and still he was so completely different. Not caught up in a panic
attack, but Thor had to admit that this wasn’t much better. There were walls up all around Loki and
Thor had to hope that they would come down on their own, otherwise Thor would have to tear them
down. Bit by bit.

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Loki did not look around as he entered his room. He shrugged off his coat and let it lie right there on
the floor. The rest of his clothes ended up the same way. Every step sent soft waves of pain through
his foot and Loki asked himself if anyone had noticed his slight limping. Not that it mattered. The
wing doors to his bedroom were wide open, Loki didn’t doubt that a lot of people had been walking
in and out during his absence.

His phone was lying on the nightstand where he had left it. Most definitely overflowing with
messages that Loki had no desire to read. Not ever. Unfortunately he still needed his phone.
Therefore Loki picked it up and took it with him into the bathroom. The tub had never looked as inviting. As the water was running into it Loki sat down on the edge and checked out his foot for the first time since he had quickly wrapped it up in a silk scarf that he had grabbed from the closet. It wasn’t soaked with blood, but nobody was ever going to wear it again. By now it looked worse than when he had pulled the shard out. Loki didn’t think it would heal without stitches.

The first touch with water hurt, but Loki didn’t hesitate to slip completely into the half-filled tub. All over his legs the little cuts burned and it seemed so absurd now to walk through shattered glass, to lie in it without caring. To embrace the very feeling of it. Most of the cuts were too small to leave scars, except for the one on his foot. It was indeed time to have it examined.

Despite the warm water Loki shuddered at the thought of going to Doctor Strange with this. Now his handicap seemed to come in handy, he wouldn’t be able to do stitches away. None of that made much of a difference when it came down to seeing the doctor again.

Laufey. Frigga. Doctor Jørgensen. Ragna. Doctor Strange and Loki himself. Those were the people who knew. Doctor Jørgensen was dead and yet he still mattered. Or at least everything that he had ever written down. That was on top of Loki’s list.

The two soulless people who had created him weren’t going to tell anybody. They would incriminate themselves and show their true, ugly colours to the rest of the world. Their lives would be over and there was nothing that selfish people valued more than their own lives and comfort.

Ragna could be found. All these years Loki had not bothered to look for her, because he was afraid of what he might find and now even without him searching his findings had been so much worse than he could have ever imagined. It should not be that hard.

Unlike Doctor Strange. Another problem entirely that needed to be dealt with. Rather sooner than later, but Loki couldn’t bring himself to start with this one. His stomach turned at the mere thought. Which was odd. For a short, ever so fleeting moment Loki had actually believed that it all would just go away. Scruples, confusion and most of all insecurity. Blown away by the wind.

Loki missed that feeling. When he had taken his hands off the ledge. That very second Loki had been freed of all the dead weight, of the horror inside his very own mind. It had vanished and for that exact second Loki knew that he could do anything. That there were no consequences for him.

How fleeting it had been. The truth of what he was remained the same and Loki would have preferred any consequence to not being cursed. To have a soul. Did it make a difference that he had been under the illusion of having one his entire life? Diseases could disappear if you only were under the impression of taking the right medicine. Was the uncertainty going to go away eventually? The doubt? The qualms?

Loki was still aware of what he was and of the role that he was supposed to play. Of the only thing that he was capable of doing. It merely seemed a lot harder now.

Sitting up Loki a fine red line floating on the water surface. The blood didn’t seem to be mingling with it. The images came back to him. Blood on the white tiles. Thor’s blood hitting his face when they had shot him. Like they had planned to. His brother, the rightful heir to the throne dead and his blood all over Loki.

The doubts were fading away already, the qualms becoming a relic of the past.

After reaching for his phone Loki called Leah. For the first time since working for him she didn’t sound completely professional, rather choked-up. She quickly got a hold of herself though and did
was Loki asked of her. Once the conversation had ended Loki slowly washed his hair, then the filth of the last five days off his body. When he got out Loki watched the blood going running down the drain.

He took his time getting dressed, eventually studying his own appearance in the mirror as if he saw his reflection for the very first time. Maybe he did. Loki looked like a man who didn’t need to feel sorry for anything.

Finally Loki was ready, his foot wrapped up in a new scarf and he was about to start working on his list. He froze in his salon, coming to face with the last person he wanted to see. She looked different now that he knew what she was. Small, downright pathetic and yet she made his skin crawl so easily. “Did Thor tell you I was here?”

If so, Loki would have to move to the penthouse.

“No. The whole palace knows you are back. Loki, I was so…”

“Spare me. I don’t have anything to say to you. I forbid you to ever enter my rooms again. You are not my kin anymore.”

Loki began to walk and he was not going to stop. Not a single second could be wasted talking to her, hearing her lies or disdain.

“Please, Loki. Your father told me what you said. My dear, you are wrong. You are not…” Desperation was reeking off her and Loki was disgusted by it. “Not a word. Don’t ever talk to me again and stay away from my brother.” Loki paid extra attention to keeping his steps slow, to leave this room confident and without looking back. The truth was that he was fleeing.

The car already waiting for him when Loki stepped outside the palace. It was going to be at least a 20 minute drive, therefore Loki had a bit of time to make a few more calls. He was going to need few good men to do the dirty work. Trustworthy, loyal, not asking questions. Normally Loki would rely on Heimdall, but he was first and foremost his father’s chief of security. Not the right place to go to. He would have to have Leah working on this one. Nobody with any connection to Jotunheim, not even a distant cousin. Someone like that shouldn’t be that hard to find since Odin and every other king before him had made sure that every man working directly for the royal family fitted that criteria. Not so long ago Loki had considered that paranoia, but as it turned out, this action had been completely justified.

Loki’s eyes dropped down to the phone in his hand and he thought about how effectively he had ignored the little sign which had informed him about how many calls he had missed. Calls from the palace, Thor, security and…Helblindi. Instantly Loki’s stomach clenched at the mere thought of him. It had been five days. Not that Loki had been aware of that himself, but Thor had kept mentioning that. Five days. Helblindi must have left for Jotunheim some time ago. Perhaps the surgery had already taken place. What if his eyes had not recovered the way they should have had? Had the doctors been able to…

No. Loki could not think about that. Not now, not in a few hours, not tomorrow. None of that mattered now. Despite the fierceness of his decision Loki’s heart kept beating in a rhythm that was too fast. Ignoring the clear signs of distress that his body was sending him Loki looked out of the window without seeing anything of the city.

When the car eventually came to a halt Loki felt relief now that his mind would be too busy to wander. The door was being opened and Loki came to face with Vangsness, the supervisor of the anti-terrorism unit. He was in charge of Þórirsson until he was going to be transferred to the
correctional facility. “Your highness.”

Vangsness bowed his head as Loki got out of the car, he skipped a long greeting. “Can we get started?”

“Of course, your highness.” Vangsness led Loki inside although the way was anything but unknown to Loki. The last time Loki had been here Helblindi had been right next to him. Another thought that was going to be ignored. They ended up in the same room, Loki standing behind the glass panel, waiting for the prisoner to be brought in.

It didn’t take long and two officers led Þórirsson inside, then made him sit down on the same metal chair. His physical appearance was exactly the same and yet Loki was shocked by how different he looked. He didn’t even seem human at this point. The pale skin and the almost unnatural blue eyes had something monstrous about them.

“One of our most experienced agents is going to interrogate him. He is wearing an earpiece, so you can tell him which questions you want to be asked, your highness.”

“Good. Let’s start right away.”

The agent was a bulky man with blonde curls and when he sat down opposite of Þórirsson, the Jotun eyed him with mild interest and recognition. So it definitely wasn’t the first time that he was being interrogated by him. When he began talking Loki couldn’t concentrate on his words the second he heard the sound of them. “Why is he speaking Jotnar?”

“Because the prisoner refuses to answer any question that is addressed to him in Old Norse.” Vangsness explained and Loki felt his skin crawl when being confronted with such fanaticism. Monsters were born from this set of mind. “This man has no right to refuse or to demand anything. The official and administrative language of this country is Old Norse. Questions will only be asked in Old Norse.”

Loki would have liked to name possible consequences, but there was no time for that. Vangsness nodded and let the agent know via the earpiece that he should continue the questioning in Old Norse. The order was immediately carried out and Þórirsson reacted to the change by casually looking at the glass panel. Was he wondering who was giving the orders? Loki would gladly step out and ask the questions himself, look into his eyes, but that would be a bad idea.

Since the language of most people in Asgard was beneath him Þórirsson remained silent, almost lazily looked at the agent. The arrogance and carelessness struck Loki in worst possible way. He didn’t just want in to ask him himself, no Loki desired to make him feel what Loki had felt. What Thor had felt. “Ask him who ordered the attack on Thor Búrison, the crown prince. His future king. Use these exact words.”

Vangsness sent Loki a quick glance as if to make sure that Loki was serious. One second later he passed the information on and the agent asked the exact question that Loki wanted to hear. Þórirsson reacted as expected. His face was contorted by obvious disgust and he pressed his lips tightly together. Loki wondered if he would be able to keep up that stern stare if somebody was to shoot him. A pity that they couldn’t try. Too gladly would Loki issue a loyal servant a blank cheque to lead Þórirsson out into the backyard and waste a bullet on him.

“Tell him that his family, his wife and his daughter, would escape a lot trouble if he were to talk. Wouldn’t he want that? Be a good father and husband? What kind of person would cause his family unnecessary pain and hardship?”
Once more Vangsness glanced at him, but Loki pretended not to notice. He was staring at Þórirsson, waiting for the revelation that he desperately needed. And Loki would get it. No matter the cost. When the new information was given to him Þórirsson narrowed his eyes, Loki could see his body tensing and yet he wouldn’t open his mouth. Not even to yell or insult them. To declare his undying loyalty for a man he considered his king. A man without soul.

The mention of his wife and kid wasn’t enough, perhaps Þórirsson didn’t believe they were actually willing to act on their threats. Then Loki would hit him with something else, something more real. How he hoped that it would tear him apart. That he would feel a bit like Loki. If that was even possible.

“He is completely locked off from the outside? He has no contact and no idea what is going on outside of his cell?”

“Of course not, your highness.”

“I need a phone or a tablet.”

Loki got what he asked for and searched for the article he had been reading only a few days ago. Written in Old Norse, just to humiliate the other one. It had been written from Jotun perspective, vile, full of accusations and it all but declared Helblindi dead after being poisoned by the royal family. That should do it. “Show him the article. Tell him that if the crown prince’s safety of this country cannot be guaranteed, how can the son a mere Lord be sufficiently be protected.”

They brought the agent the tablet and with absolute carelessness he handed it to Þórirsson while passing on Loki’s words. This time there was a better reaction. Something pure and emotional. The second he had read enough to understand the meaning of the article he slammed the tablet down on the table. When his lips had been a white line only minutes ago, now he was shouting. “That’s a lie! This is not true! You wouldn’t dare!”

His eyes seemed suddenly too big for his face and he bared his teeth. The desperate rage which he saw there gave Loki a little tingle of satisfaction, but it would be so much better if they were talking about someone else.

“Tell him it’s true. Show him pictures of the riots after it became public knowledge.”

Still seemingly without a care in the world the agent grabbed the tablet and finally presented Þórirsson the aftermath of Helblindi’s poisoning. All of them got to watch how panic and cold anger were taking a hold of this man. Now the words were spilling from his lips, accusations, curses and threats. They meant nothing to Loki as long as he didn’t hear who was responsible for the attack on Thor.

“Tell him that the young Lord lives. It was a close call and he did not walk away unharmed. He is in a Jotun hospital, undergoing a surgery that may or may not save his eyesight. Tell him that he would be keeping his prince safe if he were to talk finally. He would not want anything to happen to him again since it turned out to be almost shockingly easy to get to him.”

This time Vangsness’ eyes lingered a bit longer on him than usual, shocked or surprised by the allusion. Then he passed on these words too. They were enough to rob Þórirsson of his sanity. The two men next to him had to hold him down as he screamed in anger and vile, poisonous Jotnar words spilled from his lips, too fast for Loki to understand. Whatever composure this man had had, whatever motivation he had harboured, it had been demolished by a suddenly too real threat against his prince.
For Loki it felt like he was being torn apart. In Þórirsson’s acts and screaming he could sense the same agony and rage that he was feeling himself. Yet at the same time the display disgusted him. Loki wanted to leave and he wanted that despicable creature to tell him who was responsible. Right now there was little chance of getting that answer, so Loki turned away from the one-sided window. “Give him time to think about it. If he isn’t going to give up the others by tomorrow, then maybe it would be a good idea to let him continue thinking about it. Without distractions like food. Thank you, Mr. Vangsness. I need to return to the palace now.”

There was no more discussion or polite words, Loki was done here. On his way back to the car Loki felt the wound on his foot acting up again, but seeing the doctor now wasn’t an option. Loki didn’t feel up to it, he didn’t know if he was ever going to. For now there were so many other things to take care of.

The drive back home passed quicker this time and Loki ignored the stares in the palace just as easily. After opening the doors to his rooms Loki found Thor inside and it was not a surprise. His brother could be so stubborn and it was the last thing Loki needed. Any kind of conversation or discussion. Thor’s presence alone was something he could hardly stomach. “When did everybody stop respecting my privacy?”

“I am not sorry that I cannot be considerate of your desire to be alone when a few hours ago I was afraid to never see you again.” Thor replied drily and his eyes caught Loki’s in a reproachful stare. Not merely enough Thor had no idea what was going on and how he should really feel about his little brother. How it would be the very best for him if Loki disappeared forever. “You come back, refuse to talk and you leave again immediately. Why would you do that? We’ve had the entire secret service looking for you until today.”

“Well, then we should start worrying about the efficiency of the secret service.” Loki muttered absently while taking off his jacket. Another time Loki could feel someone looking at him in disbelief and confusion. Perhaps Thor would even lose his cool and they would end up fighting. Which seemed like a good idea. Like something Loki would be able to handle. Unfortunately Thor eventually sighed and sat back down again. “Can we just… talk? Please? Those were some terrible days and I’m glad that you are back. I want to talk.”

The softness and honesty so audible in Thor’s words felt like needles on Loki’s skin. One million stitches at once. Kindness that felt like blows. Loki would have preferred Thor to harbour a grudge. To yell at him, to hate it. It would be better for both of them. Definitely better for Thor. Nonetheless Loki was standing here, unable to reject the affection that Thor was showing him.

“Alright, but not long. I am tired, I want to go to sleep.”

“You haven’t even seen father yet.” Thor replied with indignation.

“I am not planning on leaving again soon. I will see him at breakfast.” Loki shrugged his shoulders, Odin was another person he tried not to think about.

Thor didn’t hide his frustration, but he also didn’t continue to ask the very same question. “Where were you? Don’t you think I have a right to know?”

“A friend’s place. He’s hardly ever in Asgard. I have a key. If I feel like getting away. That’s all I am going to say about it. It’s nobody’s business but mine.”

Again, no further questions. Thor cut the chase. “What happened, Loki? You should tell, otherwise I am not able to help you. That’s what I want to do. Help you.”
Help him? The monster that was meant to bring about his downfall? “There is nothing you can help me with. Nothing I need help for. I took care of it myself.”

“You used to be a liar so much better than that.” Now there was sadness in Thor’s voice and Loki balled his hands into fists. “I don’t know what you expect of me. I went away for a few days and now I am back. There is nothing I felt the need to talk about.”

Thor opened his mouth, probably to protest, to name all the reasons why Loki was so obviously lying, but a knock on the door saved Loki from hearing that. “I don’t want to see anybody.”

“They’re not here for you, but for me. Just a second.” Thor got up and quickly made his way over to the door. Loki heard him mutter some words of thanks and the door was closing. “There is someone who wants to see you. I am sure he missed you.”

Turning his head Loki saw who Thor was talking about and his whole body went numb. Loki jumped to his feet and searing pain was the direct consequence as he stumbled a few steps, overcome with the desire to get away.

“The poor guy spent an entire day alone here, because nobody thought of him.” Thor was holding Fenris in his arms, gently stroking the puppy’s head.

Loki couldn’t. Not even for a second. “Get the dog out of the room! I don’t want him here!”

The faint smile on Thor’s face froze and completely vanished when their eyes met. Loki had no idea what he looked like, but he felt panicked, afraid and unable to deal with this. “What is wrong?”

“Just get him out of here! I don’t want him anywhere near me!”

“But…” For a moment Thor seemed to be at a complete loss. “Loki, he is yours. Yours and…”

“No!” Loki wouldn’t even have him say it. Then Thor’s expression darkened and he slowly put down Fenrir. “By all the spirits, Loki…” His voice was dropping to a whisper and before Loki could even think of running away Thor was right in front of him. So worried, scared even. Loki felt his hands on his cheeks, stopping him from looking away. “What did he do to you? Did he hurt you?”

“Let go of me, Thor!” Loki wanted to scream, but his words had turned into a pathetic sob.

“Tell me what he did to you, because if he hurt you I am going to kill him.”
Hello everybody,

I know this took ages and I'm sorry, I'll try to not let you wait that long next time

Have fun :)

So many scenarios were playing in front of Thor’s inner eye. One more atrocious than the other. Nothing that he wouldn’t put past Laufey’s son. So furiously had Thor tried to argue against this relationship, to appeal to Loki’s reason and it hadn’t been enough. Loki had put his head right onto the blade of this sword. All too willingly and Thor hadn’t been able to protect him. From whatever Helblindi had done. The man Loki had claimed to be in love with and now he couldn’t even look at their dog anymore. A cute little puppy which was a symbol for their relationship and at the same time it was just a puppy. Adorable with big eyes that made you want to pet it and spoil it. That would be a completely normal, human reaction.

A reaction that Loki didn’t have. No, he was backing away like Thor was holding a weapon in his hand and its only purpose was to hurt Loki. Because he associated it with Helblindi. The mere idea of the man causing Loki pain had Thor wanting to do the same to him. Even now Loki was still trying to move away and Thor wasn’t going to let this go. Not this time. “Loki, tell me what he did. I cannot help you if you don’t tell me.”

“I do not need your help! I need you to leave and take it with you!”

That was too much. Carefully Thor put Fenrir down and then grabbed Loki’s arm. “Stop it right now! I can see that you are falling apart right in front of me! Stop telling me that you don’t need help when it’s obvious that you do! That’s all I am here to do. To make sure that you are fine.”

Loki threw up his hands and pulled himself free from Thor’s grasp. He was staring at him, not avoiding his gaze, but the intensity couldn’t disguise the raw pain within it. “I don’t need you to do anything. You never got much involved in my previous relationships. My engagement is off. That is what you wanted. What everybody wanted, so I guess you should be happy. Now go. I want to be alone. Respect that. Give me some room! By all the spirits you have no right to be here when I don’t want you to!”

His brother pushing him away was nothing completely new, but that didn’t mean the sting of the rejection lessened or that Thor could ever get used to it. In the past he would have given Loki the requested space, he would have lowered his head and backed away. Not really knowing how to respond to Loki’s unforgiving moods. Now they had reached a point where Thor couldn’t do this anymore. Not after Loki’s disappearance and the terrible state he was in. Thor was heading into the same direction, confused and so desperate for Loki to tell him what had happened. So they could work it out, so Loki would be fine and Thor could make the ones responsible pay. In a strenuous and almost ineffective attempt Thor talked slower to convey at least a bit of calm. “I see and the last thing I want is to upset you even more. Just for a single moment try to look at all of this from my perspective. I’ve never been this scared. Do you believe me that? When I got shot there was a moment I thought I was going to die. That my life was over. That feeling seems so very distant now.
Perhaps I was too numb because of the shock, but it didn’t feel like the last couple of days. I was afraid, I didn’t want to die. Not without marrying Jane, not without having kids with her. Not before showing father that I can be a good successor. That I can make him proud. I was terrified and when the doctor had stitched me up and I knew that I was going to be alright, I thought that I would never experience something similar again. The worst and most helpless moment of my life was behind me. Should be rather reassuring? Except no. When you ran away and I had no idea what had happened to you… Going through that was so much worse. Do you believe that I even got one hour of sleep? That I did anything but drifting between imagining all the horrible things that might have happened to you and telling myself that you are fine. That this was just one of your usual trips and that you would be back any second. Now you are back, right in front of me and I am still feeling the same way. I am terrified that you might disappear again. Can you at least tell me that? If I leave you alone and go to sleep that you still will be here tomorrow morning? I am not sure about it and that’s unbearable.”

No sugar coating it. Pure, sometimes almost heinous honesty. The way Loki appreciated it. The way he always spit it out himself, even if it hurt somebody. Even if it hurt Thor. Right now Thor prayed that Loki would decide that they had more love for each other than for anybody else. That brothers didn’t hurt each other.

