Avengers of Steel

by Reyel

Summary

Every legend has an origin. Every story has a beginning. Every Superman was once just a man. Before becoming the Man of Steel, Clark Kent was just a young man trying to find his place in a world that was not his. MoS/Avengers crossover. Superman in Marvel Cinematic Universe.
Prologue

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Prologue - Invasion

"It is a signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war."

When Thor said those words, Fury didn't really believe it. The arrogance of an old civilization, he thought. Just a so called "god" looking down on the potential of humans. But he knew, or at least he thought he knew, that with a little bit of time and a lot of effort, they could eventually become strong enough to defend themselves from any external threat.

They didn't need permission from an alien to use the Tesseract. They didn't need permission to grow, to evolve. They could take care of themselves, thank you very much, and the condescending Asgardian had no right to treat them as if they were children. Fury remembered the anger he felt that time; of course, this anger was very much fueled by Loki's scepter, but it had originated from inside him.

Seeing the Kryptonians fly through the city buildings as if they were made of paper made him rethink that.

Seeing the destruction a single Kryptonian ship had brought on the city, almost destroying the entire world, made him rethink that.

Seeing the mighty Avengers, his last line of defense, who had managed to stop an alien invasion led by a god, completely outclassed and useless as General Zod and Superman fought in the sky made him rethink that.

Every single agent of SHIELD was rethinking that, he noticed. Everyone's eyes in the Helicarrier were glued to the screens, as the satellite's images tried to follow the unbelievable fast and brutal battle of the two aliens. Nobody was speaking. Nobody was moving. The shock and helplessness were almost tangible in the room, as SHIELD realized that there wasn't a single thing they could do but hope for Superman to come victorious.

Fury hated that feeling. When there was a problem, he solved that problem. By whatever means necessary. That was what he did all his life. That was what the SHIELD under his command was led to do. But what could he do now? When the Chitauri attacked, led by Loki, his team was pushed to the limits, but in the end they delivered. The Avengers won the day. Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow and Hawkeye had been victorious. SHIELD had brought them together to save the world and they had done it.

Things were different this time, because there was simply nothing they could do against that kind of threat. Against that "higher form of war", Fury though, bitterly.

His weapons were useless. The Kryptonians most likely wouldn't even feel them, if they could hit the target at all, which was impossible to do since they were flying so fast that they were basically blurs. That was the reason why he didn't even consider to send jets over there, because they wouldn't be able to fly and maneuver that quickly and the pilots would just go there to die. Similarly, sending soldiers on foot when the city was falling apart was equally stupid.

And the Avengers? They were most likely feeling what common agents felt when they stood side
by side with them; that is, they were feeling, probably for the first time, what was like to simply not being able to do a single fucking thing.

The two members who could at least try to do anything were Thor and the Hulk. Problem was – and wasn't that a kick in the balls – not a single one of them was in a position to help. Thor was inaccessible, doing who knows what, who knows where, since the beginning of this clusterfuck, and the Hulk could only watch from the ground as the two aliens flew in the sky, unable to do a single fucking thing to get in the fight.

Stark had been blasted from the sky and his armor simply wasn't in condition to fly anymore. Captain America, unfortunately for them all, hadn't received the gift of flying when he took the Super-Soldier Serum, thus was stuck on the ground, helping the civilians dying like ants as the city fell on top of them. And Natasha and Clint, well, saying they were outclassed was the understatement of the fucking century.

No, as much as Fury hated it, the only hope for humanity lied with a fucking alien. With a fucking 21 year old alien from fucking Kansas who had never, in his entire life up to that point, thrown a fucking punch for real against a living opponent.

All he could do was hope.

Natasha had trouble believing her eyes. She had seen pretty amazing things in her time. She saw Captain America fighting, with all the strength of the Super-Soldier Serum, as his body moved with unnatural grace and force. She had seen the Iron Man fighting against a god on equal grounds, his technology proving to be a match against his opponent's supernatural abilities. She had seen Thor, the god of thunder from the legends, swinging his mighty Mjölnir, calling storms from the sky and defeating Chitauri soldiers as if they were nothing. She had seen the Incredible Hulk smashing his enemies with unstoppable force.

But what she was seeing right now was on a whole other level. From the top of a ruined building, covered in dust from the collapsed city, Natasha could only observe as Superman and Zod battled, each punch thrown strong enough to break the windows of the still standing buildings with shockwaves only; each skyscraper breaking in half as their bodies collided with them, the concrete walls and steel foundations proving to be as resistant as a glass window would be against a nuclear warhead.

She knew Clark was powerful. She had seen all the incredible things he had done when Fury had sent her to find the "enhanced" person who was helping people all across the globe. She had followed the urban legends that appeared wherever he passed, had interrogated the "friends of the friends" who had seen something. She had even watched footage of his previously battle against the Kryptonians in Smallville.

But this? If anyone told her that shy, unsecure, overly polite kid she had met – because whatever Fury said about him being a potential threat was severally discredited once she met him and was able to assess his personality – could be able to bring destruction on that level, she would find it ludicrous.

Not that he was the one responsible for this. Oh no, she didn't think that for a second. Actually, she knew for a fact the only reason they were still alive was because Clark was there. But that didn't affect the surprise she felt by the level of power she was witnessing. It was like the only limits he had were there because he had put them there. His unbelievably fast speed seemed to only increase as he fought, his punches were getting stronger each time, the blows he was taking, also increasingly stronger, seemed to no longer bother him the more he got into the fight.
It was amazing. And at the same time terrifying. Because as powerful as Clark was, he was equally untrained. It was very likely that no one was seeing this, but to her it was as clear as day: Clark had no idea what he was doing.

He was relying solely on his gifts, because he had no training or experience. Instinct had kicked in and it was all that was guiding him. No one would even attempt to consider, but the fact was Clark was a civilian; an immeasurable powerful one, but still a civilian. And he was going against a trained general who had the same gifts as he had.

Every single person in the city, in the world, was scared, but possibly no one but Natasha and Clark's mother would know that Clark himself was maybe the most scared person of them all. Because he knew that if he failed – he, the civilian farm boy turned journalist battling the high general of his people – the world and everyone in it would pay the ultimate price.

It was a good thing that the symbol on his chest was a symbol of hope, because they would really need it right now.

Clint tried to move as best as he could with his broken leg, while following the two missiles colliding in the sky, the thunderous sound echoing in his skull. That kind of shit was above his pay grade. He was an agent, a damn good one, but when confronted against fellow humans. An exception or two could be made sometimes; he could shoot an arrow against an ugly ass Chitauri and nothing gave him quite so much satisfaction as dropping Loki from the sky with an explosive arrow. But what the hell did Fury expected him to do against beings who could fly faster than a bullet and shrug off missiles to the face?!

Nat had said it that one time and she was completely right. They weren't trained for this sort of thing. This was monsters and magic and aliens and he was fed up with it.

He needed a vacation. He needed to stay at least a weekend with Laura and the kids. But for that to happen the "super kid" would have to win this fight and if there was one thing Clint didn't like was placing the safety of his family in the hands of an unknown.

But what choice did he have when faced against monsters and magic and aliens?

Steve Rogers raised his shield over his head, protecting two civilians from the falling debris, while he guided them away from the destroyed buildings. Some kind of red energy beams had hit a building not too long ago, cutting it as if it were a hot knife slashing a piece of butter, and striking three more buildings after that; luckily, only the first one collapsed.

The chaos was absurd. People were running everywhere, not knowing what to do. Steve was trying to call their attention, to make them follow him, to calm them down. The subway was probably a good escape plan right now, and he was yelling orders to the police officers in scene to take the civilians there.

It was Loki's invasion all over again. Except worse, if that was even possible. When the ship shooting the big, blue laser was neutralized Steve actually thought things were finished. Almost all hostiles had been defeated and the only one left was General Zod against every single one of them. How bad could that be?

Very, very bad, apparently.

Steve had bragged to Fury once that there was nothing more that could surprise him, not after the
Super-Soldier Serum, Hydra, the Tesseract and having survived being frozen for 70 years. Fury proved him wrong with the Helicarrier soon after, that was true, and then Thor and Loki managed to surprise him again by joining mythology and aliens in the story. And finally, after all that, Steve thought again, that he had seen it all.