Having Loki not reply straight away was odd. Usually Loki had been so fast, spitting out words with rapid fire, barely taking the time to breathe and yet he seemed at ease while doing so. Like it was no effort. Now Loki Thor had to wait for his answer. His little brother looked small despite his height, his eyes were still darting around the floor. If it wasn’t so deprived of sense Thor would have assumed him to be afraid of the puppy. There was also something off about the way he was standing just there. Slightly tilted to the side, like his whole body weight was shifted on to one foot.

“Are you done?”

His voice was different now. Calmer, quiet and somewhat detached. No more yelling and it still wasn’t right. “Is that all you have to say? Am I an annoyance to you?”

While shaking his head Loki met his eyes and they were a little clearer now. “No. I heard what you said. I am sorry. I didn’t consider what leaving might do to you. I couldn’t. I am sorry for that.”

It was a chance, something small and when Thor opened his mouth, Loki immediately shook his head to shoot him down. “That’s all I can say. This is something I take care of myself. I don’t need you with this. I’m going to leave again. I’m going to move into the penthouse downtown. I still have to talk to Leah to start organizing things, but I want it done in the next two days. I am leaving the palace. Now could you please leave me alone? There are things that I need to take care of.”

Like this the glimmer of hope vanished again. Not completely. At least he was talking. What he was saying was far from making sense or being sane, but Thor was grateful for little favours. He had to treat lightly. Loki resembled a scared deer in the headlights. One wrong move and he would bolt, run away with no chance to recapture him. “Okay. You are an adult. You can go… live wherever you want. That is your choice. I would only like to know why. You’ve always been happy at the palace. Being close to the family. Me, father, mother…” Thor trailed off when he witnessed Loki’s reaction to his words. How his entire body flinched and then stilled. “Loki?”

There was no response. Loki didn’t even look at him. “I think I would understand if you were leaving to be with him. Even if you were going to Jotunheim. But you said your engagement is over without giving me a reason. After claiming to be in love with him. I do believe you that you are in love with him. Yet you cannot look at his present anymore. You are fleeing from your own home. How am I not supposed to be worried?”
“I cannot stop you from feeling worried. All I can tell you is that you don’t have to. I am fine. I want to be alone for a while. That is something I have missed out on. Now would you please leave me alone? There are a lot of things that I have to take care of.”

The walls were all up and Thor was starting to believe that he couldn’t tear all of them down. At least not now Loki was doing everything to shut himself away from him and the entire family. He would be doing more harm than good if he kept insisting. Alone he wasn’t going to achieve anything. “What about Fenrir?”

This time Loki didn’t flinch. “I don’t care. Just get him out of here.”

Loki knew just as well what that meant as Thor. An engagement gift couldn’t just be discarded of. Fenrir didn’t just belong to Loki. He was Helblindi’s too. “Alright…” Thor mumbled softly and gently picked up Fenrir who hadn’t moved one bit. Without thinking about it Thor petted his fur, which felt so nice and the little dog made a pleased sound. It seemed downright bizarre that somebody would reject an adorable animal like this. “Come here, little guy. We’ll go for a walk. Looking back at his brother Thor told him that he should come to him if he chose his mind and wanted to talk after all. “Anytime. I mean that. Like we use to. Because that hasn’t changed.”

With a heavy heart and a tight throat Thor left the salon and closed the door behind him. Immediately afterwards Thor pulled out his phone and got Heimdall on the line. “I need to talk to Helblindi Ymirson. As soon as possible and personally.”

Which meant that Thor had to leave for Jotunheim and he didn’t know if he dared to do that. Not if there was a chance that Loki could still come around, wanting to talk to him. Thor wouldn’t be able to live with it if he might not be there when that happened.

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“Damn it…” Helblindi cursed and only barely resisted the sudden, frustrated urge to smash the remote control against the wall. Or just anywhere because the probability of actually hitting a chosen target was remarkably low. Instead of reacting like a child Helblindi took a breath and let his thumb run over the buttons. Third row, seven down. This time he actually turned up the volume of the song, not skipping to the next one.

Exhaling loudly Helblindi had another temptation to resist. He wanted to let his head fall back against the cushion, but the doctors had forbidden an quick movements. Leaning forward was a complete no-go. So Helblindi took his time and eventually got to enjoy the comfort of the soft cushion. “Shouldn’t be that hard listening to music.”

“Would be a lot easier if you let Alexa do it.”

Helblindi wished he could think of a way to express how immensely frustrating it was to be startled all the time. Until now his other senses hadn’t improved to balance out the lack of vision. It should not be that hard to hear Býleistr coming into the room, he was not exactly the most silent or discreet person.

“You know that I hate these things. I want to watch TV, not talk to it. That’s just wrong.”

Trying to concentrate on Býleistr’s movements Helblindi could eventually feel him sitting down on the other end of the couch. “You are too old-fashioned. That’s not a good quality for a future king.”

“It has nothing to with old-fashioned that I don’t want a thing in my house that’s going to kill me the very first second the machines raise up against us. Which they will do if we continue to talk to them.”
Helblindi didn’t feel like this type of conversation, but it was still way better than the usual ‘How are you?’ which would come eventually.

“As fun as your ideas about the apocalypse usually are… it would really be much easier for you to use voice command.”

“I don’t like it. I’m not going to use it. I’m perfectly capable of doing it with the remote control. Come on, talk to me about something else. Wait a second, I need to turn down the volume.” Demonstratively Helblindi pointed the remote control at the stereo system and the song got quieter by the second. “Perfect.”

Býleistr smiled or at least Helblindi liked to think that. There was no way to be sure, but they could all need a few smiles. Helblindi wasn’t going to be the one to start.

“I thought you might be bored and I wanted to know how you feel today although you despise when I ask that.”

“I am not bored.”

“How could you not be? Sitting around all day…”

“I don’t need you to sum up all the things that I cannot do at the time. I am not bored. Anything but. I have a lot to think about.” Helblindi wanted to ask him to leave, because as much as Býleistr loved him he didn’t understand him. Not now. He would be dismissive, trying to talk some sense into Helblindi, like he called it and that was unbearable.

A hand was carefully put on his calf, very slowly so the touch wouldn’t startle him. “This is really scary, I know. But the doctors said that everything went down as it should have. Two more days and you’ll be able to take off the pads. You’ll be fine.”

There was too much intensity in these words. Almost like Býleistr didn’t want to convince Helblindi but himself. Helblindi didn’t need any convincing or soothing words. He didn’t need Býleistr being here, lying a hand on his calf, because holding his hand would be too awkward. What Helblindi needed was way simpler. A call from Týr with an explanation why Helblindi hadn’t heard from his fiancé in over a week. The constant darkness surrounding him wasn’t making it easier to deal with the absence and the sting of abandonment. All of this confusion would have already been taken care of if Helblindi wasn’t tied to this couch, his bed or some chair. Reaching into his pocket Helblindi felt for his new phone and his fingers were burning to make another call. Another attempt at reaching him. Doomed to fail. Helblindi liked to tell himself that there was always a 50% chance that Loki would pick up the phone. 50% that he wouldn’t. Until now it had always been the latter 50%.

Býleistr wouldn’t want to hear any of that. For him it was just another hint that Helblindi was losing his mind. Or that the infatuation had got the better of him. Generally Helblindi did not care about what Býleistr thought about his relationship, but he definitely didn’t want him here while trying to get a hold of Loki.

“I am not going to be fine. Not completely. They said as much.”

The grip on him tightened, but not enough to cause even a little bit of pain. Not that it would have made much of a difference. “You don’t know that. You’ve never been a pessimist. Don’t start now.”

“I am not. I’ll need glasses or lenses even in the best case scenario. I can deal with that. I can deal with the darkness. What I can’t deal with is you trying to make yourself feel better about this situation by trying to convince me that I am okay. I don’t need you to do that. I’d like you to leave
me alone now. Is that alright with you?”

How were blind people doing it? Not seeing someone’s face while talking to them was such a tremendous disadvantage. Býleistr wasn’t answering, taking his time, because he could. Because Helblindi couldn’t bloody see him and try to interpret every visible emotion on his face. Helblindi was blind and Býleistr wasn’t saying anything. His hand was still in the exact same place and Helblindi yearned for him to leave, so he could try and call Loki.

“You… I am sorry. I didn’t want to upset you. I am worried about you and I don’t…”

“Can we talk about this later? Please, I am tired. How about you come back for dinner?”

Thanks to the spirits Býleistr didn’t put up a fight and Helblindi was left alone in the darkness around him. After exhaling softly Helblindi pulled out his phone and moved his thumb over the big, clearly defined buttons.

His hands were steady, they always were, but Helblindi disliked it that his heart was going a bit faster than it should. After so many failed attempts he shouldn’t even be nervous, he wasn’t expected Loki to take his call. Which was an utterly strange concept to begin with. Loki’s adoration for him was beyond any doubt. The last time they had seen each other Helblindi had been able to see Loki’s overwhelming worry despite his useless eyes. Now he had seemingly dropped from the edge of the world and Helblindi had gone back to Jotunheim and through surgery feeling painfully alone. His brother’s presence had done little to console him over his fiancé’s absence. Not just physically. Not a call, not a text. Not the smallest sign of a question how he was doing.

Thinking about this didn’t cause him that much pain. It was easily bearable, because the mere idea of Loki turning away from him, especially at this time, made no sense. Helblindi would even go as far as calling it ridiculous.

What he was left with was complete confusion. He was caught up in a situation that he didn’t understand and it was scaring him. Almost as much as the never-ending darkness. Stalling himself for another call that would remain unanswered Helblindi put the phone up to his ear and waited. This time he wasn’t confronted with the never-ending dialling tone. This time his call was cut off.

Helblindi would have stared in disbelief at the phone if he could have. So this was the only sign of life he got after an entire week? After surgery and with still no sign who actually poisoned him. Helblindi wanted to talk to him. It was such a simple thing. A conversation, hearing his voice and have him care.

Loki did care. Nobody knew that better than Helblindi. The way his eyes lit up every time Helblindi smiled at him. Or how his fingers grazed the lines of his tattoo when they were just sitting next to each other.

The very same man simply wasn’t capable ignoring him from one day to the other. Especially not after almost going mad with worry after the initial attack. No, Loki wouldn’t miss out on a single opportunity to talk to Helblindi. If he could, he would be here with him. Taking a deep breath Helblindi to remain calm, so he would be able to calculate his next steps. What were the facts?

Loki wasn’t contacting him although he was supposed to. The most likely consequence was that Loki for some reason could not contact him. Who or what had the means to stop a clever and even more stubborn prince from doing what he wanted to do? What advantage were they trying to gain with that action? Or was there nothing to gain at all and it was merely a question of principle. Considering that forsaken father and brother Helblindi didn’t have to ponder the possibilities too long.
Unconsciously he had balled his hand into a fist and only stopped doing so when the pressure began to hurt. What on earth might they be using to have Loki dancing to their tune? It had to be bad since somebody as fierce couldn’t be tied down easily. Helblindi had worked hard to win his trust and he knew that he could call it his. Of even bigger importance was the fact that Helblindi had his love. So what despicable plan had they possibly come up with to keep Loki away from him?

In the darkness his thoughts were racing and Helblindi cursed it, since it wouldn’t let him get up on his feet, running back to Valhalla to ask Loki what was wrong and to find the creature which was heinous enough to poison him. He could do none of that. For now Helblindi’s world consisted of darkness and the hole left behind by Loki’s absence.

The vibrations beneath his fingers forced Helblindi to stop thinking about the only thing on his mind. For less than a second he allowed the foolish hope that Loki was calling him back. The melody that accompanied the vibrations told another story. Trailing his thumb over the buttons Helblindi eventually answered the call. “Týr, tell me you have news. I swear I am going insane.”

“My prince, I am glad to finally be able to provide you with new information.”

It was torture and the sweetest relief at the same time. “Go ahead. I need to know.”

“I’ve been informed that the lack of public appearances from fiancé was due to a sudden disappearance from the court. According to my sources neither the secret service nor the royal family knew about his whereabouts. The palace managed to keep it under wraps until now, but allegedly the entire family was close to hysterics. Especially his mother. Today he came back to the palace, in a taxi. Without informing anybody, the older brother greeted him the hall, ignoring the protocol. Like this a lot of the staff got to know what was going on. As far as I know your fiancé has refused until now to tell where he has been.”

“What? Why would…” Helblindi tried to grasp the right words and the meaning of what he had just heard. “His family had no idea where he was?”

“Exactly. His brother appeared to be very upset with him.”

“Is there any information about them having a falling-out?”

“Not that I am aware of. There was another incident today though. Your fiancé’s staff is moving some of his personal belongings from the palace to the penthouse in the city. Rumors are that he wants to change his place of residence.”

As he listened Helblindi tried to find within this story some thread that would lead him to right conclusion. To make sense of it. Loki was fine, free to move as he pleased and still Helblindi remained without a sign of life. If it wasn’t for Týr Helblindi ought as well believe him dead. “He is leaving the palace? Why?”

“The reason remains a mystery, my prince, but seemingly he has already left the palace again. Without even having a single meeting with his father or mother.”

It sounded like a falling-out after all. A break-up with his family was nothing that Helblindi particularly minded. Granted, it went against their long-term plans, but he couldn’t pretend that he would not enjoy Loki turning to him and away from the ruthless people who had nothing in common with him. Except that Loki had turned away from him too.

“Thank you, Týr. I have to think about this. Keep me posted. Especially on his parents’ reaction.”

“As you wish, my prince.”
No, not as Helblindi wished. Nothing played out as he wished. The darkness laughed at him and Helblindi wondered if would jeopardize the healing process if he cried beneath the pads. Not that he would, he needed to think, find an explanation why this was happening. What they had done to Loki after sending Helblindi into a hole of darkness.

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“I need you to find her. Discreetly, but instantly. I cannot emphasize enough that time is of the essence. In the old files should be all the information that you need. I want to know where she lives, if she has a family, who she is in contact with, what is her job and who pays her bills. Contact me as soon as you have any results. I expect them rather sooner than later.”

“Of course, your highness.”

Loki hung up and his gaze travelled back to the window, watching the city passing by. It reminded him of a sleeping wolf, ready to bite and devour the second it woke up from his slumber. This time Loki couldn’t be the one taking care of it. He needed to save himself in order to be able to do anything else. Nobody else was going to do it and why should they?

They were going to find Ragna, Loki had made it perfectly clear of great importance that undertaking was. That didn’t mean he knew what to do about her when they had eventually found her. Loki needed to find out what else she knew and who she had told. Then all of them needed to be taken care of and Loki didn’t dare to think about that just yet. Ultimately he would have to and it would be an easier decision than anything related to Doctor Strange.

By the time they arrived at the university Loki felt his throat closing up, but he forced himself to hold his head up high and get out of the car the second it stopped. He made his way to the office without taking a single look around. The secretary paled at the sight of him and moved to stand up, only for Loki to shake his head. “No interruptions from anyone.”

Her eyes darted from Loki to his security detail and her face instantly became a little whiter. Unbothered by that Loki opened the door without knocking. Strange was sitting behind his desk and Loki didn’t miss how his entire body tensed at the sight of him. A shadow ghosted over his face. So this was the reaction he provoked in people who knew. How fitting.

“Your highness, I fear now isn’t a very good time. Office hours start in a moment and I have several students who made an appointment to talk to me.”

“You won’t.” Loki stated firmly. “I need to talk to you.”

“Like I said, now is not a good time.”

“That is not for you to decide. This is not a conversation you want to delay. Under any circumstances.”
Hello everybody,

Somebody has come to bargain ;)

Answers to the comments will come tomorrow, because now I'll drop on my bed and sleep a couple of hours

All his years working as a doctor Stephen had flattered himself that stress more less didn’t exist in his world. Constant pressure, of course, but Stephen had never once buckled under it. No matter what kind of surgery he had been wrapped up in, Stephen’s hands had been steady, his heartrate slow and his thoughts were in perfect order. More than once people had reproached him of being cold-blooded. Not very helpful in a romantic or amical relationship, but it had made him such a terrific surgeon. Also it had nourished Stephen’s arrogance. Before his accident Stephen had been sure that nothing could ever scare him enough to lose composure. Or scare him at all.

The prospect of never working in medicine again and being completely useless very harshly cured him of that very wrong impression. Still, one life-threatening accident wasn’t enough to thoroughly change one’s personality. Stephen still had that stoic expression in all kind of situations and he did not panic. That simply did not happen to him. Therefore it should be way more worrying that his heart was racing right now. Not faced with a tumour or his whole in shards spread out on the carpet.

No, in front of him was a young man. About 15 years younger than Stephen himself. Of fair appearance, wit and nice manners. There should be nothing scary about him. Except that even after half his life working in medicine Stephen had never seen a person more desperate and that’s what made the other one dangerous. His sweaty palms and the irregular beat of his heart were clear signs that Stephen didn’t know just how far the prince would go now. Pushed with his back against the wall.

Was there a worse moment to be a realist who didn’t believe in anything else but hard facts or reason? When you had a secret that you didn’t want anybody to know about, then you had to make sure that there was nobody else who could possibly spill the beans. There were more than one way to achieve that, but only one to be absolutely sure. Unfortunately Stephen took the prince for the kind of person who wanted to be absolutely sure.

Stephen had dreaded this moment, he had hardly got any sleep during the last two nights. His weariness had even got so far that at one time he had got up in the middle of the night to start his laptop and search for the next flight to New York or London. Eventually he had slipped back beneath the covers, because running away just didn’t sit well with his pride. Stephen’s greatest flaw. Also he liked to believe that he could make a case for himself.

Ever so calmly Stephen put his pen down and kept his eyes on Loki. “I highly disapprove of the way you try to force this conversation on me, but since you are so determined to ignore to the basic rules of politeness I guess I have no choice. Am I right that you’ve already told my secretary to send my students away?”
“That has been taken care of.”

Obviously. Closing the paper in front of him Stephen gestured at the chair in front of his desk. “Take a seat, your highness.”

The prince walked forward and Stephen could immediately tell that something was wrong with him. Apart from the obvious. The way he walked. His face remained stoic exactly like he wanted it to, but Stephen could tell that he was in pain. Physically. This kind of limp quite easy to identify. At least for an experienced doctor like Stephen. A good opportunity to get the first word in. “Are you hurt?”

“That is not of importance right now.”

“I disagree. You cannot walk into a doctor’s office and expect him not wanting to do something about that.”

Not moving a muscle in his face the prince disagreed. “I am not here for an exam or an advice.”

Stephen would be damned if he immediately ceded to play by the prince’s rules. After getting up from his chair Stephen walked around his desk, perfectly aware of those green eyes following his every move. “Take off your shoe.”

“Pardon?”

“I am your doctor and you are in pain. I have moral and a professional obligation and now take off your shoe.” Stephen was pleasantly surprised that his voice sounded as demanding and calm as ever.

Loki remained immobile for a couple of seconds and Stephen honestly didn’t know how he would react. Finally the prince slipped off his shoe and sock while Stephen repressed a sigh of relief. Instead he quietly watched a nasty wound coming to surface. The very first glance already revealed to Stephen that it needed stitches and cleaned instantly or the prince would face a serious infection. “It’s rather reckless that you have not come here earlier. I will get a colleague to clean it and stitch you up. We also need to get you antibiotics.”

“No.”

“Your highness, you’re risking infection. Even blood poisoning.”

“If it needs to be done, then you are going to do it. Nobody else.” His insistence was cold and to Stephen’s great displeasure, it was unreasonable. Which was deeply worrying.

“You are well aware that this is a bad idea. No, more than a bad idea, it would be stupid. I have a tremor in both hands, it took years of training for me to pick back up a pencil and only 1 out of 10 people and can figure out my handwriting. Me trying to stitch you up would be painful and leave a scar. You don’t want that.”

“It’s not up to you to tell me what I want. You are the doctor and you are of the opinion that this needs to be done, so you are going to do it. Here.”

Stephen felt tempted to run down all the reasons why this was the worst idea he could have come up with, but he should probably save his debating skills for later when his own head might be put on the line. “Alright, if you insist on being unreasonable. None of the things I need are here though.”

“Someone will get them.”

The prince ordered a member of his security team to get Stephen’s list from one of the labs and in the
meantime they waited in silence. Stephen tried to look into the prince’s head to figure out if the danger was as real as reason told him it was. Needle and thread couldn’t be delivered fast enough. It was once more a relief when they were ready to go and Stephen still didn’t quite believe that he was supposed to do this. “Just once more for the record – this is stupid.”

“Just get on with it.”

Not bothering to swallow his sigh Stephen sat back down and pulled the prince’s foot into his lap, starting to disinfect the wound. “Did you step on glass?”

The corner of Loki’s mouth twitched and Stephen wondered how long he was going to pretend that this wound didn’t hurt terribly. “That’s irrelevant.”

Stubborn. Another character trait that definitely didn’t work in Stephen’s favour. His fingers were trembling and for once Stephen wondered the slight shaking of his fingers right now was only due to the tremor.

***

There was a frown on the doctor’s forehead, a testament to his concentration. Loki was watching him carefully, still searching for the right words to say or for the courage to say anything at all. After having sufficiently cleaned the wound Strange picked up the needle and then looked up to meet Loki’s eyes. His throat was tightening unpleasantly.

“Do you really want a scar from this?”

“It does not matter. Go ahead.”

“Fine. You better grit your teeth, your highness.”

Loki didn’t do that, but the first sting of the needle piercing his skin had him hiss in pain. Not the worst feeling. Preferable to everything else that was going on. Maybe no was the right time to talk. The pain could help. “Why did you tell me?”

Strange didn’t look up, he was professional and continued his work. “Because you have a right to know.”

“I want you to be more specific.”

Actually Loki didn’t want him to, but it was necessary. To understand to other one, to figure out if he could trust him. If such a thing was even possible.

“I asked you what you believed in and given that, how was I supposed to stay silent? I saw you sitting at his bed. I was never known for good bedside manner and I tend to stay away from patients, but it was impossible to miss your affection for your fiancé. When I found out that he was your brother I felt a moral obligation to tell you. I’m not going to pretend that I didn’t play the thought of keeping it to myself. It would have made everything much simpler. For every party involved.” For a second the doctor’s eyes glanced at him and it took Loki a strong effort to not look away.

So once more it came back down to Helblindi. As always. Because Loki had made the unforgivable mistake of letting him become too important. Which made him a hypocrite since he had been preaching for all his life that nothing could ever come before Asgard. Not family, not love, not lust. Helblindi was all three of those and it had Loki shaking.

He wasn’t here for this. Loki had to come to a decision concerning the doctor. There was something
that he had said, it was making Loki’s skin crawl. “Is there another moral obligation that you might have?”

Loki heard the edge in his own voice and Strange did too. This time he didn’t immediately look back down. They nothing but stared at each other in silence. Strange had a stern face or at least Loki thought so, because he could not remember ever seeing him smile. The sternness was still present, but he was Loki thought that he could also make out something else. Was he imagining it? Was the doctor afraid of him? He should be, anything else would be unreasonable. Loki wondered how he saw him. Strange was the only person who knew. The only one who had not ripped his own soul apart. What did Loki look like to him?

“I am not a liar. I’ve made myself unpopular before for not telling people what they want to hear. I’m telling you the same I have before. I am not going to say something different now. I am your doctor. I am bound to patient confidentiality. You are my patient. Everything you’ve ever shared with me or any data that I happen to know because I am your doctor, it’s safe with me. The situation is actually that simple.”

Simple was a word that had long lost all of its meaning. Loki’s life itself had become complicated and ugly. Twisted. The needle was slipped beneath his skin and Loki gritted his teeth. “And you don’t feel the need to share the truth you have discovered with anybody else? You’ve shared it with me.”

“You are the only one who is concerned. The only one who has a right to know. It’s nobody else’s business.”

The doctor was lying to him. Despite his careless and rough attitude Loki had always sensed that Strange had a clear idea of right, wrong and honour. Strange definitely could think of several people who definitely needed to know about the monster that was smuggled into the royal family. A cuckoo to push the eggs out of the nest.

“Nobody’s business but mine.” Loki weighed these words on his tongue and they felt right, but could they also be reality. Not without big sacrifices and maybe injustice. “Do you really believe that? That there is nobody else but me who has a right to know.”

Strange was holding his foot in his hand. Could he feel his heartbeat through it? Could he tell that Loki was shaking on the inside? That he was so incredibly scared of Strange despite the coldness that he was putting in his voice. The doctor continued to focus on his work, not looking up at Loki. Which didn’t stop Loki from seeing his face. The thin, straight line that was formed by his lips which were white.

“Who am I to make that decision, your highness?”

“It is your decision to make, because you are the one who knows.”

The next sting of the needle was searing and Loki’s eyes fell closed for a second as he breathed through it.

“It’s not a decision I want. I have never wanted any of this.” Strange sounded calm, unusually soft and Loki thought that maybe fear and despair took different forms within anyone.

Neither of them had wanted any of this. It had been thrust upon them and Loki told himself to not feel close or connected to the doctor. He might be the only person Loki could talk to, because he knew. If Loki wanted to continue with his life nobody could knew except for himself. “We are far from wanting at this point. It is hard for me to believe that you don’t think there is someone else who
should know. That there isn’t some kind of moral obligation as you have pointed out yourself.”

“Are you referring to the young Lord of Jotunheim?”

It could not be a coincidence that he didn’t call him Loki’s fiancé nor his brother. How Loki would love to take away a few of his titles. “As you’ve said, you saw me sitting at his bed. You must be aware that the nature of our relationship is sexual.”

Strange stopped in his movements, not because he was shocked by Loki’s confession, he could not be. Rather by Loki’s loss of control. His voice had lost most of his firmness in that single phrase. Exactly what he hadn’t wanted. What he had tried to avoid so hard.

The bright eyes that looked at him were filled with emotion. Sadness and pity. Another thing that Loki did not want. “You are engaged. It would be only reasonable to assume that.”

“And still you do not feel a moral obligation to tell him that he is in an incestuous relationship?”

Slowly Strange lowered his gaze as if he was only now starting to think about that. Nonetheless he was not scared to look up again and bluntly asked a question that he had no right to ask. “Are you planning on continuing this relationship?” Actually he no right to answer a prince’s question with another question. Then again, Strange was the one person who knew that Loki wasn’t a real prince. He had been clad in royal robes, given the finest education, trained to know the protocol and with the manners of the court. A beautiful costume that couldn’t change what lay underneath.

Yet Loki wanted to tell him to know his place. Instead of doing that Loki simply shook his head as an answer to his question. The truth was that he had already ended this relationship, it was over and he still wasn’t able to say this out loud to Strange. Loki wanted it to be different.

Feeling the pain of the needle coming over him again was a surprise and Strange continued to speak in a calm manner. “Then what need is there to let him know? What good would it do?”

Right, what good would it do? None. Except that for one single and so simple argument. The right to the truth. Something so vague and yet so fundamental. Did someone have to tell Helblindi since he had a right to truth due to his personal involvement? Or perhaps Strange really did not care. After all Helblindi was a stranger to him.

“All of the implications were there. The underlying threat like the blatant fear. Stephen couldn’t imagine that the prince felt the same terror as him. At least not right now. This was a mess, like the scar that Stephen was producing right now. Both of them had no idea what they were doing.

“When I found out there was only one person I could possibly talk to. You. Even then I didn’t make the decision easy for me. I considered keeping it to myself. I did not. I told it the only person who I think should know. I am aware that you are in caught up in your personal tragedy and that you have to make some important decisions. I am under no illusions about what this could mean for me. That alone is a good enough reason for me to respect my responsibilities. Which I would have done either
way. I want no part in this.”

Stephen was telling the truth and he was pretty confident that the prince could sense that. Honesty was a good thing in Stephen’s position, but it might not be enough if the prince decided to better be safe than sorry. The calmness, the slow way he said his words without any passion at all, it was reeking of desperation.

“I am deeply sorry that you were pulled into this.”

This was the moment to keep one’s mouth shut. Something Stephen had always been terrible at. “So what kind of insurance are you going to need? Anything that you would find acceptable?”

The prince remained silent and Stephen tried to remember what he had thought when he had lost control over his car. When he had realised that he was going to have an accident. Stephen hadn’t thought of anything that moment. Maybe except for ‘Shit!’ Thinking back Stephen believed that he hadn’t been afraid. It had all happened too fast. Now time had been severely slowed down and Stephen wasn’t far away from being paralysed with fear. What would happen as soon as he had finished his terrible job at stitching him up? Only one thing was for sure, Stephen would not allow the prince to leave without an answer. Without knowing what was going to happen to him.

“I don’t think there is any way for me to feel reassured or safe ever again.”

If the prince said that right to his face, he might as well just swing the axe. But Stephen would make damn sure that the prince was looking at him while doing so. Time for him to ask the question that was hovering over his head like Damocles’ sword. “You did not come here for me to give you a permanent scar. You are an impossible situation and if I were in your position I would try to tie up all loose ends. The loose end here is me, because I have information that you want for yourself for very understandable reasons. That makes me a problem. Have you thought about taking care of me? As a problem?”

They looked at each other like in a twisted game of who would break eye contact first. The prince’s foot in his hand did not move, Stephen thought that his skin felt kind of cold. He could see the prince swallowing softly before answering. It was one single word without sharpness. “Yes.”

Of course he had. Self-preservation had to always come first that was what made them human. The moment had come to start bargaining. “You chose me for a reason. You’ve said yourself that you needed somebody who would work for you, not for your family. Someone you could trust. Have I done anything up to this moment that makes you think I am not worthy of your trust?”

“Back then I didn’t expect that I would have to trust you with something this big.”

That made sense and it definitely didn’t work in Stephen’s favour. “I see, but your word would be enough for me and I hope that mine could be enough for you.”

Only now the prince turned his head away and Stephen felt like his sentence was decided upon this very second. “Even if I were to trust you with this, if I was willing to put my life in your hands… How could you return the favour? You know what I am. My word does not mean anything.”

So it came down to the ancient words of some wise men that Stephen couldn’t discard completely, but which he wasn’t going to let dictate his way of living. “It is still my decision who I am going to give my trust.”

The prince’s eyes narrowed and for the very first time he seemed to be angry which didn’t make much sense. “I am a barn-sikja. You discovered that. You asked me about the trúa. You know what
it means. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

“Alright, I know what is written down and just like any other religious or philosophical text I refuse to agree with everything that is in on principal. You were born, raised, you grew up and your personality was formed. I do not believe that everything changed about you the moment you realised that you have different parents.”

There was more to it, of course, but Stephen had to try to start somewhere. The prince exhaled loudly and then shook his head. “I must have always been this way. Does a monster think of itself as a monster? I don’t think so. I guess I have never known right from wrong.”

This was so far beyond Stephen’s comfort zone. He didn’t know a thing about psychology or psychiatry. During his entire career he had always tried to stay as far away as possible from these departments. A brain aneurysm or a broken spine would be so much easier to deal with. Mangled mines weren’t Stephen’s expertise. Just because he knew one when he saw one didn’t mean he knew what to do with it.

“Okay, so what do you think about me? What do you think about my part in all of this? I want to know?” Stephen was going with his gut here and it could go so horribly wrong. Still, he felt like he had to go with his very first impression of the prince. Matter of principle.

The prince kept looking at him and finally Stephen could make out a bit of softness in his features. “I like you. I’ve always liked you. I know that you have nothing to do with it. You aren’t involved and I want to keep it this way, because… it’s not fair. You are a good man and you shouldn’t have to deal with any of that.”

It was the first time tonight that Stephen felt like smiling. “See? You do know the difference between right and wrong?”

Despite opening his mouth the prince was at a loss for words. “That’s… something different.”

“No, it’s not. You know the only way to make absolutely sure that I will never tell anyone is to kill me, but you won’t do that, because you are a good person. Because your personality doesn’t suddenly change after you found out who slept with whom. You know what to do. You are not going to rely on threats and intimidation like your father.”

A very noticeable flinch went through the foot in his hand. Out of a sudden the prince was staring at him with a completely new intensity. “What did you just say? What did he do”?

Shortly Stephen pondered the idea of remaining silent, to make sure the prince stayed calm, but what was the use of it? So he kept stitching him up and told him what had happened so soon after he had revealed the truth to the prince. About the strange, unsettling man at his door who had told him that it was better to keep his mouth shut. Not explicitly threatening him, but alluding to possible consequences anyway. With every word that Stephen voiced the prince’s face became more sombre. Eventually Stephen could feel him shaking and it had nothing to do with fear.

“Laufey sent this man?”

“He said as much.”

The prince balled one hand into a fist and smashed it against the armrest of his chair. Then he gritted his teeth. “That is not fair. You are not involved. He has no right to…. He… I will not allow that.”

A bit confused Stephen raised an eyebrow. “You will not allow what?”
“You have nothing to do with his wrongdoings. You were simply smart enough to figure them out. You should not be involved in this. I’m not going to allow this. He’ll be sorry for ever sending someone to bother you.”

Stephen tried his best to not show a treacherous smile. “Are you saying that you want to protect me, your highness?”

Again he was being stared at, as if the prince would have never associated the word ‘protection’ with him. “You were the only one who thought that I deserved the truth. You don’t deserve to be punished for that. I promise nothing like that is ever going to happen again.”

Was this real? How far could you go from ‘I don’t know if I can let you continue breathing’ to ‘I’ll protect you from the ones who might cause you harm’? Stephen had no idea, but he could feel the sincerity. “If you give me your word, your highness, I will gladly believe in it and I will give you mine.”

“That would make you the only person that I can trust.”

“Why not? There has to be someone, right? You believe your life is at stake. Mine’s too. So how about the two of us trust each other since there is nobody else we can rely on in this situation?”

It was as desperate as a person could get, but nevertheless sincere and Stephen was sure that the prince was aware. Finally Loki pulled his foot from his grip and straightened up in his chair. “You will not tell a soul and I will make sure that the Lord of Jotunheim and nobody else will ever bother you again. Do we have an agreement?”

“Yes, your highness.”

They shook hands and not another word was said, because they already knew. Eventually Loki let him resume his messed up job and only spoke up again in a hushed voice to make a surprising demand. “I need every single file that you’ve inherited from Doctor Jørgensen.”

“None of them says anything about your…”

“I know. I need them anyway.”

“Whatever you want, your highness.”

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Swallowing the antibiotics Loki sat down in the backseat of the car, breathing easy for the first time in days. He would have liked that feeling to last longer than a few minutes. Until he made the mistake of not simply deleting Helblindi’s audio message but listening to it.

“I swear if you don’t call me back this time I will consider that a call for help. Give me a sign of life or I’ll take all of Jotun forces and march into Valhalla. Why have you left the court to live in the penthouse? Are you being threatened? Blackmailed? Is you ignoring me meant to protect me in some way? I need information, Loki or I’ll draw my own conclusions. Call me.”

Where did he know that from? Loki hadn’t even sat one foot into the penthouse and Helblindi knew about his decision to move there. Someone had told him. Someone at the palace.
Shifting the blame

Chapter Notes

Hello everybody,

Let’s continue with the madness. Have fun :)

The soft pressure of the doctor’s touch disappeared from Helblindi’s head and his eyes instantly slid shut again. By now he was so used to keeping them closed that having them open felt strange and rather unpleasant.

“Everything looks good, my prince. I still recommend a few more days of complete rest for both eyes. For our next appointment I will prepare a selection of contact lenses.”

Helblindi hinted at shaking his head. “No. The idea of lenses is freaking me out. I’m not going to put anything in my eyes. I want glasses.”

“Of course, your highness. Whatever you prefer.”

None of this. Helblindi preferred none of this. “Glasses.”

“I will bring a selection, my prince. Am I allowed to excuse myself?”

“Yes, thank you, doctor.”

As the doctor’s steps sounded further away with every second Helblindi tied up the blindfold behind his head.

“Are you sure? You would get used to them. I guess it would cost a bit of an effort the first time, but then nobody would be able to tell the difference. You would look like you did before.”

“What is your obsession with the way I look? I don’t care. My stomach is twisting when I think of lenses. It’s not going to happen.”

“I am sorry.” Býleistr sounded sheepish and Helblindi was tempted to tell him that there was nothing to forgive. Expect that all the talking had worn him out. Words, words and they meant nothing. Complete emptiness.

“I don’t really know what to say. I want to make you feel better about this, but I guess that’s kind of… a foolish attempt. How could you feel better about it? Still you must understand that I don’t feel good just watchign you sitting here, being hurt and unhappy. I feel like I have to do something. I want to help you. Could you just try and let me do that?” It was nothing new that Býleistr felt the need to take care of him, to act like the big brother when he wasn’t. The only thing that took Helblindi slightly aback was the unusual softness in his tone. Like he was really making an effort to be whatever Helblindi needed when he had no idea what that was. Or maybe he had and he simply didn’t want to accept that. Helblindi still didn’t have the power, nor the will to think about it too hard.

Standing up from his chair Helblindi used his hand to orientate himself in the room, letting it slide along the back of the couch. He was immensely grateful for Býleistr not trying to help him. After he
had sat down on the couch, which was definitely more comfortable than the chair, Helblindi decided that he owed his brother some kind of answer. “There is nothing you can do to cheer me up.”

“But someone else can?” Softness could turn to bitterness so quickly.

Helblindi didn’t lie. Especially not to his family. “I still haven’t heard from him yet.”

“By all the spirits, it’s time to stop this madness.”

Madness. The right word to describe this.

Rather helplessly Helblindi moved his head when he heard Býleistr moving around. He almost jumped when his brother grabbed his hand that was lying in his lab. Since he hadn’t felt any shifting on the couch Helblindi believed that Býleistr was kneeling in front of him.

“I know that what you did, you did for Jotunheim. Because all you ever do is for Jotunheim and Jotunheim only. That’s why I would love you even if you weren’t my brother. Like all of the country loves you. Because you are the most precious asset of our home. Nonetheless you can’t close your eyes to what is happening. You held out your hand and they answered with poison. There is no way to reconciliation or working together.”

Words that you didn’t want to hear always sounded even more bitter when they were true. Except that there was a big part that Býleistr was happily ignoring. “Loki didn’t have a hand in what happened to me.”

Býleistr’s hand was squeezing Helblindi’s too tightly. “Shall we run down the facts of what happened? Because you seem only vaguely interested in their attempt to kill you.”

It was obvious that Býleistr wanted to rile him up and it was working despite Helblindi having so many other, more important things on his mind. “I know what happened. The usurper and the oaf took matters into their own hands. It was the most efficient way to break up the engagement. I haven’t heard from Loki since I’ve left Valhalla. He has moved out of the palace. They clearly hindered him from talking to me.”

By now Býleistr’s nails were digging into Helblindi’s skin. “Or their plan failed and there is no more reason to keep pretending.”

Stubbornness was a trait that ran in their family and sometimes it made them collide harshly. Helblindi still didn’t feel like giving the long and detailed explanation that he had given so many times before while trying to make his family understand. This time he settled for a single phrase.

“He is in love with me.”

“He is a Búrison.”

“His name doesn’t mean anything when it comes to this.”

“It means everything. You’ve been lured into a trap and you still refuse to see it. When they almost killed you.”

“There will be consequences, but first I need to know what happened to my fiancé. You don’t believe that anything about this can be sincere and I don’t have to convince you. You’ll see eventually.”

Finally Býleistr let go of him. “So does that mean you are just going to sit here and do nothing? Tell
our people that they shouldn’t be upset about them trying to kill you!”

“I am so tired of trying to make you understand. For now we should just…” His phone went off and it gave Helblindi goose bumps. He had not heard that ringtone in a while and it was definitely overdue. “Leave me alone, please.”

Helblindi couldn’t hear him move a single muscle. “That’s him, right?”

“This is going to be a private conversation, that’s why I am asking you to leave.”

His brother wasn’t moving and Helblindi couldn’t risk missing this call. Unfortunately storming out and slamming doors wasn’t an option when you were blind. He would fight it out with Býleistr later. Now Helblindi answered the call with a nervous, almost uneasy feeling in his stomach. “Hey. What took you so long? How are you doing? What’s going on?”

“I want to keep this short of simple.” Everything about that statement was wrong. The lack of greeting, the flat tone which was nothing like Loki. Most importantly though, it should not be Helblindi asking how he was doing. Loki was the one sitting next to his bed with tears in his eyes.

“Where are you? What is going on?”

The same flat voice answered without acknowledging anything that Helblindi had said. “I am sorry that I have to do this in this impersonal way, but I have too much on my plate right now to personally come to Jotunheim. I am calling you to tell you that I am breaking off our engagement and our relationship.”

It was too bizarre to have Helblindi feel anything but surprise. Not shock or panic. Something was happening that he didn’t understand. “Loki, what are you doing?”

“I don’t owe you any other explanation than I do no longer want to marry you. I do hope that we can continue an amical relationship for the sake of our homes and the entire country.”

“Is someone holding a gun to your head?”

“I wish you a quick recovery from your surgery, my Lord.”

“What? Loki, wait!”

His fiancé’s more casual than cold voice was replaced by the dial tone and Helblindi slowly lowered the phone, trying to process what had just happened when too much information had just rained down on him. After his next deep breath Helblindi took a step back from all the emotions that were starting to sprout beneath the surface, only seconds away from breaking through. What had just happened? Facts only. Loki had ended their romantic relationship and engagement. In a very detached and stale way which was nothing like Loki at all. He had called him ‘My Lord’. The very same man who had redrawn all of Helblindi’s tattoos with his fingertips while staring at him in awe. Who had held on to him like he was holding on to life when they had been wrapped up around each other. Who had screamed and pleaded for help when Helblindi had fallen to the ground, because he could remember that now.