He was wrong once again.

What Clark and General Zod were doing was unbelievable. For the first time since the Super-Soldier Serum Steve felt like the skinny kid he once was, full of courage but no actual strength to make a difference. The simple fact is that there was nothing he could do against that kind of power. It was like trying to face Thor or the Hulk with his bare hands; he could certainly take a chance, but success was far from the most likely possible outcome.

He took a deep breath, calming himself. Panicking now wouldn't help anyone. Things weren't lost. Clark was fighting with all his might right now and he would trust the kid. He couldn't say he knew him very well, but he felt Clark was, despite being an alien, very much like himself. He was there, risking his life since the beginning, fighting against his own people to protect humanity.

Yes, Steve was going to trust him to stop Zod. Maybe he and the rest of the Avengers didn't have the power to join the fight right now, but they began that as a team and the kid was a part of that. Alone they couldn't do a thing, but together… Who knows? The Avengers had done it once.

Dr. Banner's mind functioned at its most instinctual level when he transformed into the Hulk. So instead of a brilliant mind, top at its field, the Hulk resembled more an intelligent animal; grunts instead of speech, action and reaction instead of planning, emotions instead of rationality. Except that, unlike with other animals, he didn't exactly possessed a fight-or-flight instinct.

His only instinct was fight-and-fight.

Which was why the Hulk was, for lack of a better word, frustrated with how things were going. He was strong, too strong; he was fast; he could jump over buildings. But fly he could not. And that was why he was obligated to stay rooted to the ground, like a cat forced to watch a bird flying away.

And it was pissing him off!

His muscles were trembling with the need to smash. It wasn't simply anger, it wasn't simply fury, it was his instinct to hit and rip and destroy his prey until there was nothing else left. The Hulk was feeling something he had never felt before; he was being denied the opportunity to fight and it was driving him insane.

Deep inside his mind, Dr. Banner was trying to calm down, trying to rein it in before he went look for another target to vent his frustrations and became a risk. Of course his thoughts weren't as detailed as he liked, the Hulk side of his mind being in control, but the overall feeling he had was that this needed to stop. The Hulk was suffering because it couldn't fight; Dr. Banner was suffering because he needed to.

From the bottom of his self, Bruce just begged this to end. As quickly as possible.

"Holy fucking shit!" exclaimed Jessica Jones, for what seemed to be the hundredth time, unable to blink as she watched Clark being tossed across a building so strongly that he came across on the other side and kept hitting the other buildings behind that. "Jesus fucking Christ!"
She couldn't believe what she was seeing. What was happening just before her eyes was simply too much. In an automatic gesture, her hand clinched harder around Trish's, as her legs stopped moving from the shock of seeing her friend striking buildings like a bowling ball.

Everybody who talked to Jessica for more than a minute could notice that she was a pessimist. Of course, she wouldn't ever admit it. She wasn't pessimistic, she would counter, but a realist; it wasn't her fault that reality was, by its very nature, shitty. So when the lights on her apartment turned off, and her TV became blurry for no apparent reason, delivering a pretty ominous threat to the whole world by what seemed to be a psychotic alien, she knew they were fucked. It was "The Incident" all over again.

But worse. Much worse.

Not only because the level of destruction was bigger. Not only because the Avengers looked as hopeless as everyone else. Not because it seemed to threaten the whole world at once, instead of a single city.

It was worse because the whole thing was happening directly against someone she considered a friend; and as strong as she was, there was absolutely nothing she could do to help.

So maybe she was a bitch. She wouldn't deny it. In fact, Jessica would be the first to admit it. She was violent, short tempered, alcoholic and all around fucked up in the head. She liked very, very few people. But the people she liked, the people she considered friends and family, she would gladly kill and die for.

And watching all this disaster happening without being able to help was like having a bullet piercing her chest. Like watching a car coming in your direction without time to dodge, like watching your home catching fire and being unable to put it out, like being too far away to stop a friend from falling down the stairs.

Like being controlled by Kilgrave all over again, forced to watch from behind your own eyes as your body did terrible things without being able to do a single thing to stop it.

"We need to go, Jes!" Trish said, urgently, pushing her hand. "We need to get out of here."

Jessica didn't move or answer for a few seconds. She breathed and closed her eyes; and then turned back, taking Trish with her. She couldn't help Clark, but she could help Trish right now. Clark would deal with this, he would kick that guy's ass back to space. And when that was done and he came back, then she would punch him in the face for making her worry like that.

She just hoped she wouldn't break her fingers again.

"Jarvis, I need eyes on them!" yelled Tony Stark to his artificial intelligence, while he tried to make a few critical field repairs on the suit. "Link every satellite, every camera in this city, everything capable of recording that you can find."

"Right away, sir," responded Jarvis, transmitting the images to Tony's helmet.

This couldn't be happening, not again, Tony thought. It was like one of his nightmares since The Incident, except he never actually dreamed something this horrible. Shaking his head, he went back to trying to fix his repulsors, trying to keep his mind occupied to avoid freaking out. That was something he really couldn't afford it right now.

"Sir, it appears they left the atmosphere," Jarvis said, bringing Tony's attention to the images on his
screen. He saw Zod grabbing Superman and basically exploding to the sky. After a few seconds of no updates, Jarvis added "We lost one satellite."

Tony raised one eyebrow. They were fighting in space? Could Kryptonians survive in vacuum? Well, what can't they survive? After what they did against him and his armor, against even the Hulk, Tony wasn't exactly incredibly surprised to find out one more ability they seemed to possess.

"Sir, they re-entered atmosphere. They are losing altitude quickly."

And then he could see them again, like a meteor dropping from the sky, burning debris all around them while flames seemed to surround their bodies. The pieces of what was probably his own destroyed satellite fell all across town, shocking against buildings, and the Kryptonians continued their descent, glowing red like a falling star.

He could actually hear when they shocked against the ground, everything trembling for a moment.

For one second, Tony closed his eyes again. He stopped trying to fix his repulsors and just focused on his breathing, trying once more to control himself. To be the man Pepper deserved. To be the Iron Man, member of the Avengers. To be the man he knew he could be, armor or no armor.

Because he fully admitted, even if only to himself, he never felt as afraid as he was at that moment.

They crashed through the glass ceiling, knocking down a statue when the base made of stone broke down. Fast as lightning, Clark tossed Zod down and flew against him, hitting him on the floor and beating his head against the ground until the marble broke.

Clark used all the strength he could muster to hold Zod down. He grabbed him in a chokehold, his muscles straining with the effort to simply hold him to the ground, to stop him from flying away and starting killing people again.

Zod, obviously, fought to get away, grunting with the effort, the rage burning inside him. Even that, however, proved useless, because Clark didn't budge for a second. But for how long could he hold him down? How long until Zod managed to shake him off and went on his path of destruction?

No help would come, Clark knew that. Not because there weren't people willing to help, but because they simply didn't have the strength to help. There wasn't a police force there to handcuff Zod, SHIELD agents to take him away. There wasn't a single prison in the entire world capable of securing a being such as Zod.

Zod stopped struggling for a second and looked at the people still there. Clark's breath hitched when he realized what the general was thinking. With mad eyes, Zod tried to look at Clark as best as he could while being held down.

"If you love this people so much, you can mourn for them!" And fire came out of his eyes against a scared family.

Clark used all his strength to pull Zod's head, to try to stop the energy beams from hitting the family. The heat from the beam began to break the stone wall, as the family hugged each other, trying to make themselves as small as possible. Zod fought with all his might as well, the beams slowly moving in their direction.

"Don't do this!" Clark yelled, desperate. "Stop!"
The family was crying, falling on the ground as they moved away from the energy beams, the father pushing his wife and children away while they begged for mercy.

"STOOOP!"

Zod didn't even hesitate.

"Never!"

The beams were inches away from the family, sparks flying away, the screaming more panicked than ever. Zod wouldn't stop. Not until every last one of them was dead, Clark finally accepted. Not until Earth was as devoid of life as Krypton.