They were an item and Helblindi knew what the trúa meant to Loki. No lies, but complete trust. Loki wouldn’t come up with some obscure plan without letting him in on the details. Without telling him everything. More importantly so, Loki would not end their relationship. So what were they doing to him to make do this? Were they threatening to do a better job at poisoning Helblindi this time? Even then, the Loki he knew would probably curse their names and then come right to him.
That was the strangest thing. Loki knew about Helblindi’s eyes, he had been scared. Loki should have been here with him for quite some time now.

“What’s going on? What did he say?”

Urgency and impatience. Quite the contrast to Loki’s complete lack of emotion.

“He ended our engagement.”

Býleistr sounded surprised and definitely relieved which was enough to push Helblindi’s buttons. “About time our ancestors answered my prayers.”

“It does not make sense. The main purpose of our engagement was to improve the relationship between Valhalla and Jotunheim. Why would he suddenly give that up?”

“Because you survived. They lured you to Valhalla with the engagement and tried to kill you. You survived and they know that they will not get a second chance. No more use for the engagement…”

Helblindi did not have the time to become angry, he needed to find out what this was all about. “I am not going to explain to you again why Loki had nothing to do with it.”

“You’ve never had a naïve moment in your life, so why do you refuse to see the obvious now? They are one family! The family that stole the throne. Your throne. There is no way they would ever let you inside their secret circle. Even if your relationship was real, which I don’t believe, he would always choose his family over you. Because you are Jotun, one of us. They tried to kill you and until now it seems that you are not even interesting in forcing them to face the consequences. To me it looks like you are caught in a trap and refuse to get out.”

Trapped. Yes, Helblindi felt trapped. In the darkness surrounding him and being bound to the tiny space of his rooms. It was time to get out of here, to take care of things. Talk to Loki. “Oh, there will be consequences. That’s something you can be sure of.”

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Bloodtype: 0 negative

Eye colour: Green

Hair colour: Black

This was the only part Loki could read without his stomach turning. Evidently a lot of allergies ran in the Ymirson family and Loki had been tested for them as an infant. Of course he had no memories of it, but he didn’t need to. It was there right in front of him. Black letters on white paper. Written on a type writer. Almost 27 years ago. By a man that Loki had always admired and felt deep affection for. Now that sentiment had been replaced with disgust and anger.

Closing the file Loki tossed it into the crackling fire without a second thought. He did not bother to watch it going up in flames, but instead opened the next one from the file. Nothing revealing this time, but Loki wasn’t going to take any risks. Another file found its end in the fire and instead of continuing to browse through the remaining one Loki picked up the entire pile and gave it to the fire. He wished that it would also burn away all his knowledge of the things written down in them.

At least he had now the safety of having destroyed the only existing hard evidence. All he had to do now was sitting here and wait until it had completely disappeared. If only reality would disappear right with it. Then Loki could go right back to…
As the fire consumed the files Loki thought of the last time he had been sitting in front of a fireplace. It had been with Balder. Something that could have been a pleasant memory and now it was tainted forever by his mother pulling the strings and pursuing more than just the idea of having Loki in a stable relationship with a good person. Balder would have been the most perfect spouse for a king, not just a prince.

The king that his mother wanted him to be.

“How did the two of you imagine this? How was this supposed to happen?”

The throne was Thor’s birth right. It could not be taken away from him. So what was the plan? To discredit him, so he would have no other chance than to renounce the crown? Or to kill him. That would be easier and create only a tiny little mess if you did it right. Why should people who didn’t care about their decaying soul shy away from killing an innocent person for their sacred right? If you were capable of creating a Barn-svíkja, then why shouldn’t you consider murdering your own child. The one you didn’t want. The one you called a mistake, although he had nothing to do with your own cruelty and baseness. When he was completely innocent.

A radical had already tried to kill Loki’s brother All Loki needed was confirmation on who had given the order, then he would finally have definitive proof against his parents. Then he could protect Thor like he owed him. If that forsaken Þórirsson were finally to talk. Loki played the thought of calling Vangsness and tell him to do everything that was necessary to make the guy talk. Turn off the video cameras for 15 minutes and let your imagination run free. Members of the secret service definitely had a lot of ideas for the man who had shot the crown prince.

Just one call. That’s all it would take. Loki would give it another day. Let that piece of shit wallow in the misery that Loki had bestowed on him.

For a while Loki kept sitting where he was, staring into the flames and wishing they could burn away more than just the physical proof of his heritage. If it could help him to forget, would he jump right in there? It would not change what was lying underneath. His flesh would remain Jotun and his soul empty, non-existent.

When the fire had eventually burned down Loki got up to his feet, his gaze traveling across the penthouse. It felt unfamiliar, but at least Loki could breathe, something he hadn’t been able to do in the palace. He took a shower to get ready for bed, which meant lying awake all night. Right now he wasn’t even meant to get as far.

His phone ringing had Loki flinching. It usually meant bad news. At least it was Leah and not someone that Loki had nothing to say to anymore.

Sitting down on his bed Loki answered the call while longing for some hours of sleep. Actual sleep.

“Leah, I’m listening.”

“Your highness, I am sorry to bother you at this hour.”

“It’s okay. What is going on?”

“I’ve received several calls from Tony Stark today. He was asking again to get into contact with you.”

“I’ve made my stance on that very clear, so why are you bothering me with it?”
“I thought you should know that he is in Valhalla and he left the address of the hotel he is staying in.”

That man continued being a pain. When the rest of the world would think twice about coming to Asgard at the moment, he made himself very comfortable and probably thought he could score with Loki while he was here.

“Thank you, Leah.”

“Good night, your highness.”

After the conversation had ended Loki’s phone buzzed and he received Leah’s text with the hotel address. Best place in town, naturally. Tossing the phone aside Loki stretched out on the bed. What did that man expect? For all he knew Loki was still in a relationship. Was he supposed to go over there and sleep with him? Two seconds later that very same thought didn’t seem so absurd anymore. Having somebody touch him to simply change the fact that the last person he had been intimate with had been his brother.

Erase that memory, clean it off his skin.

Loki was suddenly overcome by the desire to do just that. Maybe he would feel like less of a freak then. Desire was chased by the guilt. The memory that he was trying to wash off was gorgeous. Every time Helblindi had touched him Loki had revelled in the sensation. Thinking back Loki found himself yearning for the firm grip on his hips, feverish kisses and a hand in his hair. Then yearning mingled with disgust for feeling this way in the first place. Disgusted by himself for not feeling more disgusted by what he did. Grabbing a pillow Loki pressed it against his mouth and nose and screamed.

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Jane had been angry with him for leaving her behind in Asgard. She was a smart woman, of course she knew that Thor was doing something not entirely safe and she wanted to go with him. No chance, Thor was having none of that. He wasn’t going to endanger one person he loved to protect another.

Nothing was going to happen, they had taken all the security measures. Both sides. For a simple talk. Impatiently Thor tapped his fingers against the table top. Damn that guy for letting him wait now. Thor had come out all the way to Svartálfar, Helblindi merely needed to drive from one city to another. Now he was already late and Thor tried his best to not get angry.

The bleak conference room didn’t make him feel much better. Another ten minutes passed and then the door was finally pushed open. Thor instantly got up to his feet and his stomach dropped. Just like him Helblindi had brought two security details. Of course they would not talk alone in a room.

What Thor hadn’t expected was that one of them had to gently guide Helblindi along by having a hand on his arm. Those famous eyes were covered by a black blindfold. Within seconds Thor tried to remember everything that Loki had said about Helblindi’s state. Surgery on his eyes had been mentioned several times, but since Helblindi had returned to Jotunheim and Loki’s breakdown, no information whatsoever had come forward.

Had the surgery gone wrong? Was he blind? Had he come to talk to Thor regardless?

“My Lord.” Thor’s throat was dry already as Helblindi sat down on the chair that his bodyguard had led him to.
“Your highness.”

None of them was going to ask the security to leave, so they could start right away. “How are you doing?” Thor had not been interested beforehand, but he felt like he should ask now.

“Spare me the false pleasantries. I thought about taking the blindfold off to not give you the satisfaction of seeing what you have achieved, but I decided to not jeopardize my healing process because of that. I would have never agreed to this meeting if it wasn’t for one reason. What is your fucked-up family doing to my fiancé?”

Taken aback Thor sent his plans to not lose his composure right out of the window. “As far as I know he is not your fiancé anymore.”

“And who is responsible for that?”

“That’s exactly why I am here. After the last time my brother went to talk to you, he disappeared for almost a week. When he came back he was distraught, not himself. Acting in a way he hasn’t during his whole life. My brother is falling apart right in front of me and I want to know what happened to cause this. Whatever you told him or whatever you did to him.”

Not seeing his eyes was such a disadvantage. How was he supposed to see and analyse his reactions? Well, Helblindi’s hand was balled into a fist, there was that. “The last thing your brother said to me was that he loved me. Then I don’t hear from him, only for him to call me and tell me that our engagement is off. We both know that I am not the one responsible. He was getting his bags ready to follow me to Jotunheim and then he cancels our engagement. Did he find out how you did this to me?” Helblindi gestured at his eyes. “Did you need to put him in check? What are you using to get him under control? What are you threatening him with?”

Sometimes Thor longed to be a guy from the street. A good-for-nothing. Or better even a thug. There had to be something incredibly satisfying about simply letting your fists talk. About forgetting all manners, decency and respect. To just hit the person who would dare to imply that Thor would ever hurt his own brother.

“Is this what we are doing now? Shifting the blame? If Loki wants to end your relationship that is his own free decision. I want to know what happened, because I don’t recognize him anymore and it must be related to you. Ever since you’ve got your claws into him, you’ve had way too much influence on him. I am not sad to see this relationship end. I cannot forget though that he did claim to be in love with you and then suddenly he doesn’t stand the mentioning of your name. Threats are not going to get us anywhere, but I do want to know what you did to him. So I can help him.”

“Threats? What a strong word after trying to kill me.”

“I am sorry about what happened to you, but my family has nothing to do with that.”

“Is there a single word that comes out of your mouth that is not a lie?”

“I love my brother and I will not watch him suffering any longer. So tell me what happened.”

The cruel icy smirk that Thor already knew appeared on those lips. “What happened… The only person in your family who possesses a conscience and a heart sat at my bed after you tried to kill me. He had tears in his eyes when he told me he loved me. Yesterday he called me to tell me that our relationship was over. He did not even call me by my name. That was nothing I did. You caused this. You and your rotten family. Don’t you believe for one second that I will accept this.”

Thor couldn’t remember why he had come here. What he had expected to happen. That Helblindi
would simply own up to whatever he did. Instead of searching for an explanation, he should go home and try to get through to Loki. Thor definitely had enough listening to accusations from a man who went out of line to try and protect the scumbag who had shot at Thor.

“I am sorry for wasting your time, my Lord.” Thor got up and gave one of the bodyguards a little sign. The door was being opened again and they brought in the puppy. Helblindi’s head came up when he heard the soft barking.

“Loki refused to have him around any longer. He is also yours so I figured you should have him.”

Fenrir immediately started licking Helblindi’s fingers as he reached out his hand to pet him. Thor couldn’t explain why, but the image had him feeling wrecked. Leaving also felt like running away.

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Helblindi cradled Fenrir against his chest and the little one eagerly nuzzled his neck, licking it. For the first time since Loki’s call Helblindi felt like someone was ripping his chest apart from the inside. He was theirs, not just Helblindi’s and he wasn’t going to allow the usurpers to walk all over them again. They had no right. Helblindi was a prince and his whole life’s purpose was to take care of his people, to protect them. Helblindi was going to do exactly that.

“Call my physician. I need to get ready for a trip to Valhalla.”

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*Breaking news – Doctor confirms poisoning of Helblindi Ymirson. The eldest son of the Lord and heir to Jotunheim consumed a dangerous mixture of sleeping medication and alcohol without his knowledge which resulted in him falling over and hitting his head, causing a dangerous head wound…*

Tony didn’t need to read the rest of the news article to know he had chosen the worst possible time to come here. Well, he had never been known for making smart decisions in his personal life.
Hello everybody,

It'll probably take another day till I get to answer your comments, but I'll get there, I promise

Have fun

“What are you actually looking for out there? Another building on fire?” Tony was casually pouring himself a glass of scotch while Pepper turned back around from the window. The usual soft flush on her cheeks was gone and probably no make-up in the world would be able to bring it back right now. “You’ve lost every right to make a joke when you ignored my advice to come here so shortly after a riot. Now we’ve stumbled right into the next one and I will not hear a single word from you.”

She had a point there, but Tony’s DNA was a bit faulty when it came down to the ability of keeping his mouth shut. “I will admit that the timing is a bit ill-chosen, but I do not remember telling you to come along.”

“Like I could trust you doing these negotiations on your own.” Pepper wanted to roll her eyes Tony could tell. It did not make him feel particularly good to have brought her into this situation, but he also didn’t doubt for a second that they were going to be fine. To be honest Tony considered being scared a waste of time so he always tried not to do that. Which didn’t necessarily mean that he was successful.

The volcano that was Asgard had appeared to be dormant when they had got on the plane and now lava was running down the mountain in thick streams all around them. Glancing at the window Tony got a glimpse of the red sky. Their hotel which was ridiculously expensive for a not having a minibar not up to Tony’s standards was not far away from a firestorm. Tony had still been burdened with the worst jetlag imaginable when this town had decided to eat itself. Again. This time it was worse though. Maybe that was just the difference of experiencing something on TV and ending up in the middle of it. Or in their case on top of it. This place definitely charged for the normally gorgeous view all over Valhalla and now it bestowed front row seats for the disaster.

From here the column of smoke and the fire were perfectly visible from here. The flames were licking at the wall, eating away the beautiful façade. Tony wasn’t much of an admirer of Middle Aged architecture, but he knew enough to realise that a piece of art was being lost here. Not having any idea what kind of building this was Tony merely hoped that all the people in there had got out. The firefighters were doing their job and Tony believed there was little reason to worry about the fire spreading to other buildings. The cops were the ones who should be concerned about more houses being set on fire.

“All of that going on and the other party is still willing to meet up for negotiations tomorrow. One can also rely on money weighing out common sense.”

Pepper’s sternness and unyielding professionalism was something that Tony had always considered attractive and even a little bit exciting. She had the ability to deliver the most bizarre or absurd facts
Right now Tony could only make out resignation as if their current situation had made her lose the last bit of her faith in decency and morals. Tony had never had any of that, so he could answer with a simple shrug. “I am willing to bring a several 100 million business here. That’s a big number and they’re planning ahead. This…” Tony gestured at the window. “Is not going to last forever. It’s freaking everybody out because this is a first-world country and riots are not supposed to happen here, but it’s going to pass and then a billion dollar contract still needs to be signed.”

“Until today I did not take you for that big a cynic.” Pepper sounded actually sad about that and Tony for once felt the need to explain himself. “What I meant to say is that this is going to be alright. Situation is going to be back under control, because otherwise it would be inherently stupid to invest money in this country. I am a lot of things, but not stupid.”

In a short moment of levity Pepper made a gesture that was probably meant to say ‘Not so sure about that’. Silence didn’t last long, a loud bang resounded from the outside and Pepper flinched, uttering a soft gasp. Shortly Tony considered putting a comforting hand on Pepper’s shoulder, but he was well aware that she probably wouldn’t want that and Tony himself doubted his ability to have a reassuring effect on anyone. He chose words instead. “I suppose that was a gunshot or an explosion.”

“You are not helping, Tony.”

“I know it’s not exactly uplifting to stay in a hotel two streets away from the centre of a riot, but we’re not of interest to anybody. We’re going to be perfectly okay and for now there is not much we can do than just sit tight. It’s one thousand times better up here. Also there is a good chance they will shut down the airport, so we have to comfort ourselves by raiding the minibar. You mind a glass of red wine?”

After glancing at the window one more time Pepper shook her head. “I am going to pull the curtains and have a nice long bath.”

“Alright, call me if you feel like talking… or like a back rub.”

“Dangerously close to crossing the line to sexual harassment, Mr. Stark.”

“Yeah, I still got it.”

She rolled her eyes as she left, but right now she was not thinking of a horde of crazy, dangerous people roaming the streets. Little victories. As soon as he was alone Tony took another look out of the window and asked himself how far thing would go this time. No two weeks had passed since the last uprising and this seemed already worse than what Tony had seen on television. He didn’t fear for his own wellbeing, the country would not go into lock-down, that much was for sure. The guys out there were out for blood and Tony wondered how far this was going to go tonight. How close it would come to the palace.

Pulling out his phone Tony glanced at his news app. The list of closed streets had become longer, warnings to stay away from three major parts of the city. Asgardian Police urged people to stay inside their homes via twitter. Also there these two photo floating around. The reason for this whole mess presented in a sharp, almost bizarre contrast. A standard portrait that you find in any database. Tony had seen it before when he had researched the son of the Jotun Lord ages ago. Allegedly the other one was fairly recent. Being an engineer Tony had never considered himself a very artistic person, his company had several apartments who were paid for knowing how to stage a good picture. Despite not having a clue Tony could tell that this photo had been taken from the most unflattering angle possible. Even that guy who had without a doubt been carved out of marble could look like complete crap lying in a hospital bed.
One photograph and one doctor’s statement were enough to let an entire city spiral down into chaos. Tony asked himself how quickly people would shrug it off if the newspaper told them that he had been poisoned. Same thing happened to pretty boy and buildings were set on fire.

His phone buzzed. A new alert. Rioters were building barricades on the Slóð, Valhalla’s main boulevard leading to the royal palace. They were engaging in fights with the police. Excessive violence. There was a hint of goose bumps on his arms. The most unpleasant feeling Tony had experienced in a very long time.

Prince Charming couldn’t be doing something much different than Tony right now. Forced to stay put in that giant atrocity made of gold. Pissed off beyond means because he couldn’t go out there and end this excess himself. While lying down on the luxurious but uncomfortable couch Tony called the prince’s secretary.

Granted at the beginning it had been utterly exciting that there was a person that was difficult to reach. Quite an achievement for a man who had the president of the United States on speed dial. Now it had become a nuisance.

Even now it took him four tries until he heard the girl’s voice and then Tony was quickly shut down. Another thing that never happened. “I am sorry, Mr. Stark, but his royal highness the prince of Asgard does not wish to be contacted by you again.”

Great, so all Tony could do here was make a multi-million dollar deal. What a fucking waste.

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Torn between a feeling of dread and disgust Loki rejected his mother’s third call. There was nothing between earth and sky that could make him talk to her and yet he wondered what she would have to say. Did she call him to tell him to come home to the palace, because he would be safe there? As if she was even capable of caring for his wellbeing, he was an asset and his potential use for her had to be protected. The mere thought nearly had Loki crush his phone with his bare hand.

What was she feeling right now? Was she looking out the window and was horrified by what her precious Jotuns were doing? That her entire despicable plan didn’t mean anything, because the Jotun population had chosen their king. Their love for Helblindi was similar to Loki’s – consuming and destructive.

There was a dark urge hiding beneath Loki’s skin, crawling to the surface and what was the point in fighting it. Everything beneath Loki’s paleness was darkness, a black hole. His nature and entire being.

The penthouse was too far away from the affected parts of the city for Loki to see anything. Smoke disappeared in the darkness of the night. What his eyes couldn’t see was provided by the internet and the TV. Everything that he had tried to stop was happening again, only worse this time. At least Loki was seeing things clearly now, he simply was not able to stop bad things from happening. He was their cause.

Loki wanted to line them all up and beat them down for doing this to their city, for destroying homes and hurting people. For believing that they were entitled to do that.

Yet every single time Loki ended this train of thought another feeling was surging with equal intensity. The wish, maybe even longing to join them. To tear down everything in his way. To make someone pay for hurting Helblindi. For making his beautiful eyes useless. For trying to kill him.
Everything that was happening right now, the fires, the shots and the formerly unknown violence proved the madness of his parents’ plan. Loki and Helblindi had been born the same year. What had Laufey thought the moment the doctors had delivered him another son? The perfect Jotun specimen. The one that the entire Jotun population would consider the rightful heir. The one that would evoke so much love in them that they the thought of him hurt made them with mindless and harsh violence.

Loki could never be as loved or as trusted as Helblindi was. This was a simple fact and it hadn’t just now become obvious as parts of the city were burning. Laufey had to have known for years, he was not stupid. Their treacherous, mad idea of Loki on the throne could never become real even if you took Thor out of the equation. People still wouldn’t want him, they would still be yearning for Helblindi. No Jotun would accept Loki stealing his place and they could never know what Loki actually was. It would discredit him and their Lord forever.

Repeatedly Loki told himself to stop searching for a meaning or sense in this insanity. Soulless acts lacked both. Refilling his glass of wine Loki turned on the TV and watched the special broadcast about the riot that was happening right now. The presenter were cosily sitting in their safe studio while the screens in the background provided footage. Loki recognized images from the Slóð and other areas in Valhalla. This time things had become more personal, the rioters more organized or a lot more reckless. No more attacks on administration, now they had set one of his family’s private estates on fire. They hardly used it nowadays, most of the time during the summer days. Odin was the one who mostly enjoyed staying there. By looks of it that wasn’t going to happen again.