So he closed his eyes, the tears falling down his face, and made his choice.

The sound of Zod's neck breaking would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.
Arriving in New York

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Chapter 2 - Arriving in New York – Before the Kryptonian Invasion

Clark couldn't help but to open a big smile when he looked at the beautiful city: New York, the Big Apple, the most populous city of all the United States of America. He had never seen anything quite like that.

Of course, having lived most of his life in Smallville would make it all the more impressive. Not that Clark hadn't left before. He had, after all, travelled a good portion of the world, while looking for traces of his origins, but he had definitely never stayed on big cities and certainly not one as impressive as this.

As he walked down the streets, his big travelling bag on his shoulders, he tried to take in the sights, as best as he could. There were people everywhere, bumping on each other, as they walked on the sidewalks; cars, buses, motorcycles filled the streets, the noise they made surrounding the air; music was blasting from inside the stores, of every kind; the smell of different kinds of foods caressed Clark's nose, making his stomach growl.

It was all so different from Smallville and the other places he had been that it might as well be on another planet. But, despite all those differences, Clark was really excited to be moving to the big city, to start this new phase of his life, to chase his dream of becoming a journalist.

It wouldn't be easy, he knew that. For all his work on the high school's newspaper and the several journalism's courses he took, Clark still didn't have any real experience. So he was moving to a new city, without a guaranteed job, with no previous references besides his old articles and without knowing anybody in the city.

And in this economy, or so everybody would say to him at every chance they had, nobody was hiring.

But Clark wouldn't let this bring him down. He had talent and he had will, that was all an honest man needed to succeed in life, his father used to say. And of course, there was the real reason behind wanting to be a journalist: it was a job where he could keep his ear to the ground, where people wouldn't look twice when he wanted to go somewhere dangerous and start asking questions.

A job that would give him the chance to finally do what his parents, both adopted and biological, believed he could do: to use his gifts for good.

Clark stopped at the crosswalk, waiting for the traffic lights to turn green, his mind wandering for a second, thinking back on how he ended up where he was. He had to admit it was quite the journey.

After his dad, Jonathan Kent, died, Clark was numb. Everything he was, he owed to his family, and to have half of that family ripped from him so early was a shock. He simply didn't see it coming; a heart attack, probably one of the most, if not the most, common causes of death in the world. And something that he couldn't fix, despite having all those powers.

He was devastated. He was lost. He was angry. And most of all, he was confused. Should he have noticed something? Should he have expected that? Because he didn't, at all. The thought of his
father passing away had never crossed his mind, not even once, and Clark didn't know if that happened because he was young, thus naïve, or if he didn't see it because he was a super powered alien who never got sick in all his life.

Not for the first time his unknown past plagued him with doubts. He didn't want to be different. He didn't like being something else. He didn't like not knowing what he was. And with his father passing away he never felt so alone with his doubts.

His mother was the one who shook him out of his depression. And the reason he left Smallville. Martha Kent was a strong woman; and a very scary mother, when she needed to be. She had told Clark, not too gently, that he had a choice: he could stay there, depressed into his little dark world, whining about all the problems he had in his life; or he could get up and do something about it.

Don't know what you are? Go look for clues to see if you find something out. Feeling sad because you are different? Everybody is different, grow up, be your own sort of unique. Can't understand humanity because you are not one? Then get out of your bubble and try to learn something useful from other people. Feeling useless because you can't help everybody? Hone your abilities and use them to help those you can.

Clark smiled a little bit thinking about his mother. She was a lovely person, but she could scare even him, a bullet proof alien, when she had to. She was the one that gave him the kick-start he needed to go out in the world. And go out he did, for years, learning everything he could, training his abilities, searching for clues of his past.

Surprisingly, he ended up learning more about his own morals than anything else, at least in the beginning.

He found out that he liked to help people. And so he did, as often as he could. It was by doing that, that Clark observed something valuable: good actions generated good actions. All some people needed to start doing good deed themselves was a little push, a little example, a little help. And sometimes, in a world that could more often than not be unforgiving and harsh, that was the most difficult thing to find.

So when Clark finally came back to Smallville, he did it with the sense of a job well done. He had done what he set out to do. And seeing the knowing smile of his mother when he hugged her made it everything worth it; as if she knew, all along, that he would succeed. The only one who needed proof was him, apparently.

He spent a couple of months in Smallville after coming back, telling his mother everything he'd learned and seen, about his experiences and his past, about his biological family and his people. Not that he hadn't told her before, an abridged version here and there every time he called home, but nothing could beat actually sitting down and talking, while eating a piece of apple pie.

He was happy. His mother was happy. And for the first time since the passing of Jonathan Kent, Clark felt he could finally move on without that bag of bricks on his chest. Which brought him, finally, to New York. To, hopefully, the beginning of a successful career.

But first, before trying his hand into becoming a legendary journalist, Clark needed to find a place to live. And there was probably one place someone with no job, no family money and limited savings that came from working in diners could look in New York. The neighborhood that was almost wiped off the map during The Incident: Hell's Kitchen.

Walking through the streets of Hell's Kitchen, Clark could understand why the prices were so sympathetic to his pockets. The place had been hit the hardest during the Battle of New York.
Everywhere he looked there were signs of the fight. Destroyed buildings, debris still on the sidewalks, big cranes making repairs… The Avengers had saved the world, but the aliens had taken a piece of it before throwing the towel; that piece was Hell's Kitchen.

Clark felt his mood dampen a little bit. An alien invasion. An honest to god freaking alien invasion had happened and he wasn't there to help. An alien invasion had happened while he was elsewhere looking for clues about aliens. If it wasn't so tragic, the irony would have made him laugh.

Well, that wouldn't happen again, Clark promised himself. Not now that he had actually learned how to fly.

Shaking off his bad mood, Clark began to hasten his steps. He was going to meet the real estate agent that had rented the place to him, and it wouldn't be very gentlemanly of him to keep a lady waiting, especially in this dangerous neighborhood.

Susan Harris was tapping her foot, impatiently. Mr. Kent was late. It was bad enough to be in this part of town for any amount of time, surrounded by the unsavory elements and the ruined landscape, but to be here waiting indefinitely was cause for worry.

Hell's Kitchen change after The Incident could be quantified between "worse" and "even worse". Before that it wasn't a bad place, full of restaurants of every kind, good places for people who enjoyed music and any kind of artistic performances and in general full of good people.

Things like that tend to change when an alien army falls on top of it.

The damage to Hell's Kitchen was astronomical. Several people lost their homes, the buildings that were left standing were in poor condition, water and energy were cut off, businesses had to close its doors… The situation now wasn't nearly as bad as it was a few weeks after the invasion, but it also wasn't nearly of what it was before it.

Because of that, the prices had dropped tremendously. Nobody wanted to stay there. Nobody that had options wanted to move there. Supply and demand. Things would get better in time, she hoped, with how much work and money Union Allied Construction was pouring there, but for now, prices were low.

Which brought Susan to her current predicament: waiting for a client that was probably poor as a church mouse, who, she could only hope, would arrive before she was mugged.

It wasn't such an absurd possibility. Susan Harris stuck like a sore thumb. Blond, beautiful, dressed on a form fitting white dress and black high heels, she was surrounded by a bunch of people in old jeans and ragged coats going to work. Given the risen numbers of violence and assaults since The Incident… Well, she wasn't exactly crazy for being worried.

"Susan Harris?" asked someone from behind her.

"Finally," she muttered, turning to speak with Mr. Kent, an irritated look on her face.

And as soon as she did turn, the angry frown disappeared, replaced by wide eyes. She was not expecting this, Susan had to admit. Mr. Kent was beyond hot. And she used the word only on special occasions. Tall, dark hair, the most gorgeous cerulean blue eyes… And, oh my, did he have muscles! Big, defined, muscled arms and she could only imagine how ripped his stomach would be…

Clark cleared his throat when the silence extended.
"Mrs. Harris, I'm so sorry for being late," he said, sheepishly. "I guess I overestimated my sense of direction."

The sound of his voice snapped Susan back to reality; her cheeks were a bit rosy now.

"Not at all, Mr. Kent, I wasn't here for long anyway," she said, suddenly cheerfully. She extended her hand. "And it's Miss..." she added unconsciously, for her eternal embarrassment; she shook her head a little bit. "Susan Harris, Midtown Property Solutions."

"Clark Kent, but please, call me Clark," he said, shaking her hand, with dazzlingly smile.

Strong hands, Susan thought, holding it a little more than what was socially acceptable.

"So, this is the place?" said Clark, since apparently Susan's mind was elsewhere.

"Yes!" She confirmed quickly, turning towards the entrance of the building.

For a few seconds, Clark didn't say anything.

"It's...hmm...severe?"

"Yes, severe..." Susan agreed, though the word she would have used is "dump". "But don't let yourself be fooled by the plain look of the building. Regardless of how it looks on the outside, it's very well placed. There are several good restaurants here, the subway is a few blocks that way, and at night there are a few good bars around, if you like that sort of thing."

Let it never be said that Susan Harris was bad at her job.

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad," he agreed, and looked at her. "So... let's go in?"

"Absolutely!"

She crossed her arm with Clark's and guided him to the entrance. The inside was as gloomy as the outside, but without the sunlight to help. It was an old and unkempt place; not the cleanest too, she noticed. She pressed the button of the elevator as fast as she could.

"There aren't a lot of occupied apartments in the building," she said, as Clark looked around. "But you will share your floor with 2 others, if I recall. They probably are lovely people; the people of Hell's Kitchen tend to be very welcoming." The doors of the elevator opened and they entered.

When they arrived at the right floor, the doors opened, showing a long corridor with doors on both sides and one door right at the end; a woman was coming from that apartment.

"There, that is one of your neighbors," Susan said, happily.

The woman approached the elevator with fast steps. She had black hair, very white skin and was using a black leather jacket and old jeans; her face, however, couldn't exactly be described as anything close to welcoming.

"Good morn..."

"Fuck off!" interrupted the woman, sliding past them and entering the elevator.

Susan shared a nervous look with a wide-eyed Clark.

"Ha ha... Mondays, right? They can get to the best of us."
God damn this people, Susan thought. If Clark hadn't already made a deposit, he would probably make a run for it. This building was terrible and it was apparently full of aggressive nutjobs. Outwardly, though, she kept a cool face. They were already there, nothing could go wrong anymore.

She reached her purse to get the keys of the apartment when they arrived in front of it; the door, however, seemed to be unlocked and only half closed. Frowning, she opened, only to jump back when a man got up from the couch and pointed a knife at her.

"What are you doing in my apartment?!"

She didn't even notice when Clark stepped in front of her; she was just suddenly blocked by his broad back. Oh god, this couldn't be happening! She didn't want to be stabbed, least of all in a place like Hell's Kitchen. She frantically looked for her phone, ready to call 911, only to be stopped by an alarmingly calm Clark.

"Hey, there is no need for that," he said with a smile, walking forward. "He is not going to attack us, we just surprised him, right?"

Clark kept walking, no hesitation, no sign of fear whatsoever. And despite the situation, Susan suddenly felt completely safe.

"So what is your favorite? Crunchy or smooth?" For a second Susan didn't understand, until she noticed the jar of peanut butter on the man's hand; the knife she was so afraid of was a kitchen knife that he was just using to eat it.

"Crunchy of course," the man mumbled, putting the knife back on the jar and scratching his nose. "Is there any other way to eat it?"

"Not as far as I am concerned," said Clark, still smiling, stopping in front of the man. "So, what's your name?"

The man hesitated for a second, looking at Clark. He looked terribly unhealthy, especially standing so close to a big, strong man as Clark was; he was thin, had black skin, wasn't particularly tall and had a very high afro. He was also, undoubtedly, a drug addict.

"Malcolm," he muttered.

"I'm Clark," he extended his hand and, after a moment, Malcolm shook it. "I think I'm your new neighbor."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. But, the thing is, I'm almost certain that this apartment here is the one I'm renting. Do you think it's possible you got confused and entered the wrong one?"

Malcolm shrugged noncommittally.

"Happened before."

Clark smiled again.

"A friend of mine entered the wrong classroom once, when we were kids. Went all the way back and actually sat down. Small town, people laugh about this to this day."
Even Susan smiled; Clark's good mood was infectious.

"So, why don't I help you get to your apartment so I can let this lovely lady go back to her work?"

"Alright," Malcolm agreed.

Susan moved out of the way and watched as Clark guided the obviously high man back to his apartment, the peanut butter jar in his hand. She held back a smile when the man turned to the wrong side again, trying to enter the apartment they've seen the woman leave earlier, and Clark had to turn him to the other one.

When he came back, Susan couldn't hold herself back anymore.

"Mr. Kent, I'm so sorry about this!" she said, fast, before she regained her senses. "This place is... This place is horrible! You have a rude neighbor on one side and a junkie on the other, the streets aren't safe..."

He interrupted her with a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, it's alright. It's not so bad. I'm sure after a good scrub this apartment will be as good as new. Malcolm is not a bad guy, just a little confused. And the woman, well, you were right, Mondays can be rough."

This man was a saint, Susan thought.

"I know that I can't expect much with a budget like mine. You don't have to apologize, Miss Harris, you did the best you could and I'm happy."

She could have cried right then and there. She hoped New York wouldn't tear him apart; he was probably the nicest person she ever met.

"Well, Clark, if you are satisfied, so am I. Here are your keys," she said, handing him the keys. "But I must say, if there is any problem, at all, give me a call and I'll see what I can do. Okay?"

He gave her a beautiful smile and shook her hand again.

"I promise. And thank you, Miss Harris."

She hesitated before turning, than added.

"And, you know, if you need someone to show you around, give me a call too."

And before he could answer, she gave him a saucy smile and left.

Clark was a little bit shocked; he definitely wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, but still with a big smile on his face from being asked out by a gorgeous woman, Clark turned to look at his apartment. Despite his reassurances to Miss Harris, the apartment really wasn't much. A living room, a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom. There was no T.V, it was small, dark, and the furniture could very well belong to a house of the old U.S.S.R; he was pretty sure the fridge actually was from the East Germany.

Well, there was nothing he could do for now. He tossed his bag on the couch, opened it, and used his super speed to put his stuff on the designated places all over the apartment in a few seconds. Tomorrow he would have to buy some food and cleaning products. And a broom, he couldn't forget
a broom, because the amount of dust that rose when he ran made him feel as if he were in the
middle of a sandstorm.

But now there was no time to clean his new home. Now, Clark was going out and, hopefully, when
he got back, he would be employed. He took the list from his pocket where he had written the
names and addresses of the main newspapers of New York, opened the door, and left.

Today was going to be a good day, Clark thought.

Natasha Romanoff walked quickly through the corridors of The Triskelion, SHIELD's
headquarters in Washington, D.C. As quickly as she walked, though, the people who crossed her
path moved even quicker out of her way. Natasha was an intimidating woman. There were several
factors that contributed to it, like her confidence, her phenomenal good looks, her immense
sharpness and perspicacity, her no-nonsense attitude and her Avengers membership.

Her ability to kill any person, armed or unarmed, trained or untrained, using any kind of weapon or
simply her bare hands probably was a factor too.

She stopped in front of a door and knocked, entering soon after, without waiting for permission.

"You called?" she asked, a little smile on her face.

Nick Fury didn't even turn his chair.

"I have a job for you," he said, still looking through the big window of his office.

Fury's office was a beautiful room, modestly furnished, bright and with a lot of space. There were
screens on the wall in front of his desk and, behind it, a striking view of the city. Natasha walked
with the sureness of someone who had been there several times and sat on a chair by Fury's desk.

"I do hope it's better than the last one," she said, making herself comfortable on the leather chair.
"Can you even imagine how tedious it was to observe a mob's accountant? The man was so
predictably boring that one day he mistook sweetener for sugar after pouring it into his coffee and,
instead of drinking it, he bought another one. I actually thought you were punishing me for
something."

Nick gave her a little smile.

"They can't all be alien invasions, can they?"

"Well, if those are my two options, I take the accountant," she rolled her eyes. "But we'll see how
long it takes until I wish another alien invasion upon us."