A knock on the door had Loki sighing and he downed the rest of his wine. He had told the security that he didn’t want them in the main rooms, but they wouldn’t leave since his parents had insisted that his security needed an update as he had refused to return to the palace. Loki wouldn’t spend a minute in the presence of his mother.

“Yes?”

“Yes, your highness, your mother tried to contact you and she is worried that something might be wrong with the connection.”

“The line is working just fine. I am not going to talk to her. Close the door behind you.”

The security member nodded and did as he was told and Loki refilled his glass another time. Tonight seemed like the perfect time to get drunk. In the meantime the presenters continued to comment on the current situation and Loki froze when Helblindi’s picture appeared on the screen. What he already knew got repeated again. A doctor telling the press what Loki had already known. Helblindi had been poisoned at the palace, the public now had the confirmation and they had drawn the right conclusion. Who else could have done this than the royal family? Loki had been the very first to accuse his father and brother only to hear them denying it.

Maybe it was the wine or the distance that Loki had put between him and everybody else who he was supposed to care about. He had no idea how he connected two different thoughts that until now had never come up together. Suddenly it clicked and another scenario of events started to make sense. Thor wasn’t the only one who had an interest in getting rid of Helblindi. He was that other person that stood in the way of Loki becoming the puppet king he was made to be. There was no chance for that fever dream ever becoming reality as long as Helblindi was still around.

With a shaking hand Loki put down the wine glass. Why was there still something that could faze him after all that he had found out? Because he did not want to believe it? Because he might still believe that there was a line that couldn’t be crossed. Which was foolish and simply false.

For one second there was horror, a hole filled with darkness so deep and consuming that not even
Loki, a creature coming from the exact place, didn’t even dare to look in its direction. Then another moment passed and all that was left was the feeling of being such an immense fool for not having thought of this possibility sooner. If you were willing to go all the way to get rid of one son, what would stop you from to do the same with another one? The one you shared no actual blood with. Laufey couldn’t possibly know. Loki refused to believe that. Not because of a father’s love for his legitimate and absolutely marvellous son, but for something much simpler and more important to this man.

Helblindi was Jotun, not a drop of blood in his veins that didn’t origin from that beautiful land rugged by snowy mountains. That was all that mattered after all, Loki had learned the hard way. Therefore no, Laufey wouldn’t let harm come his son’s way. With Frigga things were different. Two young men between Loki and the throne and there already been an attempt at both of their lives.

Looking at the screen Loki saw several young people, male and female, throwing stones at a member of the Special Forces. The night air around them was illuminated by flares and Bengal fires. Painted red. Loki couldn’t bring himself to feel indifferent about it. He hoped that they would tear the whole city down, erase it from the ground and with it all the malicious ideas that Frigga had cultivated in her head.

Sitting here and doing nothing out of a sudden became an unbearable chore. Something that Loki could not stand a fleeting moment longer. He finally needed confirmation. Otherwise he would be forced to stay in this state of torpidity, when his wretchedness needed to be put to its only purpose.

Now pacing around the room, because sitting was so wrong, Loki typed on his phone. The thought crossed his mind that he might damage the screen as he was using too much force and yet he could not be bothered.

“Your highness, I am sorry for the time it took to answer your call. As you can imagine we have quite a few things going on here. What is it that I can do for you?” There was an unmistakable edge in Vangsness’ words and voice, proof of something happening behind the telephone and of course Loki called at the worst time, but he was a prince and there was no way to quickly get rid of him. If he only knew that Loki was actually nothing.

“Is there any progress on Þórirsson?”

“No, your highness. He is still keeping his mouth shut, but it has only been two days. An assassin’s stubbornness cannot be underestimated. As discussed I am going to inform you as soon I have any new information on…”

“I cannot wait that long.”

A pause on the other end of the line. “Your highness?”

“I need him to give up the names of the ones who gave the order to kill the crown prince. I need that information instantly and I hereby give you carte blanche to obtain that information in the fastest way possible.”

“I am not sure I understand, your highness.”

“I want him to give up the ones in charge. I want that information yesterday. If the lack of food and water doesn’t work fast enough, then there other, harsher measures need to be taken. Whatever turns out to be necessary as long as he gives us the names of those who attacked my brother. Did I make myself clear?”
“Yes, your highness.”

“Good. Keep me posted.”

After hanging up Loki instantly made another call to have two men dropping by Doctor Strange’s place. Just to make sure no accidents would happen during the chaos the city had fallen into. As soon as he was done Loki downed his half-full glass. It was a pity that this quality wine couldn’t unfold any of its exquisite taste. To Loki it tasted like nothing at all.

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“My prince, I adamantly advice against this idea. It is way too dangerous to even think about…”

“Do you hear this?” Helblindi slightly lowered the window and the car was instantly filled with the agonizing sound of shouting, yelling, screaming. “These are our people. My people and they are out here because of me. What kind of person would I be if I were to hide in my house and let it all pass over?”

They both knew he was right, Týr definitely shared his opinion, but so many years ago he had dedicated his life to one purpose only and that was protecting Helblindi. Týr could never agree to anything that might endanger Helblindi.

“I understand your motivation, but the doctor didn’t even declare you fit for traveling. Your eyes haven’t enough time to heal yet.”

Did Týr think that Helblindi actually had a choice? That there was more than possibility how this night would work out? The second Helblindi had seen his own picture on TV and then his brothers and sisters roaming the streets to avenge something that has happened to him. They needed to hear that it was not their job to protect him. He was the one meant protecting them.

“What would you do if you were out there? If all you had heard were the news. If that was all you knew. What would you do?” Helblindi asked softly and Týr answered without hesitation. “I would be out there with everybody else, trying to hit them the worst way possible.”

Helblindi nodded, it was the answer he had expected. “Right and that is why I have to be there. I have to be seen. They have to see me and then I will talk to them.”

This was how it was going to happen. Helblindi had not come here for this, tonight he would have gone to see his fiancé. Talk to Loki and make him understand that there was nothing fierce or powerful enough that the two of them couldn’t take it down. Sadly that had to wait. Helblindi had to deal with something way more important right now.

“Get me to the Slóð.”

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Tony didn’t catch a lot of sleep. Oddly as soon as he turned the lights off, the constant sounds of a riot appeared to be a lot louder. He had barely shut his eyes for about three minutes when Happy called him and Tony naturally felt a little bit cranky. When his chief of security told him that someone was here to see him.

Fuck all other business men that weren’t him. Tony told Happy as much and at the same time rolled over to continue to sleep. Then Happy told him that it wasn’t related to business. A member of the royal family was here to see him. That had Tony jumping out of bed and almost falling over. It was still in the middle of the night which was an indicator for Prince Charming.
Then again, Happy wouldn’t call him a member of the royal family. No, he would have come up with a fancy term. Most likely wannabe-boyfriend or crush. So it was someone else and Tony definitely wasn’t going to get dressed up. Not for someone who was telling him to get out of bed and come to his hotel when there was a riot out there. Well, at least they had Tony curious, that much was for sure.

Since Tony had some decency he put a shirt on and then walked out of his bedroom. He did not bother to look into the mirror or fix his hair. They would have to deal with it. In the salon of his suite Happy was waiting for him. Along with the Queen. King’s wife. Prince Charming’s mother.

Now that was a surprise.

“Well, I’m feeling underdressed out of a sudden.”

It was the first time Tony saw her in person. Until now it all been pictures. Her being here was instantly quite revealing. Tony could see where Prince Charming had his green eyes from. As she moved to look at him she was all grace and beauty. Long, blonde hair that fell softly over her shoulders and only very light make-up. The state Tony was in had to make her uncomfortable, but she didn’t let it show.

“Mr. Stark, I hope you will forgive me for disturbing you at this time.” She was smiling and her eyes were just like Loki’s. Detached from her mouth, clearing showing the truth. She definitely didn’t feel like smiling.

“Oh, I don’t mind. I’ve been told that I have quite an ego and you coming here when your city is going to shit is very flattering. I’ve hardly ever felt this important. Right, where are my manners? Can I offer you something to drink, your highness?”

She softly shook her head. “I fear I must decline. As you probably can imagine I do not have a lot of time. I came here to talk to you.”

There was a lot of emphasize on the last word and Tony decided to throw her bone, because he had already pissed off his future father-in-law, there was no need to do the same with her. Even more so since she clearly wasn’t happy to be here. “Happy, would you leave us alone, please?”

Naturally Happy did as he was asked and Tony should probably feel awkward standing in front of a queen only wearing shorts and a T-shirt, but she could have called before showing up. “Well, you don’t want a drink, but it’s still dark and the world outside is still ending, so you won’t mind if I have a scotch.”

She didn’t even sit down and Tony wondered why and how the hell she had even got here.

“Have you come to Valhalla to see my son, Mr. Stark?”

That stopped him in his tracks. Cut the chase, straight to the point. Tony replied while fixing his drink. “I am sure your son is desperately missing my company, it has been months since our last meeting. Unfortunately I am still a very busy man and I am here to do business. Admittedly I have the worst timing imaginable, judging by the burning builds and shots being fired in the streets. Anyway, I still have a business meeting tomorrow. For once in my life I am being professional.”

“And nonetheless you have tried several times to contact my son since you’ve arrived in Asgard.”

“Wow, his secretary really should be fired if she is telling you that.”

She was unfazed and remained friendly. “Mr. Stark, you are a smart man. You must know that I
don’t have a lot of time and that I went through a lot of trouble to even come here. This is important
to me. Everything connected to my son is. I need to ask you to not waste my time.”

Sipping on his drink Tony enjoyed the smooth taste of quality scotch that definitely been imported
from Scotland. It also gave Tony the opportunity to think a few seconds before answering. “It was
you who came here and I don’t even know why, your highness. I may have tried to contact your son,
but there is no reason to worry. He does not want to talk to me. The last time we did talk, he was
rather dismissive. I heard rumours that he is in a relationship. There is no need to worry about the bad
American influence.”

“I am not worried. You are right though. My son entered a new relationship, he got engaged.”

Now Tony was definitely disappointed. Not about the engagement, Prince Charming was gorgeous
and a bit of a man-eater, sooner or later he would end up with a ring on his finger. Or rather a tattoo
on his lower arm. It was kind of disappointing that the mother of a prince would personally come
here to tell him to stay the fuck away from her son. “Congratulations are in order. When do I get my
invitation?”

“The engagement was called off.”

Damn, she was indeed putting Tony on an emotional rollercoaster. “My condolences, but I’ve said it
before – he is really rushing through his guys.”

She showed no reaction to that, way too much class. “Usually our family stays far away from
discussing private matters with strangers, but circumstances don’t leave me much choice. The end of
my son’s engagement was rather… messy and definitely painful. It took quite a toll on Loki and
unfortunately it drove him away from his family. I fear it drove him away from people in general.
Especially me.”

Tony would never claim to have the best knowledge of human nature, but even a blind man could
see that she was struggling. Beneath that immaculate appearance was some very real pain. “What are
you here for, your highness?”

“I’m going to be honest, I’ve never quite understood my son’s fascination with you. His affection. I
have talked with him about it and now that seems so long ago. I let him know about my reservations
about you. As always he was not very bothered. Almost amused actually. I am a mother, Mr. Stark.
The spirits know that there is nothing on this earth that I love and cherish more than Loki. It is
unbearable to see my child suffering. I cannot reach him and as much as it shames me to admit, I am
running out of options. All I know is that my son has turned to you before when he was upset. I am
here to ask you, Mr. Stark, if I were to enable you to see him, would you go and talk to my son?”
Hello everybody,

So... somebody seeks Loki out and doesn't accept being sent away...

“Your highness, we have confirmation on at least two members of the special forces in critical condition. According to the latest report from the Officer in Chief shots have been fired at the Sólalag Square. It’s impossible to tell how many of the protesters are equipped with actual firearms, but the ones who have them are not hesitant to use them.”

As he listened to this new piece of information Thor kept his eyes on the tablet in his hands. Words and pictures together formed the immense tragedy that had hit them again and this time nobody had seen it coming. Not in Jotunheim but here in Valhalla. One single person gave an interview and thousands left their homes to do exactly what? Thor wished that he had an idea what the actual intent was. Where this should lead. Probably nowhere. Revenge didn’t lead anywhere. People wanted to see someone hurt, someone bleed for the alleged attack on their beloved Lord’s son.

Thor thought of his own grief about Loki and tried to imagine what he would have gone through if the cowardice attack on his own life would have hit Loki instead. If his brother had lain on the ground in his own blood. Would Thor then be willing to roam the streets and mindlessly hurt whoever might cross his way?

No. Because he was nevertheless responsible for all these men and women out there. For the ones hiding away in their houses and the ones who showed no respect for the rules of society and living together. It was still his duty to look after all of them and this made it so much harder.

“I need a clear statement from the leaders of the special forces if they see a chance to get the situation back under control. I don’t want the army to get involved as long as there is still a chance we can handle it without military interference.”

There was nodding and concerned looks. Thor took advantage of the few seconds that he had won to turn to his father. He seemed to be sitting miles away when it was only the other end of the table. A big part of him hoped for advice or a nod of approval, but the reality of the situation looked different. There was a reason why Thor was the one talking, why people were addressing him. It was time and Odin did not protest, he seemed perfectly at ease with what was happening, because he had to know it was for the best.

Knowing that did very little to actually help Thor. He felt like a child again, being thrust into the deep end of the pool when he had just learned to swim. Now he was mostly trying to keep his head above the surface, busy with staying alive although another part of him knew that he had all the tools to do this. He only needed to find a way to use them. If only he had more time to think, to ponder, to analyse the possible consequences.

“Your highness, we are answering emergency calls coming from every district of the city. The summer palais is still on fire and the fire brigade is doing everything from stopping the fire to spread to the surrounding buildings. Police forces are needed for the evacuations while there are street
battles all over Valhalla. The protesters are seeking confrontation with our forces. Most of them are armed with commodity items used as weapons, but some of them are carrying actual fire arms. We do not have enough manpower to cover all the places where we are needed. People are using brutal force against everybody who is wearing a uniform with the royal insignia on it. Our men cannot react accordingly. Either we answer with violence or we involve the military to be able to cover more ground. At this moment we need to be aware that we do not have the upper hand. It would be foolish and grossly negligent to do so. It is vital to get the situation under control within the next few hours or the uproar will seize other cities. There will be casualties on both sides. All I can do is to urge your highness and I give you this honest advice. There is not much time left to come to a decision.”

So many eyes on him and Thor was surprised how easy it was to ignore everyone’s but the chief of police. Nobody could have all the right answers to this. Again he glanced at the tablet and the chaos he saw had nothing to do with Valhalla. Studying history and ancient revolts had not done anything to prepare him for this. A violent uprising seemed so much more logical and organised on paper. Reality was just chaotic, confusing and it wouldn’t disappear when you closed the book. It was all very real and it was up to them

“One single person. A doctor. Giving a single statement to the press. That is all it takes for our home to fall apart. For our people to tear each other apart. For them to want our heads on spikes.” As Thor mumbled these words he knew them to only be partly true. Nothing had happened in an empty space. The overwhelming majority of the people rioting were Jotun and they did so, because someone had told them the truth. The doctor had pointed out facts and had then painted them in a slightly different colour without changing the foundation. Helblindi had ended up in hospital because of an overdose of sleeping medication. Whoever had done that to him remained a mystery, although it could have easily been an accident inflicted on himself.

Were they supposed to tell this to the Jotuns? That the man they were so fiercely, blindly devoted to maybe had a problem with substance abuse? Was that better than the suspicion that Thor’s family had tried to murder him?

“There still has to be someone we can talk to. Negotiate. The people are angry, acting on false information. We need to get another version of this story out, so perhaps we can cool down the tension.”

During his entire life Thor had seen his father talk and listen to his advisers, allowing to be criticised but not always following the advice that he had been given. One thing had never happened and that was someone downright rejecting his father’s idea or proposition. He was the king after all. Thor himself being treated quite differently now and he could not tell if it was due to the unique urgency of the situation or if it had to do with Thor personally.

“There are no negotiations to be had, your highness. There is not a single leader that could be addressed. Nobody in control.”

Again Thor looked into Odin’s direction and he got a soft nod in response. He had thought so. They were right. A single person was not able to undo this mess. Probably only hundreds of them could and only for a short moment. But they needed this moment.

“If my father the king agrees, I do believe that it would be the best to bring in a division of the army. To supply the necessary forces that we need to regain control of the situation non-violently. Therefore…”

“Your highness!”

Nobody had the right to interrupt royalty. You had to wait your turn. It was a basic rule of politeness,
the way things worked. Obviously all rules had been abolished for now.

“Forgive me for… There is something happening. At the Slóð.”

How much time did it take? Fifteen minutes or maybe a little bit longer? So little time for only one man, but more was not necessary. Suddenly the king, the crown prince and the entire senior staff as well as the government were made small, unimportant spectators as someone else did what they were unable to. Through TV and social media they got to witness how the mere presence of Helblindi Ymirson instantly gathered a crowd when only moments before they had been engaged in a fight with the police forces. Parts of a barricade were quickly repurposed as a platform and then he started to talk. Everybody listened. That man walked into a riot full of armed people and all he needed was his presence and charisma to make everything around him stop. Almost as if something like this could be easy. All of them were reduced to bystanders, auditors. Afraid to miss a single word. He could probably direct them, wield them like a sword as his personal army if he wanted to. Instead he told them to go home.

“This is not your fight. You are not doing your duty. When I look around the streets of Valhalla I feel nothing but shame. Ashamed of my own failure. You are not supposed to protect me. It’s the other way around. My life is dedicated to one purpose and that is to protect you. All of you. You believing that you have to do this for me is a testament to my failure and I ask you for forgiveness.”

The interpreter with them in the room kept translating Helblindi’s words and Thor didn’t miss that it lacked the usual distanced, professional tone. That speech didn’t fail to make an impact on everyone. It continued about how he had made a mistake. That he had underestimated his own people, that he hadn’t wanted to give them much information on what had happened to him because they deserved a full, detailed explanation. One that he still couldn’t offer. What happened to him could have been an accident and as long as he didn’t have proof for anything else happening, he would not draw any conclusions. Then he asked everyone else to do the same.

“I do understand the anger that has been festering inside of you. Inside all of us for over 500 years. This is not the time and the place to let it get the better of us. Valhalla is a city full of our brothers and sisters who are not at fault and who might end up hurt. Or anyone of us. I do not want to carry the responsibility for such an event, but it is mine. Nobody else’s. So I am asking you to go back home to your families. I swear to not keep anything from you, but now as your prince I do need to do this for me. Go home. Hug your children, partners, parents. Jotunheim has decided to walk into the future alongside Valhalla. Hand in Hand. That is the way we want to go. The way that I believe is right. Please don’t let me go there alone.”

They went home. Messages were coming in about most of the gatherings all of the city started to dissolve as Helblindi’s word were passed on via social media. As Asgard’s government still sat in the very same room, badly adapting to their new role as observers.

Just as Thor felt like the collective sigh of relief and disgrace could be uttered new information came in. There was a fatality among the rioters.

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Týr didn’t say anything and Helblindi knew what that meant. The lack of actual protest. Their purpose in life was very similar. Týr’s was to protect and shield Helblindi from all harm, so Helblindi could do the same for the rest of Jotunheim. Helblindi was tired, a headache was forming right behind his forehead and his bones were aching. He had closed his eyes for the entire ride.

Of course Týr was aware of all of this and wanted him to lie down, sleep and get the rest the doctors had ordered. It was Týr’s duty to make sure Helblindi would do just that and yet he didn’t say
anything. Because he knew Helblindi had his own purpose.

One that had never felt more like a burden. Maybe because he had already crumbled under the pressure. The white hospital walls were throwing the sound of Helblindi’s footsteps back at him and it seemed he found something that terrified him even more than the darkness. In the pit of his stomach was an uneasy feeling like he could end up being sick any second. His feet were getting heavier by the second. Probably an illusion brought about by his mind, because he simply did not want to reach the end of this corridor.

However, it was the only thing that he could right now. Just thinking about going anywhere else was tremendously wrong. This was what he needed to do, because he had failed and it was his fault.

His throat was closing up, making it hard to breathe and Helblindi ignored it. There were eyes on him when he stepped into the room and once more he wondered what would happen to his eyes if he started crying right now. No matter what the doctor had said.

The woman was young, early thirties. Whatever beauty she possessed had been destroyed by pain and overwhelming grief. When she raised her head to look at him Helblindi for the first time in his life considered running away from something. Except that he would never do that. He could not when he owed her everything. When he had this immense debt to pay. His own gaze drifted away from her, to her husband body on the hospital bed next to her.