"How about something in-between?" Fury asked.

Natasha raised her eyebrows slightly, even if inside she felt a bit more surprised than that.

"What do you mean?"

Fury turned one of his monitors so she could see it.

"Three and a half months ago, the Canadian army found something buried in thick ice in Ellesmere
Island. They didn't have the equipment necessary to know what exactly it was, so they made a joint
operation with the American army to find out what they could."
"We didn't send anyone with them?" Natasha asked, her eyes on the screen.

"Of course we did, just not officially. But a previously associate of ours was invited because of her expertise: Dr. Jane Foster and, of course, her 'assistant' Miss Darcy Lewis. As I understand, they tried to contact Erik Selvig, but as you probably know, he still is treating himself because of the number Loki did on his mind."

She liked where this was going less and less.

"What could an astrophysicist know about an object trapped in ice?" she asked, already guessing the answer.

He didn't disappoint her.

"It wasn't about where the object was at the moment, but where it was 20,000 years ago: out of this planet."

There was a stream of curses in Russian.

"Yes, that was exactly what I said too, only in English!" Fury replied, laughing ironically. "But wait, it gets even better. One day after Dr. Foster arrived, that was a huge tremor. The specialists would have thought it was an earthquake, if not for the fact that several lights turned on beneath the ice and, suddenly, an alien spaceship rose to sky and disappeared into the night."

Her eyes closed for a moment as she refrained from cursing again.

"They lost an alien ship?" she asked, her voice perfectly calm.

"They did," confirmed Fury. "They weren't exactly equipped to chase it and the ship simply doesn't show in our sensors. It either buried itself back on ice or…"

"Or its technology is too advanced to be noticed by ours," she completed.

"Precisely. We have no idea where this thing is," he tilted his head "but at least it isn't killing people. Nobody there died, the ship just took off."

Romanoff studied the screen again, seeing the grainy images from the ship.

"What's the other lead you have then?" she asked, knowing she was there for a reason.

Fury smiled.

"There is one. The Canadian forces hired a company called Arctic Cargo to transport everything they needed. There were 67 workers when they arrived; after the ship left there were only 66. After analysis, we reached the 'oh so surprising' conclusion that his documents were fake and that left us without a name or a picture."

"How do you know it isn't simply an illegal that left after things became too heated?"

"Because of the testimony of our Norse God's old friend, Darcy Lewis. I can't even begin to quote from memory, so let me read it… Here it is," he looked at the text on the screen and read: "[…]He totally saved our lives when the killer robot attacked and almost killed Jane! He just appeared and ARGHHH, ripped the thing in two with his bare hands! […]How did he look like? Wow, where do I begin… He was a dark haired hunky blue eyed beefcake of a man and I wanted to bite him! I told Jane that a have dibs on this one, she can't just get all the good looking aliens for herself."
How do I know he is an alien? That's a stupid question. He operated on Jane with laser eyes! He went ARGHH and destroyed a robot! What else could he be? Captain Canada, who was also frozen in ice?"

It was a testament to Natasha's training that she didn't laugh when Fury read that.

"So, an alien that looks like a human with dark hair and blue eyes, is strong and has laser eyes stole the ship?" Natasha asked. "And before that he was working for Arctic Cargo with fake documents. Well… it's a lead. Though I probably should speak to Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis, they might know more."

Fury nodded and suddenly looked very serious.

"We need to find this man, Romanoff. We have an alien with unknown strength and motivations who is in possession of an alien ship inside our planet. If we don't deal with this swiftly, it could turn into another Incident."

Natasha got up.

"I can't believe they are calling it 'The Incident'," she said, looking at Fury. "I was there, I remember it being a little more than a simple 'incident'." She looked at Fury. "And I have no intention of letting something like that happen again."

Saying this, Natasha Romanoff turned and left the room; she was already missing the accountant.
Chapter 3 - Moving Forward

Clark was wrong; it had not been a good day.

He had been all over town, sometimes making liberal use of his speed to beat the traffic, visiting every single newspaper he could find. He began with a very selective list, trying his luck with newspapers he had dreamed of working at. Sooner, rather than later, he realized that maybe he would be more successful if he aimed a little lower.

Just thinking about it made his head hurt.

The Daily Bugle Building – Earlier that day

"Who are you again?" asked John Jonah Jameson, barely looking at him while he shuffles through the papers on his table, a lit cigar in his mouth.

"Clark Ke—"

"I don't care who you are!" he yelled, finally looking at him. "That was a rhetorical question. I don't know who you are, kid, and you have the gall to come here and waste my time by asking for money?! Do you think this is one of those charity things where we feed the poor and homeless?!

"Look, Mr. Jameson, I just…"

"No, you look!" he pointed at him with his cigar. "We have no place for a reporter. What I need is a photographer! Can you do that?"

"I can take pictures, yes," Clark answered, slowly; by that point he had already realized that whatever he could get here was a profit.

"Then you are worth something! Alleluia! Let me clue you in a little secret, kid: I'm surrounded by idiots.

Given he was yelling that, Clark didn't think it was such a closely guarded secret that he felt that way.

"People think these so called 'heroes' out there are protecting them," he continued. "They think that these Avengers give a crap about what's happening in the city. Well, I'm here to clarify to you that they don't! This whole shitstorm with the aliens and that maniac with the horns was their fault! They made all this theatre happen. And do you know why?"

Clark didn't, but he was sure Jameson would tell him.

"For fame!" he howled. "Just so they could be hailed as heroes! And then, when every one of those poor bastards turns into a starstruck fan, that's when they act!

"Act how?" he couldn't resist asking.

"They take power!" Jameson yelled. "They make themselves a symbol of everything that is right in
the world, so that when someone disagrees, they are automatically wrong! They are a menace!

He slapped the table with both hands, his eyes shining with a maniac glow.

"But I've seen through their ruse! And I will unmask them!

Clark couldn't really speak right now, stunned into silence.

"I want pictures of the Avengers! That's what you can do, boy. Bring pictures of them showing their real colors and I will pay you.

The word "pay", for his eternal shame, shocked him into motion.

"How much?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

"50 bucks. 25 if they are not perfect. Now leave. Not all of us are unemployed."

That had been a one of a kind experience. And would remain just the one, if he had anything to say about that. He couldn't imagine the kind of selfless, patient and humble soul that would take for someone to endure that man on a daily basis.

He grabbed his burger from the plate and took a bite; at least the food was good. The place he was at wasn't bad at all. A little bar, good music, a few people drinking and laughing at the tables… Not a bad place at all to end the day and go home, because even if his body wasn't feeling it, his mind was tired from the long and unsuccessful day.

Well, maybe not all that unsuccessful.

The New York Bulletin Building – Earlier that day

"Look, Clark, we just can't hire anybody right now," said Mitchell Ellison, editor in chief at The New York Bulletin. "It's really not a matter of want but a matter of can't. I've read the articles you gave me and they are good. You have talent. But we are being forced to work with less and less people every day just to make ends meet."

He took his glasses off and sighed.

"The truth is, we are hanging on by our fingertips. Newspapers are dying. Everybody wants news immediately. They want to take their cellphones and read. And they want their news updated as fast as they happen. Nobody wants to buy a printed newspaper every morning just so half of what they read isn't relevant anymore by the end of the day. We are just… At the end of our days."

Clark could feel that the man really meant what he was saying. It wasn't just some excuse to turn him down.

"I understand, sir. About you not being able to hire me, I mean," Clark said, getting up. "But I disagree with you. What you do, what I want to do, is as relevant as ever. Maybe more than it ever was. Everybody wants fast news, that's true, and there are thousands of media vehicles ready to deliver them. But put those news to a test, and if you find that 1% of that is true, then you got lucky. What you do is bring true, real and proof based news every day and that is as important as it ever was."

He pushed the chair back to its place and smiled.
"It's a shame you don't have a place for me now, but I hope you will one day. It's been a pleasure, Mr. Ellison" he shook Ellison's hand and turned.

He heard Ellison sigh again.

"Clark, hold on," Clark looked at him again. "We can't hire you now, but I can buy stories from a freelancer," he pointed at Clark. "Bring me something worth reading, with all the proof to back it up, and I'll buy it from you."

He shrugged.

"It's not a perfect solution," Ellison added "but it's what I can do right now. The number I gave you, do you have it? If you find something of value give me a call, day or night, I don't really sleep much anyway."

It really was a pity that Mr. Ellison couldn't hire him, Clark thought, biting his burger again. From every person he met that day, he felt that Mr. Ellison was the one who believed in what his career represented the most. He had a little problem with his belief, that was true, but deep down Clark felt he knew what was important.

He was so distracted thinking about everything that happened that he only noticed someone was close when an enormous shadow came over him.

"Can I see some ID?" asked a deep voice.

Clark raised his eyes to see a huge man behind the balcony; and in a rare moment, he actually felt small. Tall, bald, dark skinned and built like a bull, the man talking to him was even bigger than he was, with muscles so massive that Clark wondered the amount of food and exercise it would take to get to that point.

"Sure, just a second," he finally said, digging through his pockets and fishing his ID. "Here."

The man looked at it for a moment and gave it back, before opening a bottle of beer and putting it besides his plate.

"I didn't…" Clark began, only to be interrupted.

"It's on the house. It looks like you need it," he said, raising his hand. "I'm Luke. I own the bar."

Clark quickly cleaned his hands on the napkin and shook the man's hand.

"Clark. And thanks, it's very nice of you." It wouldn't work, of course, since he was immune to alcohol, but it was the thought that counted.

"So, what's eating you?" Luke asked, wiping a few cups. "Girl problems?"

He chuckled.

"Need a girl for that." Luke smiled. "No, my problem is more… basic. I moved here today and I can't find a job. Nobody is hiring in this economy, apparently."


"It's not easy for anybody. Where you're from?"
"Smallville."

His eyebrows rose a little bit.

"That a real town? Or you actually are from a small vi…"

"It's real," Clark answered; he waited a bit and added: "And pretty much, yes."


"How are you adapting?"

"Well, the apartment I'm renting is pretty much a dump, one of my neighbors is a drug addicted and I'm almost certain the other one is crazy, I don't have a job and my money won't last to the end of the month." Clark took a swig of the beer. "But, other than that… Other than that I like the city. I honestly didn't think I would like it that much. It's… alive. You know what I mean?"

"I do," Luke agreed. "It's like the city has life of its own and the people in it are just a part of it."

"Yeah," Clark finished his burger and drunk another sip. "I just hope I don't have to leave it so soon."


"Journalist. Or at least I want to be one. No one is hiring though. I think I'm going to have to work by myself, at least for a while. Freelance. One of the editors said he would buy a story from me."

"Do you have a story?"

"Nope. And to be honest, I don't even know where to start looking for a good one. I mean, should I go for politics? Or something more down to earth, like the reconstruction of Hell's Kitchen? Or just wait for Tony Stark to make a bombastic revelation to the press again?"

Luke laughed in his deep voice and then looked at Clark.

"Pop used to say the only direction in life that matters is forward. You already know what you have to do. Now you just have to do it."

Clark considered what he said.

"That's a pretty simple way to look at things. Smart too."


He finished the beer and picked his wallet to pay for his dinner.

"Thank you for the talk. And the beer. Next time I come back, introduce me to Pop, he sounds like someone I would like to meet."


"If I can drag him here someday, I will. Good night."

With that, he said his goodbyes and left the bar. The streets were much quieter now than they had been during the day, since there was no one around. The wind was chilly, but that didn't bother
him, of course; not when he could withstand arctic winds without feeling cold. Luke's words were still in his mind and he realized now that the guy was right. He knew what he had to do, now was just a matter of finding out how to do it. He was basically halfway there.

Distracted by his thoughts, Clark was a bit surprised when a white van passed on his side, running a lot more than it should. He stopped and looked at it, until the van was at the end of the street.

That's when it drove on the sidewalk, right in front of a homeless man, and two masked men got out from the back and hit him in the head.

Boy, did they have bad timing.

It was an easy job. Get out of the van, beat some poor drunk or high bastard, throw him into the van and drive away. No fuss, no muss, just a quick grab and sell kind of deal. Of course, plans don't always go as advertised.

This was of one of those times.

Before anyone could realize what was going on, there was a dry THUD and one of the men was down. Nobody saw anything, nobody had any kind of signal as to what was going on; one of the masked men simply jerked his head to the side, as if something had hit him, and fell down.

Everyone stopped for a second, their brains trying to process what had happened. That was when a blur hit the second masked man, throwing him on his back and far away from the homeless person he was still trying to drag.

To his credit, even as scared as he was, the man had the good sense of pulling his gun and pointing it at the direction he had saw the moving shape; the act of taking his hand to his waist and grabbing the gun took about 2 seconds, but when he pointed it, there was nothing there anymore.

Instead, he felt something holding him from behind and, before he could even think, he was pulled and thrown at the side of the van. The impact was so strong that the van shook, staying on two wheels for a while, before falling back down; the masked man didn't see anything anymore.

The third man, the driver, saw all that happen from the inside of the car. He didn't really understand it, the adrenalin making all the details hazy, but that small part of his brain that had survived years of evolution was screaming one thing at him: run.

Without caring that his partners were unconscious on the street, the man turned the van and pressed the gas pedal as if his life depended on it. It wasn't exactly a fast car and it took a little time to gain speed, all the while the driver kept watching the thing that was attacking them in the mirror; it wasn't following.

Until it simply vanished; and appeared right in front of the van.

He didn't have the time or the ability to react. The van simply crashed against his pursuer. But instead of running over it, instead of throwing it to the side, the vehicle behaved as if it had hit a steel wall. The noise of metal bending against an immovable object thundered across the night.

It wasn't that bad of a crash. For all his despair, the van simply hadn't managed to gather that much speed. But it was enough to make him hit the wheel with his head and make him dizzy, probably break some ribs too. Groaning, he lift his eyes to look through the cracked windshield; the thing was there, completely unscratched, appearing to not have moved a single inch.
And then, he wasn't there anymore; and he felt a hand grab him from behind.

Before he could even scream, the thing lifted him with incredible force. He clashed against the ceiling, face first, and had to close his eyes when he was dragged against it, the metal burning against his forehead.

When he was in the middle of the van, it stopped; he remained there, in the air, facing the ceiling, while the creature held him with apparently no effort at all. The pressure was beginning to push the air from his lungs.

"Who are you?" the thing asked, his voice sounding disturbing normal.

"Shit, shit, shit..." he chanted, panicking.

The pressure became stronger and he had to turn his face to the side so his nose wouldn't break.

"If I have to ask again, I will begin to push," the thing said. "Then we will see what breaks first: the metal ceiling or you."

"Turk! Turk Barrett!" he yelled, before the thing decided to crush him again.

"Why were you kidnapping that man?" the thing asked.

He didn't answer for a while, having literally forgotten about that.

"For cash! Th-they pay us t-to bring people to them. It doesn't matter who, you just pick them up and take them there. Junkies, drunks, homeless people... People no one will miss!"

"Who pays you?"

"Man, if I tell you they'll kill me!"

"I'd worry more about the present," the thing said, putting even more pressure on his back.

"I don't know who they are! I swear! Don't ask, don't tell, right? But I can tell you where they are."

"Where?"

"I-if I tell you, will you let me go?" he asked.

The excruciating pressure on his back was enough answer.

"My pocket! The address is in my pocket!"

He felt a hand take something from his pocket. And then, the thing let him go. He fell heavily on the ground and, before he could even think about moving, the thing crouched over him; its eyes were glowing red.

"Now listen to me and listen carefully," it said, the heat from its eyes making him sweat. "You are going to pick up your friends and drive to the nearest police station. And then you are going to surrender your illegal weapons and confess every single crime you did."

The thing approached even more.

"If you don't, if you make one turn on a street that isn't the way to the police station, I will catch up, fold this van like a can of tuna, and throw it all the way to the station. And I don't really care"
how badly the landing will be. You saw how fast I am. You saw how strong I am. Don't test me.”

Looking at those red eyes, the last thing on his mind was disobey.