In that moment the corpse with its black hair and white skin was every Jotun. Every single one of them who Helblindi had failed and then it was again Aðalherr. A man Helblindi had never met and would never be able to meet.

“My prince…”

The only words that Helblindi was able to utter were apologies, a plea for forgiveness and it was not enough. Could never be enough. She had to detest him for failing them, but instead she gently took his hand and told him that she thanked the spirits for keeping him safe. That her husband would be so happy to see him here being fine. That her husband would be so happy to see him here being fine.

By the time he was back in the car Helblindi was sobbing.

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Since he had not slept for even a minute Loki did not mind when the call came around 3:45 in the morning. The small hope that it would be Vangsness with the confirmation that Loki needed quickly faded away. There was no time for disappointment though. It was one of the men he had chosen for the dirty work. The information he provided was rather simple and unsettling. Ragna’s current whereabouts.

Sleep had now become an unknown concept. Loki sat on the couch, staring at the display of his phone where bold letters formed an address. The very same question presented itself again and exactly like with Doctor Strange Loki was clueless. She knew and only the spirits knew how many other people she had told. Logic dictated that Loki needed to dispose of a risk that otherwise could swallow him whole. Something that he wasn’t going to let happen.

However there was the memory of the lullaby, of her tugging him in at night and her smiles warm and full of affection. Something that could not be faked. It didn’t mean anything anymore, tarnished by the true intentions that Loki now knew about.

And that was why Loki perhaps needed to hear her say it. A perverse interest in whatever
justification she might have to offer. With that thought in mind Loki slowly stood up and walked into
his bedroom to fill a small bag with clothes for about two days. That should be more than enough.
Just as he placed the bag on the bed somebody cleared his throat behind him. One of his bodyguards
obviously ignored his need to be left alone. “Your highness.”

“What is it?”

“Helblindi Ymirson, future Lord of Jotunheim, is here to see you.”

No matter how insistently Loki told himself about how cold he had become, how cold he had always
been without knowing it, his brother’s name had him freezing and his heart changed the rhythm of its
beating. It was blatant fear of somebody who had provoked such different feelings in him.

“I did not invite him. I will not see him.”

“I am sorry, your highness, but the young Lord made blatantly clear that he was not going to leave
until you see him. He insisted on waiting in front of the door. Normally we would have him moved,
but after what has just happened in the city…”

“You cannot move him against his will due to who he is, I know. Especially not with everything that
is going on outside.” Loki wanted to grind his teeth and considered if there was any other way to
leave the penthouse without using the elevator. Which was silly, but his entire being wanted to flee
knowing that Helblindi was in the same building as him. Sooner or later he would have to face him
again, but it should not be now. Not in a long time. Loki did not think that he would be able to face
him. Not without panicking. Helblindi would want an explanation and Loki could not give him one,
Loki could not give him anything.

He needed Helblindi to stay as far away from him as possible, because the implications of their
former engagement made Loki’s stomach turn. The memory of his mouth and hands on his skin. The
danger of saying the wrong word, of making Helblindi see the truth as well. Have him spiralling
down into the same abyss. Who knew if he was able to walk away from it? He was not as deeply
messed up as Loki.

No, Loki would make sure that he never knew, but he also needed Helblindi to stay away. Loki
could not have him near. He could not look at what he wanted and what he could not have. If only
Helblindi weren’t as stubborn and full of conviction. Loki had known all along that he would not be
able to get rid of Helblindi with a single phone conversation. Helblindi leaving him alone wasn’t in
the realm of possibilities.

Loki needed to take care of this. One time would be enough if Loki only did it right. One talk and
then he could push Helblindi out of his life forever.

“Tell the young Lord that I will see him in an instant. Make him wait in the living room, please.”

Taking a breath Loki zipped up the bag and tried to figure out what he was going to say. No matter
what he needed to keep his distance. What would it even be like to see him for the first time after
finding out? Loki did not want to.

He took his time, staring into pace for a while until he thought that he could not stand here any
longer. Loki’s feet were heavy when he made his way as slowly as possible into the living room.

Helblindi hadn’t even bothered to sit down. He was standing next to the couch, owning the entire
room while doing absolutely nothing. One glimpse at him and Loki wondered how he could even be
here. The surgery hadn’t been that long ago, he should probably still be recovering. Instead he had
come to Valhalla to take care of his people and now he was here. With Loki. When Helblindi turned
to look at him Loki felt like his mind was being wiped. Replacing fear and anguish with something
so much more superficial. Also somewhat terrifying. Helblindi was still beautiful. Why should that
have changed? Loki had only seen him a couple of hours ago on television, but it was different now
that he was here. Loki didn’t want to flee anymore, he just wanted to look at him, marvelling. Except
that he shouldn’t and it was a proof of his sickness that his heart was still speeding up even though he
knew.

“I was actually surprised that you allowed me in.”

Loki ignored the light-headed feeling and slightly bowed his head. “My Lord.”

“Just don’t.” Helblindi ever so slightly shook his head. More hinting at it. “I don’t have the force to
deal with you acting this way. Like you did on the phone. I want to talk to Loki. Not to whoever you
pretend to be. Will you tell me what happened?”

Loki needed to get him out of here. So far away that Loki wouldn’t even be able to think about him
anymore. “I’ve already explained myself. I don’t know what there still is to talk about. You should
go home, lie down and get some rest. Your eyes…”

“Damn my eyes!” Helblindi’s sharp voice had him wincing and it was all too familiar. Passion and
anger all at once. Helblindi could be so many things, but he could never be cold. “It does seem you
stopped caring the minute you walked out of my hospital room, so spare me now. You were not
there when I needed you to. When I wanted you to. You promised to come to Jotunheim with me.
You wanted to. So why didn’t you? Why did you leave me alone and then lie to me?”

All ideas and intentions in Loki’s mind went up in flames, leaving behind ashes which the wind
carried away, so no traces remained to remind him of them. Why did Helblindi’s pain seem to
outweigh Loki’s? How could it have a bigger impact? What was he supposed to do when leaving
had hurt him and staying would be damnation? Even without a soul Loki could not bear being the
cause for Helblindi’s misery. Except that it was in Loki’s nature to bestow misery upon people. If he
wanted to or not.

Loki used his entire willpower quite successfully to let his voice remain even, to not show how
Helblindi’s mere presence was enough to completely unsettle him. “Because I was a coward. That’s
why I didn’t come with you without talking to you about it. I did not lie to you though. I was trying
to avoid doing something unpleasant. Like looking you into the eyes and telling you something that
you would not like to hear. That’s why I called you instead of…”

Once more he was interrupted. Sharply. Helblindi was standing there and except for his expression
his body seemed so calm and composed when he was anything but. Loki had seen this kind of anger
before. The other one was holding back, because he knew things would go from bad to worse if he
lost control. Was it even possible to push Helblindi to a point where nothing mattered anymore?
Nothing but blind rage.

“Do not do that. Don’t you dare to lie to me! I am your fiancé. You should trust me, not lie to me. I
deserve that and you should know that the two of us can figure this out. Whatever has happened to
you. Whatever they did… Together we can take care of it. So whatever your family or anybody else
did. Just tell me. I can figure it out.”

It only became an honest plea at the end. Yet he sounded so honest, so sure about what he was
saying. How could Loki admire him for that when he knew that Helblindi had no idea what he was
actually talking about? A small part of him wanted to smile, to find a way to make it easier on the
other one, but every sign of affection would only make it harder. Letting his eyes roam over
Helblindi’s form Loki tried to remember the initial sensation after Doctor Strange had told him the truth. News so vile that they had triggered a physical reaction. Loki had broken down completely, he had been sick and now he could not hold onto that.

The idea of touching Helblindi had nothing sickening about it. He was beautiful. That realisation had Loki taking a small step back and by the movement of Helblindi’s eyes he could tell that he had noticed.

“Believe me, I know that you can almost to anything. I am the last person to doubt that. I saw how you single-handedly saved this city tonight. That doesn’t mean you can do anything. Here is nothing for you to do. I’ve told you before and I want you to leave now.”

Helblindi merely shook his head. “No. I am sick of this. I’ve come here for you. On my way here I had to see a man who died, because I didn’t do a good enough job. Yet his widow was the one to comfort me. That she was going to be alright as long as she knew that I was fine.” His eyes looked the exact same way they had the last time Loki had seen him. Marvellous and they were still burning. “I am not fine, Loki. People, my people got hurt because I wasn’t good enough. Because I failed. Outside there are still houses on fire, people in prison and others in hospital. All of that is happening for me or because of me. I don’t want my name on this. I don’t want to have anything to do with this.”

Swallowing quickly Loki fought down the urge to touch him. A comforting gesture only. Because Helblindi deserved better. So much better than all of this. Loki was going to loathe whoever would end up marrying him. Anybody who was going to possess him and who wasn’t Loki. “But you put an end to it.”

“Yes, but you didn’t!”

As Helblindi shouted at him Loki flinched and guilt buried its nasty claws inside of him. Something that should be a relic of the past. A Barn-svíkja had no reason to feel guilty about anything. Rules didn’t apply with Helblindi.

“You did nothing! You stayed here in your Ivory Tower and I don’t understand why! This is nothing like anything we planned to do! This is nothing like you! What are you doing here? Hiding away from what? Asgard? Or just me? You owe me an explanation and then the truth, so I can help you with it! Why did you not come with me? Why did you call me and said things that you do not mean?”

“I meant them.”

“No, you don’t!” Helblindi hissed at him and came closer. “Is it a threat? Blackmail? Tell me, you are supposed to trust me!”

According to the trúa, yes, but these concepts didn’t apply to Loki any longer. “No, we’re not engaged anymore. It does not matter if I trust you or not. If you came here, because you needed to hear this in person, I will tell you again. Our engagement is over. I changed my mind and I do no longer want to marry you. I would prefer it if you didn’t contact me again. That is all the explanation I need to give you. Nobody forced me to do this. It’s what I want. Now I want you to leave. Please do so or I will have my security escort you out. Good night, my Lord.”

Loki was fleeing, he was well aware, but the last minutes had been enough for him to realise that he was not strong enough to do this. Helblindi was too much for him to deal with. So he turned around and walked back into the bedroom, but of course Helblindi did not leave him be.
“Loki! Come back! I know that you are lying to me!”

Only partially. Next to his bed Loki picked up his bag. It was better to leave immediately. Of course Helblindi wasn’t going to leave, instead he had followed Loki, now invading his personal space. That closeness was already enough to painfully knock the air out of Loki’s lungs.

“By all the spirits what did they do to you?! Look at me! Look at me, damn it!” Forcefully Helblindi grabbed Loki’s left wrist, the hand that was holding the bag. It had to be the very first time that Helblindi touched him in a non-gentle way that was not supposed to excite him. Loki flinched again, trying to pull his hand away, but Helblindi’s grip was tight. “None of this is like you. What is this… passive, cold act that you’ve put on? I know it’s an act! Remember when you were with me at the hospital? What you said and when my family refused to let you see me? I do remember. The way you looked at me. Like there was no other place for you to be and I was so glad, because I wanted you there. I was scared out of my mind and I wanted you to be there.”

Every word coming out of Helblindi’s mouth was the direct answer to several of Loki’s prayers. Those damned letters he had written. About being overwhelmed by wanting him so much. Wanting something fiercely that had nothing to do with his role as a prince. Wanting him just for himself. Here he was. With those unique blue eyes that were pleading Loki, unwilling to let go of him.

He was there for the taking and he was Loki’s brother.

“Helblindi, let go!”

“They were out there, tearing up everything in their way for me and I don’t want any of it. But I told your brother I was going to make him regret it if he should try to keep you from me and I would do the same as them. I would tear this city down. Because that’s what I promised you. I promised you to make you the most important thing in my life alongside my duty. I promised you that, I believe in the trúa and in you. I’m not going back on my promise. I want to know what has happened for you to turn your back on everything.”

There was no way to not marvel at his eyes. How everything he said could be found in those pools of blue. Hearing him and seeing him talk didn’t necessarily make it harder to breathe, but Loki definitely became more aware of it. Of every single breath that he took. No butterflies in his stomach, but nonetheless a sensation that normally wasn’t there. A bit uneasy and exciting. Not like it was supposed to. Loki’s head was feeling lithe, as if it would only take a few more seconds for him to be taken by vertigo. His body was not acting the way it usually would have and it was good. This is what being alive felt like.

Loki revelled in it. How wonderful it was to be dominated by another sensation than permanent disgust. At himself. At the ones who made him.

However, Loki should be disgusted. The man who was the cause of all of this shared his blood. Helblindi was his brother and Loki knew that. Why didn’t he want to move away? Why wasn’t this what he saw? Helblindi was beautiful and so very unlike Loki he was pure. Wasn’t it human to want that? Especially for someone who could never be like that again?

Giving in now seemed so much more tempting than anything else Loki had ever experienced. A proof to how far he had fallen. Forcefully Loki jerked his hand free from Helblindi’s grip, convinced to drive him away. “I don’t need your promise! I don’t need anything from you! Just go! I don’t want you!”

It was such an amateur mistake, uttered in a moment of passion and Helblindi’s brilliance didn’t allow him to miss it. He slightly raised his chin, looking every bit like royalty as he stared Loki
You can lie about everything. You can tell me everything you want, but don’t say that you don’t want me.”

In that moment it was blatantly clear that he knew. That he had probably known all along. How could he not? People were aware of their own beauty and there was no arrogance in Helblindi’s statement. Just the simple knowledge that there was no possibility of Loki not wanting him.

Helblindi was right, Loki did want him. In such a fierce way that it was almost consuming. Also he was right in front of Loki, wanting him too.

The kiss almost resembled an attack. Tangling his fingers in the black hair Loki crashed their lips together, clinging onto him like a man wasting away from thirst. He indeed must have been dying, because this felt like salvation. Something he had been missing so terribly that finding it filled a hole that he had become used to and the result was overwhelming. Helblindi’s fingers were digging into his shoulder, pulling at his shirt. They kissed messily and Loki thought that everything he was feeling, the same need and hunger came right back to him.

This was it. Loki didn’t care that he shouldn’t want it. He did. What did it matter? He was fucked up, so why shouldn’t he want and enjoy something that was horrifyingly wrong. Helblindi moved against him, he was calming the kiss down a bit, his tongue flickering across Loki’s lower lip. A rush of heat went through Loki and he pushed both his hands underneath Helblindi’s sweater, yearning for the feeling of skin that simply made everything better.

Without even breaking apart Loki pushed him down on the bed and Helblindi pulled him along, right on top of him. No more need to reminisce about how Helblindi’s body had felt against his. It was right here with him. Fingers were trailing down his spine and Helblindi pulled up one leg, allowing Loki to get in a more comfortable position. Eventually it was Helblindi who stopped the kiss, brushed his lips over Loki’s throat and then dropped his head on the pillow to catch his breath.

Loki made the mistake of looking at him. He was perfect. Breathing going a little too fast, lips parted, hair messed up from Loki’s touch and his eyes were smiling at him. The heat was being replaced by panic and Loki felt like waking up from a trance. Like he only now realised what he was doing to the other person.

“No. No.” As if burnt Loki got off the bed. He blindly grabbed the bag and fled as fast as he could.
Hello everybody,

So good news. After lying on the beach for a week and doing absolutely nothing I've finally come up with the final story plan. Amazing, right? :) I don't know if I can do it till chapter 120, but the story shouldn't become much longer. There is an end in sight, who would have thought? Something we can all be happy about :D

All his life Loki had excelled in different kinds of sports. Everything related to agility, but not power. Loki was great on horseback, his fencing teacher went into raptures while talking about his skills. However, his area of expertise was running. Thanks to being lean and graceful it came easy to him. He could be incredibly fast if he wanted to. Except for now.

Loki was running, he felt like he couldn’t demand more of his legs and yet he was moving way too slowly. He could just as easily remain standing, because it seemed impossible to put enough distance between him and Helblindi. Waiting for the elevator had not been in the realm of possibilities and now Loki was more or less falling down the stairs. Making his way down from the penthouse by foot was ridiculous and almost impossible. The only sensible thing to do was to stop at the next floor and get into the elevator. Except that he could not risk running into Helblindi again.

Stopping was not an option either as long as Loki couldn’t know for 100% that Helblindi wasn’t following him. Another idea that made no sense either. A man who had just left the hospital was not going to rush down the stairs of a 13 store building. If only Helblindi wasn’t the type of person to defy expectations.

Loki continued to run, his heart pounding and a burning sensation inside of his throat made him believe that he might have to stop after all to empty his stomach. There was something else he had to outrun. The feeling of fiery needles digging into the back of his neck. A constant infecting pain that spread rapidly across his body, making it burn with shame.

If Loki were only able to run fast enough. On the next step his shoe lost its grip and Loki began to tumble, losing his balance. He barely made it to grab the railing and to steady himself, preventing a fall down the stairs. Nevertheless a severe stab of pain shot through his foot, making him believe that having a knife rammed into his flesh had to feel the same way. In the back of his mind he thought of the stitches Doctor Strange had done and that they may have burst open. An unimportant consideration that Loki instantly dismissed and continued his escape.

By the time Loki had reached the ground floor he was dizzy, sweating and the last remains of his sanity had been lost somewhere on the stairway. Left behind for Helblindi to pick up. A puzzle that nobody would be able to put back together. The astonished look on his driver’s face could not be missed, but Loki wasn’t capable of caring about it in the least. Hastily he muttered the place he wanted to go and then sunk into the soft cushioning of the backseat.

Right now he had no idea what he was going to do, but the need within him to do something had replaced every single small desire that his soul had ever harboured. To right the unimaginable wrong
that had been done to him. Or to at least release loud, anguished scream that had been buried inside of him, because nobody was ever allowed to hear it and therefore Loki had to keep it down. For it to torture him. A scream so loud that all his ancestors would hear it. The ones Loki had no idea about.

When the car stopped Loki was still shaking and physical exhaustion had nothing to do with it. He felt faint, a distinctive feeling in his stomach like he could throw up any moment. Another thing that Loki could not pay attention to. There was no time to stand groaning and spitting next to the car when he was yearning for that scream and for everybody to hear it. Or just the one who caused it. The driver did not get an opportunity to open the door for him. Loki jumped out and again started to run. Maybe even faster this time. Nausea and sickness had him ignoring the confused and concerned glances all around the halls. The entire staff asking themselves what to do as they saw him flying by. There was no running inside of the palace.

The guard in front of his mother’s rooms stared at him helplessly as soon as Loki turned around the corner. Luckily he could read on Loki’s face that now was not the time to respect protocol and to ask questions. His terrible sight alone was enough to have the door opened for him. As Loki slammed the door shut behind him he had trouble telling his legs to stop moving, he no longer felt like the master of his own body. His grip on his sanity was also slipping and was completely lost by the moment his eyes found his mother. Despite the state he was in Loki could see the relief and the happiness on her face to see him. Nobody should be glad to see a monster. It only made his rage rushing faster through his veins. Releasing an uncontrollable, fierce beast.

“Loki, my sweet child, where have you…”

The sound and inflection of her voice was enough to push him over the edge. Now the voice that had always calmed him down as a child was making him scream. “How could you do this to me?! Repeating over and over again that you love me and then you turn me into this! A vile creature that does not stop wanting! Which doesn’t even shy away from destroying the very thing he desires!”

Frigga was wearing a lithe blue robe, one that he had seen many times before and Loki distinctly remembered thinking that she looked beautiful in it. Now he had nothing but disgust for her. “Loki, please, you are distraught. If you…”

How could she even dare to talk back to him? To try to reason when all of this was madness? When she was even more insane than Loki himself. “He is not like me and I wanted to pull him down to my level. I did not care. Because I wanted him. All I do is wanting and all I want is either too good for me or already tainted, so all I’m feeling now is disgust and hatred and I am sick of feeling that way! I cannot do it anymore!”

This time she wasn’t trying to approach him and that was good, because Loki couldn’t have guaranteed for anything. He didn’t trust himself at all right now. There was another thing he wanted, ugly and wretched. It wouldn’t even be revenge but justice. If only something fair and sincere could be delivered by Loki’s hands.

“Listen, my son, I am so sorry that I’ve caused you pain. You do not deserve any of it. I can see that you’re tried, that you’re not sleeping…”

“Sleep?! How do you want me to sleep!?”

She took a step back as Loki yelled at her and he felt the last bits of his composure slipping. “I thought it could be liberating. Something like complete freedom, because I do no longer have care about anything. No rules apply… It’s not like that at all! He was right there and I still cannot have him! Because simply everything is wrong with me! Everything! You made me this way! This thing that I don’t want to be and you force me to hate! Now I do not know anymore how to do anything
else! Wanting and hating. So I guess I have to destroy everything that you intended to happen.”

A slight tremor was taking over Frigga’s body and it should have given Loki a feeling of satisfaction, but instead it angered him even more. How could she be worried and afraid when she should have seen it coming. When this was the only way that it could have gone anyway. “Loki, just give me a moment. I can make you understand. You will stop feeling this way if you only give me a chance to explain to you.”

She wasn’t calm. Perhaps she could sense how far Loki was gone. That she had pushed him over the edge and Loki wasn’t just going to fall. No, he was going to pull as many people as possible down with him. Especially the ones who pushed him. The ones who had destroyed his life and who still planned on destroying those whom he loved.

“You want to give me an explanation!? Go ahead, I am eager to hear it!” Loki balled his hands into fists, because he did not trust himself about what he might do next. “What was your plan? I am not the firstborn! Even as the son of the king I don’t have the right to the throne! Thor does! He is the crown prince. What was your plan? How did you want to get rid of him?! Tell me! What was your plan?!”

“Loki…”

“Stop saying my name!” Loki raised his voice again and now she recoiled. Maybe for the first time in his entire life Frigga looked at him with something else in her eyes than utter adoration. Just a hint of fear. “What was your plan with Thor?! How was I ever supposed to get on the throne!?”

Slowly she parted her lips, but whatever words she might have chosen to explain and to defend herself, she knew better than to voice them.

“Tell me! What was the plan for the son that you never really wanted? What was supposed to happen to him?”

Loki’s question was met with silence and it was more than he could take. So he took a step forward, using the small bit of height that he had on her as an advantage. It was such a basic and primitive way to try to intimidate someone and yet it came to him naturally. Worst of all – it worked. “You have already admitted to the most horrible sins, so why stop there?! Just tell me that you were involved in the attack on Thor. Whose order was it? Yours or Laufey’s? Did you really point your finger at your own son? Your flesh and blood? It’s the easiest way after all. When the elder son is dead and burned, the second one can take his place. So shockingly easy. What’s a little mess? No need to worry about a bit of blood on your hands when you’ve already gone this far. Tell me now! Did you and that cursed man who dares to call himself my father try to kill my brother?!”

Again Loki merely received silence in return. Silence and the wild look of guilt in her eyes. It was unbearable how much those pools of green resembled his own. Weren’t they two sides of the same coin? Woven with the same thread? The desire to crush them both was burning inside of Loki, ravaging him. He longed to do the very same with the entire palace as long as they were still both inside of it.

“Who was it? You or Laufey?! Tell me!”

“Loki, I would never…”

“So how was this supposed to work?! What was your plan for Thor? A bullet? Poison? Force him to abdicate? How so?”
“Loki, please…”

He had intended to never let her touch him again or to let her close to him. Forget about the kisses on his forehead and the gentle words about how special and precious he was. Now Loki was forcefully grabbing her wrists as if that could make her admit her crimes. So that Loki could be sure that she was worse than him. “Look me in the eyes and tell me that you tried to kill Thor!”

“Loki, sweet, you are hurting me.”

Good. Then maybe she would finally able to understand what she was doing to him. If that even meant anything to her. “And after you get rid of Thor, what are you going to do about the problem that is Helblindi? All of Jotunheim loves him and most of the rest of the country too. They would never accept me over him. I would choose him over me! You realised that. So you poisoned him!”

Those green eyes widened in honest shock and she was shaking her head. It looked all so real and yet Loki couldn’t believe any of it. Not a single word out of her mouth had any value as long as it wasn’t a confession. Loki didn’t even know what he was going to do as soon as he had this information, but he needed it. This was the only certainty that he had. Complete insanity and need.

“Did you get Laufey’s permission? Or is he none-the-wiser that you intended to murder his legitimate son? The one his real wife gave birth to. Did you do it behind his back, because children and sons are so easily replaced?”

Finally she gave him an answer and of course it did not mean anything. “You and I both know who is responsible for what happened to Helblindi. I would never harm a son of Laufey in any kind of way. You know that. You are angry, that’s why you are here. Lashing out. But please, Loki, if you were just willing to let me help…”

Loki pushed her away. Violently. Frigga stumbled, almost fell down and when she raised her eyes to him again, she was afraid. “Tell me what you did to them! Are you going to try and kill everybody who means something to me? Is father going to be next?”

“You are mad. You don’t know what you are…”

“Admit it! If there is still a single decent bone in your body, you will tell me about your plans and about everybody who was involved! Tell me the truth! Admit that you wanted to kill your own son! My brother!”

“No, Loki, you…”

“No more lies!” Feverishly Loki shook his head and his confused mind was racing to find a way to make her talk. To tell him the obvious. “I will not hear any of it. I deserve the truth!”

And she deserved nothing but his contempt. Even more so when she suddenly didn’t look as frightened anymore. “The truth is that there is no need to hurt or manipulate Thor, so you will get what his rightfully yours. He does not have the means to fill this role. Unlike you.”

Loki recognized the disdain in her voice. It was so similar to the contempt that he had for her. Except that she had no right to feel this way. Thor had a good heart, a strong luonto and that sometimes so clumsy but sweet way to deal with people. Very much unlike her Thor was a good person. One of the best Loki had ever known and Frigga hated him. Worse so. She had tried to take him away from Loki. She had tried to kill Loki’s brother and instead of withering away from the shame and guilt from doing so, she wore her hatred as a crown. With pride and that disgusting conviction of doing something complete justified and inevitable.
Loki wanted her to stop doing that. Loki needed her to stop everything.

“No more.”

She screamed but Loki didn’t even really hear it. For him it was like stepping out of his own body, watching another version of himself wrapping a hand around his mother’s throat. It made sense though. To stop her from lying and to protect Thor. Helblindi. And to get some justice for himself.

Her eyes were wide as she grasped at his arm and Loki just wanted her to say it. To tell him the truth. Even if he had to squeeze the words out of her. Then maybe Loki would stop feeling like this and how good would that be.

The sound of the door being opened shattered the bubble he was inside of. As the pieces fell to the ground Loki blinked, overcome with sickness and nausea. He let go and stumbled back, his eyes darting from his mother to the two guards in the doorframe. Around him the room started to crumble and Loki thought he was going to faint. Quickly and unsteadily he moved towards the door, but the guards remained where they were, refusing to let him through.

“Out of my way.” Loki hissed at them and the sound coming out of his mouth was hoarse and hard to make out.

They didn’t move and Loki felt the panic rising up inside of him. Making it hard to breathe.

“Let him go.”

Loki did not turn around to look at her when Frigga voiced those words. Reluctantly the guards moved aside and Loki once again started running. Only after a few steps he was forced into an abrupt halt and the feeling of suffocating reappeared with twice the intensity. The man blocking his way now was his father.

No, not his father. Just the man who had raised him with love and care, so Loki could one day steal everything from him. Odin was looking at him with in a way that was not unfamiliar. Attentive, worried and like a man who had done so much during his long life that it was not fair that he should still have sorrows and troubles. What else could Loki ever bestow on him?

“Son, where have you been? You’ve had us burdened with concern for you.” Odin’s words were soft, filled with actual content to see Loki. Nothing could be more wrong. Every single confrontation with Frigga and Laufey was nothing compared to this. The shame was wearing him down. Odin’s gentle gaze on him felt like a knife being brutally thrust into his stomach. Loki would prefer the actual knife to this. Everything would be better than having to face the man who had been so utterly betrayed by Loki’s mere existence.

“It is nice to see that you have come home.”

The mere idea of Odin opening his arms to welcome him back had bright spots dancing in front of Loki’s eyes. Before the sickness in his stomach got the better of him.

Loki ran. Faster than he had ever before. The shame came with him and tears were burning in his eyes.

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“My prince, I am sorry to wake you, but it is urgent.”

Sleep only slowly let go of him and when Helblindi opened his eyes he had no idea where he was. It
could be any room, his surroundings were blurred and fuzzy. He had trouble making things out and
to start the day like this was a gruesome reminder of this new reality. Also his head was throbbling
with a nasty headache. Blindly he was reaching for the nightstand and found the glasses. When he
put them on the world became a lot clearer. Now he was able to actually see Týr standing next to his
bed.

“What time is it?”

“6:30, my prince. I am sorry for the early disturbance, but your father wishes to talk to you.”

A short nod increased Helblindi’s headache and he sat up slowly despite wanting nothing more than
falling up into a deep slumber. Preferably for the next two days. “I just need another moment. Could
you please get me an aspirin?”

Thanks to the glasses Helblindi could make out Týr’s disapproving look very clearly. “It would be
better if you saw a doctor, my prince. You left home too soon. You’re still in recovery.”

“For now I’ll be doing fine with an aspirin. Quickly please. My father doesn’t like to be kept
waiting.”

While Týr was doing as he was told, Helblindi slowly got out of the safe cocoon that was his bed
and wrapped himself in a dressing gown. Unfortunately the aspirin took some time to work, so
Helblindi was still feeling unwell when he sat down in front of the laptop that displayed his father’s
and his brother’s faces.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, son. How are you doing?”

“Good enough. It was a very short night. What do you want to talk with me about?” It was a
rhetorical question. Helblindi was well aware of what was going on.

Their expressions weren’t grim, but happiness looked very different. Not that Helblindi was
particularly surprised by that.

His father nodded slightly as if he was confirming something that Helblindi hadn’t even said. “You
did a very brave and admirable thing yesterday. I want you to know that I am proud. You acted like
royalty.”

Yes, because nobody else had been doing anything. Not the false king. Not Helblindi’s father. Not
Helblindi’s fiancé. Helblindi had always been very bad at standing by the side. Doing nothing was
not in his nature. “Something had to be done. Our people were putting themselves in danger for
nothing.”

“For nothing?” Býleistr stared at him with indignation. “They were doing it for you! Because they
are furious about what they did to you. How can you say that it was for nothing?”

“Because I am doing fine. Because I don’t want a single burning building in Valhalla or in
Jotunheim because of me. That is something I am not going to let happen.”

Býleistr opened his mouth again, definitely to protest, but their father stopped him. “It honours you
that you want to protect your people. Yet I cannot help but wonder why you would let such an
opportunity pass. You had everybody listening to you. Jotun and Asgardian, but you didn’t tell them
the truth. Me and your brother want to know why.”
The glasses felt so strange on him and Helblindi wondered how long it would take to get used to them. If he was ever going to. “I am not going to lie to my people. Ever.”

“You know it’s not a lie.”

Helblindi shook his head and a flash of pain went right through it. “There is no proof that they had anything to do with what happened to me. So what was I supposed to say?”

“Just because we don’t have any proof, it does not mean we don’t know what happened. Everybody knows what happened and I cannot understand why you are so willingly let them get away with this.” Helblindi was not used to Býleistr criticising him. In this case there even seemed to be hostility. All his life Býleistr had worshipped the floor Helblindi was walking on. Like most other people.

“I am not willing to let them get away with this. Do you think I enjoy this? That this is what I wanted?” Helblindi demonstratively took off his glasses and their faces became a blurred, beige mess. “None of it felt good. It was bloody painful and I’ve never been this afraid in my entire life. I didn’t want any of that and I want someone to pay for it. The ones who did that. The pretender king and his forsaken son. But that is my battle and I will not let my people fight it for me. Even less so when I am unable to tell them what happened.”

“I don’t understand you.” He could hear his brother whispering. “You are the crown prince. Everything that happens to you concerns all of Jotunheim. They want to fight for you, to protect you. How could you refuse that?”

“Because it is my duty to protect them and my opinion has not changed. I am going to make the relationship between Valhalla and Jotunheim work. Me and my fiancé. Together.”

There was still protest, but Helblindi’s headache made it too hard to listen to it. “Thank you for checking on me. I need to leave now, I want to show my face around the city. Make sure people are okay. I will call you when I get back.”

Or a little later. Helblindi had a lot on his schedule.
Hey everybody,

Damn, this chapter has 7000 words. Good luck ;)

“Tony, we really do have to insist that…”

With a loud groan Tony let his head fall back, very exerted to show his annoyance in every possible way. “Do we really have to do that? You insist, I roll my eyes and make a snarky comment and in the end I do what I want anyway. This time we could spare some time and as you know – time is money.”

“The head of an international multi-billion dollar company like Stark Industries can’t just hang out in a potential warzone, because he feels like it. You have responsibilities.”

This was why Tony hated talking to members of the board. They all were definitive buzz killers. “Why do you make me answer you with facts? That’s so boring. Alright, facts. It’s not a warzone. There was a tiny little uprising among the population and that has been dealt with. Also, I had to do business here.”

“And that has also been dealt with. There is no more reason to stay in Asgard. If you want to go on vacation, then please do it in a country that doesn’t have a travel warning written all over it. Switzerland is nice at this time of the year. St. Moritz would be glad to accommodate you.”

Could he have come up with something even more boring? Switzerland? What was next? Italy? “A travel warning? Seriously? What level?”

“Three.”

“Oh, come on. What’s a vacation without a little action? It’s not like I’m on a trip to Yemen or Somalia. I’ll be back in a couple of days when we sign the contract with Craven. That’s what you guys are really worried around. In the meantime I promise not to get killed, but I definitely will do something stupid. Let’s face it, that’s the best you will get from me. I wish you a most pleasant day. I have to do some poking around in an active war zone.”

After ending the call Tony stepped up to the window and took a closer look at the remains of last night’s chaos. The building, which he had found out was one of the residences of the royal family, had not completely burned down, but nobody was going to live here for a rather long time. Clean up was already going on and given by what had been going on last night it would take longer than a couple of hours for the streets to look like they had before.

It wasn’t news to anybody that Tony had the worst timing imaginable. However, that had never stopped him from doing what he had planned anyway. Also, now he finally had a good idea of what he was going to do. Thanks to the king’s wife. Tony hadn’t been the greatest gentleman by refusing to do her bidding, although it definitely wasn’t in his nature to act against a desperate woman’s wishes. Too bad he sometimes was a selfish jerk who happened to have a sixth sense about people
trying to use him.

That didn’t mean Tony wasn’t ready to use them in return.

Sometimes he wondered what the prince’s secretary had to think of him. Even men in the Top Five of the Forbes List could end up being the guy who tried to get his one-night-stand to call him. Tony had to have at least a few traits that made him human.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’m not even going to try to talk you into giving me his number. I merely want you to pass on a message. The prince’s mother came to talk to me yesterday. About him. If he wants to know what it was all about, he can give me a call any time.”

That was all. Now Tony had to play the waiting game. In all honesty, he would be shocked if prince charming didn’t take the bait. Whatever beef he had with his mom, Tony was willing to take a pretty high bet that it was severe. Otherwise a classy lady like that wouldn’t lower herself to ask the guy who had fucked her son for help. Tony had to be at the very bottom of a long list. Not that he minded very much, his interest wasn’t with the royal family, but with only one member of it.

“Damn, he could really appreciate all the trouble I’m going through for him. What kind of idiot works his ass off like I do…” Walking over to the bar Tony fixed himself a glass of whiskey and then went on to enjoy the smooth taste of it. His phone was lying on the couch table and Tony glanced at it ever so often, waiting for the prince to call. Because he would, Tony was ridiculously sure of that. Until then he could make himself comfortable and enjoy some Netflix. Maybe it was time to watch that documentary about him that he had never agreed to. Should definitely be entertaining.

25 minutes into the movie Tony was pretty sure that he could get a fine lawsuit out of this. It had to wait though since somebody was knocking at his door. Probably the board had turned to Pepper and now she was going to try to convince him to go back home. That normally would be fun, but Tony was waiting for an important call. Reluctantly and as slowly as humanly possible Tony got up from the couch, already mentally preparing some unnerving comments for Pepper. When he opened the door he wasn’t looking at Pepper though. In front of him was Prince Charming.

Tony was definitely surprised to see him. Not shocked. He was shocked by the evident fact that the prince didn’t look as charming anymore. Sure, anybody could have a bad day when you just rolled out of bed, your hair looked like shit and your skin had that really unhealthy tone. Normally people then liked to spend their entire day on the couch. A bad night of sleep couldn’t ruin the looks of person in Prince Charming’s league, but the man in front of Tony clearly hadn’t closed his eyes in a very long time.

Still, there was a soft, pleasant tingle running down Tony’s spine. Damn, he had definitely missed this guy. “Your highness, what a most pleasant surprise. I would have been content with a mere phone call, but this is definitely better. Why don’t you come inside?” Tony stepped aside and made an inviting gesture.

Not saying anything Loki entered the room and Tony took advantage of this opportunity to look him up and down. The sleeves of his shirt looked dirty and wrinkled. Not very royal. Something was wrong with the colour of his skin. Immaculate white now looked strangely grey. The most prominent difference had to be his hair though. It was uncombed, falling in greasy strands into his face. Not quite the same person that Tony had had on almost every piece of furniture in his Parisian apartment. It was not enough to completely disfigure his beauty, because this was one fine man.

“The last time you complained that I didn’t offer you something to drink, so would you like…”
“What did she say to you?” Loki interrupted him coldly and every single vibe that Tony got of him was off. Like someone had sucked all life out of him. No, wrong. Not life. Happiness? Was that too melodramatic?

“Are you alright, Prince Charming?”

“I am not here to have a conversation with you, Mr. Stark. I need to know what my mother discussed with you. Right now.”

Huh. Tony had hit bullseye. It was actually a bit scary just how right he had been. “Okay, how about we make a deal? You look awful and that is quite an achievement when you’re usually such a hot person. How about you sit down, have a coffee and I tell you what you want to hear? You bouncing around like that kinda makes me dizzy.”

Evidently there was nothing that bothered Loki less. He didn’t move, just stared at Tony with green, slightly bloodshot eyes. An intense, rather unsettling glare which didn’t resemble the one Tony had taken a liking to. Not flirtatious or annoyed or maybe even slightly condescending. No, he looked haunted. Almost like a guy with a bad cocaine habit whose daily dosage didn’t cover his need anymore. However, Tony was perfectly sure that no substance abuse was involved here. This was lack of sleep and a shitload of family troubles.

“Tell me what my mother said to you.” The urgency in his voice rubbed Tony the wrong way. It was not his usual tone. Despite his arrogance the prince always kind of expected, even wanted Tony to talk back at him, to challenge his supposed superiority. Part of it was serious, part of it was a game. This right now was none of that.

“Like I said – how about you sit down and take a breath before we…”

“I am not going to let you waste my time.” Just like that the prince was moving past him and that had to be the moment when all infatuation went out the window. When you realised – Hey, the other guy isn’t all fun and games. He has some major baggage and it definitely does not look pretty. Time to let him walk out the door and go back to sleeping with models half his age that he had thrown out by Pepper the next morning. Fun times. Easy to go back to and it was equally easy to say ‘Fuck them’.

“Alright, slow down. What is it with you? Always so freaking demanding. Okay, from the beginning. Your mother showed up here and wanted me to meet up with you. She offered to arrange a meeting since I’ve been trying to contact you and you’ve been brushing that off. Are you going to sit down now?”

Loki didn’t, but at least he had stopped heading for the door. When he turned back around he still had that dark glint in his eyes. Tony didn’t like it. Not after the wickedness and playfulness he had seen there before. “So what is this now? What did you say to her?”

“Hey, I am far too old to have a mother set up dates for me. I am perfectly capable of doing that myself. Also, it was just a bit creepy.” Tony shrugged casually and to his surprise he could see some of the tension leaving Loki’s body. Still that couldn’t be confused with relaxing. “Like she only wanted me to talk to you to put in a good word for her. I assumed that you guys have some issues. Which is now fucking obvious given how you waltzed in here. For a moment I actually worried that you might tear down my walls. Well, not my walls technically, but it would be a real nuisance to explain this to the hotel manager.”

There. Tony finally saw something that was another emotion than complete distress. Now Loki was also annoyed and pissed. At Tony. That was definitely progress. “Everything is a joke to you, right?”
“No. Unfortunately I don’t think anything about this is particularly funny. I don’t like to get pulled into personal drama and your mother tried to do just that. Not something I am very fond of. I am in the city to do business… and I am always game for a couple of drinks. This is not what I bargained for. Won’t you finally sit down? You’re making me dizzy.”

Naturally Loki didn’t move, because who would ever want to do Tony a favour. Not going to happen. “What else did she say? About me and what did she want from you?”

Tony shrugged. “She didn’t go into specifics, but it was pretty obvious that the both of you aren’t in the best spot. That you don’t want to talk to her. It has to do something with your engagement and how it got dissolved. Sincere condolences by the way.”

Something that he had said, Tony wasn’t sure what it was, set Loki off. Tony wouldn’t have thought that it could get even worse, but a fire seemed to light up in Loki’s eyes. Not one that could be associated with passion or joy. Tony was facing an almost blind fury. It was unsettling although it was obviously not directed at him. Hearing Loki’s voice shaking just wasn’t right. “She talked to you about Helblindi?”