"I swear to god I'll go to the police! Just let me go, please!"

He didn't even notice when the thing left; he just felt, a few seconds later, the unconscious bodies of his friends crashing against the inside of the van and the doors closing.

He never willingly drove so fast to the police in his entire life.

If there was one thing Clark didn't like was people like those men, who would so willingly destroy someone's life just for their own gain, no matter how small. It was disgusting. And it made him question if those people were simply rotten to the core or if they were good once and somehow, for some reason, they became like that over time. He didn't know.

He sighed and looked at the piece of paper he had taken from the man, all the while hearing the sound of the van, to make sure it would really go to the police; he had made a promise to mister Turk Barrett, after all. So maybe he wouldn't really toss the van all the way to the police station, but he would definitely fold that thing around them and personally drop it at the police.

The paper had an address and a time written on it. It was the place where they would drop the kidnapped people and, from there, they would probably change locations. So the only option he had if he wanted to save those people was to go to that place before they were sent somewhere else.

Well, it looked like his night was far from over; and that he had, maybe, found a good story for publishing. Who would've thought?

Some nights, Jessica Jones had trouble sleeping. Or, it was more accurately to say, some nights Jessica Jones didn't have trouble sleeping. Peaceful dreaming was an ancient memory by this point and the mere act of closing her eyes brought forth things she rather not think about.

The booze helped. It dulled reality for a while, made it bearable, but it was just a short term solution. And, since she had a fast metabolism and a higher rate of healing, it was an even shorter term solution for her.

So when sleep refused to come, Jessica worked. She followed cheating spouses across town, taking pictures as proof, trying to at least for a moment make herself believe that some people were just as fucked up as she was.

On the nights she didn't have work, though, Jessica always ended up on one place: the fire escape right in front of Luke's Bar.

What began as a way to keep tabs on a man whose wife she was forced to murder, had quickly evolved into something else. Jessica didn't really have a word for it. Fact was, she realized that somehow that calmed her. Seeing his routine, serving drinks, talking with his clients, occasionally taking a woman to his apartment on the second floor of the bar…

She wasn't thrilled about what she was doing. She knew she was invading his privacy. The people she followed for her clients she could justify to herself, since she was hired and they were obviously doing nothing good. But Luke was just living his life. Following everyday routine.

Moving on. He was just… a good man.
Maybe that was the reason she liked to watch him so much.

That night was pretty much like all the others she had watched him, at least in the beginning. Luke opened the bar, the clients arrived, he served the drinks and food… Nothing out of the ordinary. Until one person entered the bar; a person she knew, but had never saw there.

It took her a moment to realize she was looking at her new neighbor. The guy who had arrived that very day, together with the real estate agent.

It was a small surprise, but the guy needed a place to eat, she supposed. Nothing wrong with that. She saw him order a burger and sit there, quietly, for a while, apparently thinking very hard about something. Luke brought him a beer, they talked a bit, and he left. All very normal.

What wasn't normal was the van driving fast on the empty street, just as he got out.

What also wasn't normal were the men that got out of the van and tried to kidnap some guy.

And what was even less normal was the sight of her neighbor running so fast he basically disappeared on a blur, the sight of him knocking down the kidnapers and the sight of him stopping a moving vehicle just by standing in front of it.

For a moment there, Jessica thought she had drunk a bit too much. She didn't even notice her jaw dropping or the fact that her flask was upside down, the cheap liquor falling. It was only when she unconsciously let the flask drop that the sound snapped her back into action.

That was unbelievable. But it was real, she knew she wasn't drunk enough to imagine that. Her neighbor was apparently like her, except a little bit stronger and a little bit tougher, she forced herself to admit.

For one embarrassing moment, that Jessica made sure to suppress quickly and hard, she felt a pang of fear; the last time she saw someone like her, someone gifted, well… Saying that things hadn't really ended up well was like saying water was wet.

But this guy was different, she thought. Or at least he seemed to be. He didn't have to help that dude and yet he did, just like she would have done it once upon a time. Her curiosity was picked.

It was time to go back, just not to her apartment. As a good private investigator, Jessica would take this chance to learn a little more. Just in case her neighbor ended up being less like her and more like him.

And if she was being nosy, well… It wasn't like staying there, taking pictures of Luke, would change that.

Natasha arrived in New Mexico later than she would've liked. It took her more than calculated to put her pressing matters in order so she could finally go; she couldn't even talk to Clint before embarking. She hoped he wouldn't pout when he got her message. But knowing him he probably would.

Darcy Lewis was the one who answered the door and let her into the lab, wearing robes and slippers, her mess of a hair enough evidence that she was just out of bed; that and the irritated and tired look behind the glasses.

"Really? Couldn't you wait until tomorrow?" Darcy asked.
"I'm sorry," Natasha apologized. "I really am, but I'm sure you understand the need for me to move as quickly as I can."

"But why now? We already told you guys everything that happened. It's been months!"

They walked through the dark lab while talking, Natasha stepping with grace and speed, while following a sluggish Darcy, who apparently was having trouble with talking and moving at the same time.

"SHIELD has been looking for the ship all this time," she explained. "They considered following the man a waste of resources, given that he and the ship were probably together. It was a bad move."

"So now they got you in the case," Darcy stated. "Well, I don't know what else you want to hear, but sure, I guess we can tell it again."

Saying that, Darcy turned to the wall and turned on the lights; the form of Jane Foster appeared, sleeping on a chair, her head held by the white board full of equations in front of her.

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, she's been doing that a lot," Darcy chirped. "Usually she has a half-eaten sandwich on her lap, but I guess today she wanted to look pretty for the guests."

And then, she clapped, really loud; Jane jerked awake, hitting her head on the board.

"Jane dear, Miss Widow is here."

"Wha-What?" Jane slurred, looking around. Natasha took pity on her and walked closer, pulling up a chair.

"Dr. Foster, I called today, remember?" she said, sitting down. "I wanted to ask a few questions about the alien ship."

Jane rubbed her eyes and nodded.

"I remember, sorry. I must have fallen asleep."

"Sleeping 10 minutes here and 15 minutes there isn't sleeping, Jane," Darcy protested, also sitting down. "You have to stop moping around. Thing are getting unsanitary already. There was a rat on your shoulders yesterday! I managed to toss him out with a broom, but it's only a matter of time until another one appears."

"A rat… That was Jerry!" Jane exclaimed, suddenly awake. "He was a lab rat! My lab rat!"

"Huh… Wow! I-I'm… Well, my bad," Darcy stuttered in apology. "But I'm sure he will be back! Lab rats are smart right? Like Brain, from the cartoon, remember? Pink not so much, but there's a 50-50 chance." She frowned, suddenly thinking about something. "What the hell were you doing with a lab rat, anyway? You are an astrophysicist."

Jane blushed a little bit.

"I was feeling lonely, he helped."

Natasha tapped her finger on the table; if she didn't interrupt, she noticed, she wouldn't leave tonight.
"Girls, please, the sooner we end this, the sooner you can go back to sleeping."

Both of them turned to Natasha, as if they had forgotten she was there.

"Yes, of course," Jane said, sitting straight. "What would you like to know?"

"Like I said on the phone, I read the report SHIELD made after interviewing you. But, since I'm actually trying to find this person now, I would like to make my own questions. So if you could tell me what happened, in detail, it might help."

Dr. Foster nodded as she collected her thoughts.

"Three and a half months ago I was contacted by the American army for a consultation about an object that they had found. Understandably, they couldn't tell me more over the phone, so they sent someone here to explain that the Canadians had found something under the ice on a place called Ellesmere Island. Something they suspected it was not of this planet."

Funny how normal it became after the Battle of New York to admit that something could be alien; people were often mocked, at best, if they dared to suggest such a thing before.

She nodded so Jane would continue.

"I tried to explain that this wasn't my field, that I wasn't an expert on anything alien but…"

"But no one is," concluded Natasha.

"Exactly. I at least talked to one so I guess that makes me kind of an expert," Jane chuckled.

"Talked', huh?' interrupted Darcy, smiling. "Is this how you kids are calling it today? 'Talk'?"

Dr. Foster blushed hard.