“If that is your fiancé’s… ex-fiancé’s name. No, she merely mentioned an engagement. Nothing more.” Even if she had, Tony would have probably lied about it given the haunted look on Loki’s face. A part of Tony was worried that he would storm out here any second and go on a rampage if he said the wrong thing. That was definitely the last thing that Tony wanted. They had already got to the root of this disaster. Tony had ears, he had heard in Loki’s inflection when he had voiced that name. Had his mother fucked up his relationship? Why would she want to get Tony involved? Did she have issues with the fiancé? And where had Tony heard that name before?

Three seconds later the scales fell from Tony’s eyes and his memory did him a favour. Normally he was way better at remembering numbers than names, but seemingly things were different when it came down to Prince Charming.

“Hel… how common is that name in Asgard? We’re not talking about the son of that Jotun chief? The one who got poisoned and looks like…” There was no need to even finish his question. The way Loki was grinding his jaw said more than an actual answer. This new piece of information had Tony’s mind racing. He was a little torn between wanting to complain about how unfair life could be and marvelling at the mental image that had just come up. “Wow, kudos to you. Okay, I get it. If I were dating that guy I wouldn’t answer my calls either. He’s like sex on legs.”

“Don’t talk about him. None of this concerns you.” Loki muttered under his breath and that was the last bit of confirmation that Tony hadn’t really needed anyway. In front of him was standing a man who reacted so obviously to a name being mentioned. No questions needed to be asked, Prince Charming was definitely unhappy with the current state of his engagement. Normally Tony had no trouble dealing with a little competition. Why not? It was fun to make them believe they had a chance before he crushed them. Unfortunately Tony was still self-aware enough to realise that he was screwed. Everybody would be screwed when that guy with that face was involved.

It could be a political match. Made perfect sense to bind new ties between Jotunheim and the rest of the country. Considering the intense reaction Tony suspected that there was much more to it. Of course he did not like that, but he liked the sight right in front of him even less.

“Okay, right, none of this is my business. I get it. I don’t know anything about your relationship. I don’t know what’s going on between you and your mother. I do not have the slightest idea what kind of shit happened to you, but I have eyes and I can see that something is wrong with you. That’s why I want you to sit down and take a breath. Calm down. Drink a hot chocolate or even better get some sleep. You desperately need it.”
Loki laughed drily and it upset Tony more than he ever wanted to admit. “And why the hell would you care?”

It would be wrong to smack an obviously distraught prince who would probably have you thrown into the dungeon because of that. “Wow… How about we don’t start pretending now that we don’t both know that I like you? You also like me. I don’t know what the two of us had going on. Let’s call it friends with benefits. There is still a friends-part in there. I don’t like to see you unwell, so could you do me a favour and sit down. I would really like for you to feel better. That couch over there is awesome. I fell asleep on it before, watching Netflix. How about you lie down and close your eyes? I know you are a prince, you have shit to do. 20 minutes could be enough. How does that sound?”

Now Loki was staring at him. No longer angry or mad, but utterly confused. Then his eyes darted to said couch and Tony could see how much he was longing for a moment to close his eyes and forget about whatever was happening to him right now. It had Tony thinking that there was actually a chance that he would say. That he could wind him down.

Before he could think about giving Loki a little push the ringing of the other’s phone destroyed the short instant of calmness. Clearly irritated Loki pulled his phone from the pocket and glanced at it. A cold mask slid over his face as he refused to answer the call.

“Everything alright?”

“I have to go. Don’t talk with my mother about me.”

Loki was already at the door when Tony called after him. “Did your mother break you up? You and your fiancé?”

That question had him freezing and Tony took advantage of the situation to catch up with him. He wasn’t going to get an answer, Tony was aware of that. At least not a verbal one. “You are not in a good place, I get it. You don’t want to talk to me, that’s fine. I just want you to know that I am still around if you feel like talking. Okay, I was never your Go-To-Person, but I do believe that you know that I understand you. If you still happen to feel like talking eventually, just give me a call.”

“You are not the person I want to talk to.”

“Okay, fair enough.” Tony shrugged lightly. “Still, I am in no hurry to get back in New York and if you still end up feeling like talking to someone who is not from around here. You know where to find me.”

Loki slightly narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously like he was trying to catch Tony in the act of lying. Not going to happen. Eventually he hinted at a nod and walked out of Tony’s hotel suite. Releasing a long breath Tony pushed the door closed behind him. He really didn’t like to make his own life easier.

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“I’m sorry, my Lord, but I do not see any way I can help you with this. You will have to turn to a higher authority than me.”

Helblindi’s smile wasn’t wavering. It stayed perfectly in place and he wasn’t going to let that change. On this front one had to fight with every weapon at one’s disposal. “Minister Hagen, I fear you are misunderstanding me and this issue is too important for me to not be absolutely clear about everything. I apologize that I was not able to explain the reason for my visit. Thank you again for
Hagen nodded and sent Helblindi a genuine smile in return. “It is always a pleasure and honour to have you here, my Lord.”

The old-fashioned glasses on Hagen’s face didn’t stop Helblindi from closely studying his eyes. There was some real fondness for Helblindi and he had counted on that since Hagen had helped them when Loki and Helblindi had created the conditions for their engagement. Also Helblindi was well aware that Hagen was closer to Loki in his political beliefs than to the king. Another reason why Helblindi was definitely talking to the right person. “Sir, I am not asking you to open the gates and let these people go. Under different circumstances you might have been able to do something, but I know that the king or the crown prince are going to want to decide personally what happens to everybody involved in… last night’s events.”

“The riot.” Hagen corrected him without the slightest hesitation. “You said you didn’t want there to be any misunderstandings, my Lord.”

Yes, Helblindi should know better than trying to sugar-coat what had happened. “You are right. The riot. Like I said, I do not want you to release anybody. The crown will personally oversee the procedures. What I am asking you to do is to take a stance. To advocate for the release of the people present during the riot. Not the ones who attacked police forces or who set the fires. I am being reasonable. All I want is a word in their favour from the minister of justice. Otherwise I fear that a lot of good people will end up in front of a judge for merely being carried away by a wave of general outrage. Could you do that for me, Minister Hagen? As you know I am not likely to forget somebody’s support or good work.”

The other one was thinking as a man in his position should. Weighing the pros and cons and asked himself how far he could go without bestowing the anger of the crown on himself. Or if Helblindi’s good will was worth that. “My Lord, you’ve said yourself that these are not normal circumstances. If they were, you could definitely be sure of my support, but I fear you overestimate my influence. The riot last night didn’t had a policy or an ideology as a target. No, there were voices in the crowds who shouted for the assassination of members of the royal family. It seems to me as the logical consequence that the king is not going to treat mere followers lightly.”

“So is it right to judge hundreds of people the same way for paroles that only a handful of them wore? I am talking about teenager, students who have never participated in any incident of that kind before, but who were angry and felt like they had to do something. Then they went out on the streets. You know just as well as I do that not everybody whose hands were cuffed had actually committed a crime. At the end of the night all of them went home.”

Hagen nodded. “Because you told them to, your Lord. Please do not doubt my appreciation of what you did last night, but the riot dissolving is merely a testament to your skill and reputation among the Jotun population. How do you think that the night would have continued if you had not put an end to it? Military intervention? What about all the weapons that have been confiscated? Would they have been used against Valhallan civilian population? Or against the palace?”

“We are both lawyers, minister. We do not base our arguments on ‘What ifs’ but on what actually happened.”

“Certainly, my Lord. Nonetheless it’s not the two of us or another lawyer who is going to make that decision. It’s the crown and as a family they are going to ask themselves these questions before deciding if any participant is going to be released.”

If there was one thing in his life that Helblindi was sick of that it had to be the royal family making
decisions for him or any other Jotun they didn’t care about. Helblindi straightened in his chair before releasing the faintest sigh. He reached up and pulled off his glasses, placing them on the desk. Hagen turned from a man in his early sixties with grey hair and freckles into a blurred, colourful mass. All details had vanished. That didn’t mean Helblindi didn’t know that Hagen had observed his move very carefully. The glasses were a proof of his new disability, but they were also a tool that could be used to his advantage and Helblindi would be damned if he didn’t do just that. “Minister, from my point of view it’s not in the royal family’s interest to smash these people with the fist of the law. Every citizen of this country knows why people went to the streets last night. They made that very clear. Until this very hour the investigation remained fruitless. Whoever orchestrated the attack on my life is still at large although it happened within the walls of the palace. Supposedly the safest spot in all of Asgard. So either the royal family is facing a huge embarrassment for not being able to protect a member of high nobility and to fail in uncovering the truth or…” Helblindi paused to put the glasses back on and to take in Hagen’s stern and displeased expression. “Or a swift and through discovery is not in their interest.”

“My Lord, I am vastly distraught by what happened to you and you have my greatest sympathy, but I cannot condone what you are insinuating. The implication of the royal family in your poisoning in any kind of way is unthinkable. You should know that. Especially since you are engaged to one of the princes.”

Helblindi was going to think about Loki later. Now was not the time. “All I am saying is that I am drawing my own conclusions and the people will do the same. Have already done the same. They went home last night, because they trust me, because I do not lie to them. I sincerely do not want to imagine what the people might feel inclined to do if I were to share my conclusions with them. Something I have refrained from until now. Would you be so kind and share my concerns with the king and the crown prince? My immense gratefulness would be yours.”

One minute later Helblindi left the department with his head held high and blank features. He was not going to let anybody call his bluff. Týr escorted him to the car, not saying a word and Helblindi was glad, because it gave him an opportunity to lose himself in his thoughts. Now all wrapped about the second event from last night that had shaken him. Even on his worst days Helblindi wasn’t arrogant enough to assume he knew everything that motivated Loki, what kept him up at night or what scared him. Helblindi wanted to know though.

It was anything but a surprise that Loki didn’t answer his call and yet it made Helblindi feel a little sting in his chest. “Hey, it’s me. I still don’t know what happened to you feel the need to push me away. To protect me or yourself, I don’t know. I said a lot of things last night and I wondered if I forgot what is most important. I miss you. I am not doing fine and I miss you. I am trying to clear up this damned mess and I do not think I can do it without you. I am tired, I just want a long night of sleep and I love you. That’s why I am going to keep coming around until you talk to me. I hope you are doing better. Take care.”

Helblindi’s throat felt uncomfortably tight and he was well aware of Týr’s disapproving glare. How wonderful that Helblindi didn’t give a damn. No matter how much he loved Týr, when it came down to this, Helblindi wasn’t interested in whatever he thought about it. During the entire drive Helblindi enjoyed the small thread of hope that Loki would listen to his message and call him back. It didn’t happen.

Instead he arrived at the townhouse with the same weight on his shoulders and the constant longing to crawl beneath the sheets of his bed and let the world continuing to spin on its own. Sometimes his selfishness disgusted him so much that he wanted to claw his eyes out. Or what was left of them. It wasn’t going to happen today since Helblindi found a surprise in the salon. For the first time in ages it was not an unpleasant one.
“Býleistr, did you hop on the very first plane?” With a relieved smile Helblindi closed his arms around his little brother who immediately hugged him back. A little too tightly like he always did. It felt like home even in Valhalla.

“After our last conversation it became blatantly obvious that I can’t let you alone any longer.” Pulling back Býleistr looked him up and down to slightly screw up his face. “You look even worse than first thing in the morning. Did you get any sleep at all?”

“You and father woke me up. I guess the overdose of aspirin doesn’t help my complexion.”

“You’ve got a headache after a severe head injury and you’re walking around town? Sit down, won’t you? You’ve left Jotunheim way too early. I should just force you on a plane back home.” When Býleistr pushed him down on the couch Helblindi didn’t resist, merely asked with a smile if the elder brother shouldn’t be one who ordered the other one around.

“Not if the elder one begins acting irrationally.” Býleistr handed him a glass of water, but Helblindi was severely distracted by something pushing against his leg. Glancing down he saw Fenrir pleading for his attention and Helblindi picked him up with a feeling that resembled joy. This was what it was like when he was feeling good. It hadn’t happened in a while. Running his fingers through the soft fur Helblindi tried not thinking about Loki’s fierce and desperate kiss and how Helblindi had thought that everything was back to normal. Just for a second.

“We need to talk. I am worried about you.” Býleistr sat down opposite of him while Fenrir was licking the tips of Helblindi’s fingers.

Shaking his head he tried to dismiss this conversation before it would even take place. “I am fine. No reason to worry. Just a lack of sleep and a bad migraine. Nothing a bit of sleep cannot fix. It’s so nice to see you, Býleistr.”

His little brother showed him a small smile before turning serious again. In a way that had Helblindi worrying. “That’s not what I mean. I better get straight to the point. I know you have your ideals and everything you have done, you did in the belief that it would be the best for Jotunheim, but you’re being taken advantage of. You are being manipulated.”

The old song and dance. Helblindi didn’t know if he had the energy to hear it. “Do we have to go over this again? I don’t think we…”

“They are torturing Þórirsson.” Býleistr stated simply and Helblindi’s hand froze on Fenrir’s back. “What?”

“Týr was able to obtain that information from the court.”

That little bubble of wellbeing burst and Helblindi felt cold and overcome by disgust for that false king and his rotten son. First attempted murder and now this. And there was Helblindi himself. Once more failing the ones he had sworn to protect. “Týr? Why would he talk to you and not to me?”

“Because he was worried about your reaction. He didn’t know if you could accept it for what it was…”

“I don’t understand.”

Býleistr spoke slowly, seemingly to make sure that there was no way for Loki to misunderstand him. “He didn’t know how you would react when you heard that it was Loki who ordered it.”

Somebody turned off the lights and Helblindi was trapped in complete darkness. Alone with
confusion and deception that threatened to eat him up from the inside. It was clawing at him when Helblindi reminded himself of being a reasonable person. That there were things that he was absolutely sure of. Putting Fenrir back down Helblindi shook his head. “This accusation is ridiculous.”

His little brother’s eyes went wide in disbelief. “What? It’s a fact and I’ve just told you.”

No, Helblindi wasn’t going to stop shaking his head. None of it made sense. “I don’t doubt what you are telling me, but I do know that Loki is not the one responsible for it. He is not like the rest of them. He would not do it. I know that.”

Rendered speechless Býleistr got up to his feet, staring at Helblindi in a state of shock that he had never seen before. It was so extraordinary that Helblindi for a moment forgot about everything else and just worried about his little brother. “Býleistr, what’s wrong?”

“Everything.” Býleistr whispered hoarsely, still staring at Helblindi. “Everything is wrong. You are supposed to be one. Ever since I was a little child, since the first time I opened a history book or mother and father told us about our family and our responsibility I knew that you would be it. The one to take it all back. The people knew that too and you were doing so well, but lately… You close your eyes in front of something so obvious and real. Why can’t you understand that? He used you to calm down the waves and then he pushed you away. Now he is torturing one of our own and you just say no?! Like it is not happening?! By all the spirits, Helblindi! Look at what is right in front of you!”

He was not screaming, but there was not a lot missing. The sudden change of mood took Helblindi aback, he could hear Fenrir growling. “I can see what is right in front of me. I have come to know him unlike you. I know that he would not do something like that. If you trust me, then also trust my judgment. Whatever information you have, it is false. I know that for sure.”

His attempts to convince his brother of the obvious were futile. Býleistr closed his eyes in resignation, once more shaking his head ever so slightly. “I’ve written so many letters to our ancestors, praying for you. That you would come back to reason. But you won’t. You are too far gone.”

“What are you even talking about?” Helblindi felt at loss, not really understanding what was happening around him. Or why his brother was evidently losing all faith in him?

“I am talking about how he ruined you! You are supposed to be better than all of us and yet you have turned into his little puppet. A Búrison! The ones who have stolen your birth right and now you hand it all over to him willingly! You are not even realising it!”

“I think you should calm down and…”

“Calm down? You are supposed to be it, Helblindi! Everybody believes in you and you turn your back on Jotunheim!”

That accusation coming from his brother was the most hurtful thing that Helblindi could have possibly imagined. It was worse. Something inside his chest was breaking. All the fear and pain of the last weeks vanished in comparison to what was happening this very moment. Who on the surface of this earth should know him better than Býleistr? Standing up Helblindi forced himself to not raise his hand in a threatening gesture. He was hurt in so many different ways. “No matter what caused you to say that, I want you apologize, because you very well know that there is nothing more important to me than Jotunheim. Nothing. Not even father or you.”
“I thought so too. The way it should be, but it’s no longer the case. You are dancing to a Búrison’s tune. Only concerned with your personal relationship when you should be king! You are supposed to be king and instead you are only interested in the man you are sleeping with!”

Balling his hands into fists Helblindi bit the inside of his cheek. To buy himself some time. He did not want to fight with his brother, but he could already feel the anger getting the better of him. “Don’t you dare to go there. It was me who liberated us of the Language Act! It was me and Loki! You have no idea what you are talking about!”

“But I do! You are the blind one how you keep defending him after he walked away from you and clearly…”

“Stop!” Helblindi shouted back at him. “I will not have this. You don’t know anything about him and I will not listen to you talking about him or me like this! I am not ruined, but tired. Tired from trying to clear up this mess. You are not helping me! I don’t need your meaningless accusations! If they’ve laid a single finger on Þórirsson I will come for them and make them regret that for the end of their lives. Loki has nothing to do with it though. Eventually the both of us will take care of all of it and you will learn to live with it.”

That was it. Nothing left to say. The meds had worn off, his head was throbbing from the ache and this conversation had done nothing to improve the situation. He’d probably feel better if Býleistr just left him alone. It was not going to happen. Not when the expression on Býleistr’s face was something between rage and desperation. “What has he done to you? That you forget everything that is important. I don’t understand. I did everything to bring you back home. Away from him. Everything went so wrong. You almost died, because that idiot made you drink and you still went right back to him! What else am I supposed to do to save you? When you so willingly let him ruin you?”

Not his words felt like a knife being thrust into Helblindi’s guts. Those could be interpreted any kind of way. It was his brother’s face that he knew so perfectly well. The genuine despair and the guilt all over his blue eyes. A slight tremor was visibly going through Býleistr’s body and somewhere in his clouded memories Helblindi found his brother’s bloodshot eyes as he was crying next to his bed. Clutching Helblindi’s hand between his own, pleading him to get better while repeating one phrase over and over.

I am sorry

The next breath that Helblindi took seemed be burning his throat. “You did everything to get me away from him how? What did you do?”

“I just needed you to get out of there. So you would be away from them and their influence… What happened wasn’t the plan.”

No. No. No.

“Then what was the plan?” Helblindi’s fingernails were digging painfully into his palms. He already knew, it was right there on Býleistr’s face. The tears glistening in his eyes. “I wasn’t supposed to hit my head, right? I wasn’t supposed to fuck up my eyes.”

“Helblindi.” His name resembled a plea. The same he had heard in the hospital. Býleistr made a step towards him and Helblindi’s first reaction was to back away. “I am sorry. I wanted you to stay with me, but you stormed out of the room. You were only supposed to feel bad. To give you a reason to come home. It was not…”
An entire part of him was ripped out of his chest and left him a different person. “You did this to me! Do you have any idea how scared I was?! You are my brother!”

“I’ve never wanted it this way. You were never even supposed to end up in a hospital room.”

“But I did!” Helblindi couldn’t do anything else but yelling. So loudly until one of them understood what had actually happened. “You almost killed me and you pointed your finger at someone else! By all the…” Suddenly it was getting hard to breathe. Helblindi tried to suck some air into his lungs but he only ended up gasping. Images came to his mind. People chanting. Buildings on fire and a young man and father lying dead on a hospital bed. His crying wife next to him only glad to see Helblindi alive and well. “People got hurt… someone died…”

As he leaned forward to gasp for air Býleistr placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. Try to breathe slowly.”

Spinning around Helblindi violently pushed his brother away. “Don’t touch me! Curse you for forcing this on me!”

The expression on Býleistr’s face changed once more. The guilt which had made Helblindi realise the truth was pushed into the background and then faded away completely. What Helblindi saw instead was making him tremble. Rage. Unyielding. A sensation so real and unsettling that Helblindi made another step back.

“Force on you?! What other choice did I have? You are the rightful king and only a few months ago you were ready and willing to fight for that! Back then you saw them for what they were and now… Now you are fraternizing with them, betraying our home. Our people. Our ancestors.”

Helblindi couldn’t do it. Breathing and thinking were not possible in the presence of his brother. “Go! Leave! Go away now!”

At first it seemed like Býleistr wasn’t going to do him that single favour, but then he turned around on his heels and stormed out. Left behind Helblindi finally thought he could get some air into his lungs. He dropped to his knees anyway. Fenrir rubbed his head against his thigh and Helblindi didn’t feel it. All he could see was the rage on his brother’s face. Devouring his face and then his character. The very same rage Helblindi had seen with the people last night. His people. His brother. Slowly eating them away until there was nothing left of them.

It had to stop. One way or another.

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- **Anchor Stars Hide Your Fire** by [RenneMichaelsArt](https://archiveofourown.org/users/RenneMichaels)

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