"A-Anyway, I talked to SHIELD and they didn't mind if I took 1 month from my research to go to the expedition, so I agreed. The pay was good and I was curious as to what they had found."

No, SHIELD wouldn't mind at all, Natasha thought, since they wanted to know what that thing was too.

"We both got there a few days later," Jane continued "and they gave us some of the information they had about it. Apparently, the ice around the object was 20,000 years old. And it was emitting a signal, which was how they managed to find it in the first place."

"What kind of signal?"

"I don't know, but whatever it was, it stopped after it took off, I asked," Jane answered. "After that, we took our stuff to our tent and waited. We didn't really have anything to do there until they managed to take the object out of the ice."

"Which was completely boring," Darcy added. "Thus, why I suggested we take a look around. After those annoying soldiers were out of the way, anyway."

Jane nodded, guiltily.

"So, when night fell, we got out to take a closer look. You can't imagine how cold it was. If we died there they wouldn't find our bodies until spring, probably. It was a stupid idea, so we decided to go back. That was when we saw one of the guys who worked for Arctic Cargo, the same one
"who had taken our things out of the plane."

"How can you be so sure it was the same guy?" inquired Natasha.

"Trust me," answered Darcy "there was no forgetting a guy that hot. Even Jane agrees with me!"

Given how much she was blushing, that was probably true.

"It doesn't matter how hot he was or wasn't, the problem is that he was wearing a t-shirt! No coat, no gloves, just a t-shirt! And in that weather, his fingers would have fallen off the minute he got out of his tent."

Now that was interesting.

"We got curious, so we followed him…”

Ellesmere Island – Three and half months ago

Jane and Darcy tried to follow the man as quietly and quickly as they could, which proved to be harder than they thought on that snow and using that amount of clothes. On the upside, the howling wind made it difficult to hear, so the guy probably wouldn't listen to them.

He was clearly going down to the wall of ice where the ship was trapped so, when they lost sight of him, that's where they headed to. It wasn't easy, holding to the frozen rocks, trying not to fall to their deaths in the raging sea, but they managed.

The surprising thing was, the 20.000 year old wall of ice wasn't as impenetrable as they thought. There was a tunnel on it.

Both of them stopped to look at it, going as far as forgetting the cold and the height for a minute. Jane was stunned. There was simply no way that the Army had dug that tunnel in such a short amount of time, without some serious equipment to do it and on the side of a very high cliff.

"What the hell?!" exclaimed Darcy, conveying exactly what Jane was thinking. She touched the walls of the tunnel. "It looks like it was melted."

It did. But by what? A laser? What kind of laser could melt a wall of ice that thick? And with that kind of precision? And without making a sound? Jane's scientist mind was working overtime trying to make sense of this; Darcy, much more practical, simply walked towards the tunnel.

She felt like she was in the depths of the sea walking under all that ice. There was no wind there and the sound was muffled. The light of the flashlights glowed against the walls. It was like another world entirely. And that's when they saw it: the mystery object.

An alien ship, in all its glory.

Even Darcy stopped moving for a second, while they tried to take in the view. The ship was huge, encrusted into the ice, like it was a sculpted mountain of metal; beautiful and, at the same time, clearly not from Earth. In silence, they walked towards it, eyes wide, until they found an entrance.

The inside of the ship was maybe even more impressive. Surrounded by the alien metal, both of them followed the corridors, the weak lights doing little to stop them from looking around, trying to make sense of that weird environment. Until they crossed an open door and saw an odd floating robot.
The robot didn't move when they approached, just kept itself in air. They looked at each other, smiling, amazed by what they were seeing. Darcy fumbled with her thick clothes and managed to pick her cellphone, pointing at the funny looking robot.

"Say 'cheese'!" Darcy said, grinning.

Jane's own smile began to disappear when the robot seemed to open and started vibrating, like an angry wasp.

"Darcy, no!" she yelled, pushing her friend to the side, just at the moment the robot lashed a strange metal tentacle at her.

It missed Darcy, but hit Jane in the stomach, throwing her in the air, until she shocked against the wall. It hurt so much that she could barely breathe, but adrenalin was running through her veins as she tried to get away. Darcy ran to her, putting herself between her and the robot, that ridiculous taser on her hand.

And then he was there. The man they were following, the man who supposedly worked for Arctic Cargo. And even in pain as she was, panicked as she was, she couldn't keep herself from watching as he grabbed the robot, fighting against it as it struggled, his fingers sinking into the metal; and then he pulled it.

He gave the robot a last look, probably assessing if it was still a threat, and then looked at them.

"Don't even think about it, pal!" Darcy warned him, shaking her taser, as if she could actually do anything.

The man simply raised his hands, a universal sign that he didn't want to fight, and started walking to them.

"It's alright," he said, his voice calm, as if he was trying to tame a horse. "It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you."

Jane was trying to keep herself from passing out and Darcy was shaking like a leaf, but neither of them did anything. He approached, hands still held up, and crouched over Jane, ignoring the taser right in front of him. He moved slowly, making sure he didn't startle them, and opened Jane's coat.

He sighed and looked at her.

"You are hemorrhaging internally," he said, giving her one look. "Now, if I don't cauterize this bleed…"

"How can…?"

"I can do things that other people can't," he answered and offered her his hand. "Now, hold my hand. This is gonna hurt."

He looked down and his eyes glowed red. Jane was still screaming when she passed out.

Natasha was silent as she digested the story they told her, trying to look pass all the amazing things
and analyze the details. She looked at Jane.

"May I?" she asked.

Jane nodded, understanding, and lifted her shirt. There it was, the burned mark of the cauterized wound, proof of the story they just told her.

"He saved my life," said Jane, letting the shirt fall down. "But damn if that didn't hurt."

"Scared the crap out of me," added Darcy, sounding serious for once. "I really thought we were done for."

Jane just held Darcy's hand for a second, as if reassuring her.

"So what happened then?" asked Natasha, looking at Darcy.

"Well, it didn't take him long to finish up cauterizing the wound," she answered. "And then, he just looked at me, told me she was going to be fine, and picked me and Jane up before I could even say anything. And then he ran. Now, when I say he ran, I mean he ran! All I saw was a blur, and suddenly we were back to our tent and he was gone. It wasn't long until the tremor started and the ship flew off."

Natasha stayed in silence once again, contemplating everything she had learned, trying to form a clear picture of the man she was chasing. So far all she had were physical attributes: appearance, strength, speed, the ability to shoot energy from his eyes… But now, perhaps, she had just learned something new. She had learned that maybe, just maybe, he wasn't a bad guy at all.

He had no reason to save their lives. If he was an alien, which was pretty much confirmed, and stealing an alien ship from under the nose of two armies, why would he risk himself by leaving witnesses? Why would he save both women that had seen his face, that could give the army clues as to who he was? If he just left them there, Natasha doubted she would have enough clues to even start this investigation.

But he did save them. And that told Natasha that he had a conscience. Maybe that was something she could use.

Natasha got up from the chair.

"Thank you for your help," she said. "I believe you gave me something to go on."

With that, she said her goodbyes and turned to leave; but then she stopped again, as if remembering something, and looked at Jane.

"Jane." The girl looked at her. "I may not have known Thor for a long time, but I fought by his side. Even then, when his own brother was attacking Earth, he managed to tell us a little bit about you. So I can tell, with absolute certainty, that if he isn't here by your side it's because he can't be. He loves you. Never think otherwise."

Now, her good deed of the year done, Natasha left; she had an alien to find.
Trial by Fire

Chapter 4 - Trial by Fire

Clark looked down from the edge of the building on which he was perched. If he had one thing to say about that place it was that it really looked like somewhere where people would be held against their will; 9 out of 10 kidnappers would approve. It was a dark and uninhabited neighborhood, full of abandoned warehouses, just a lot of empty streets and shadowy buildings.

The address he took from the kidnapper, Turk Barrett, was of the building directly in front of the one on which he was standing. Like all the others around, it was probably used to store some kind of cargo. It had only two floors, big gates so trucks could go in, and a vast area where any kind of thing could be kept.

From where he was standing, a normal person wouldn't be able to see a thing inside the warehouse; Clark, however, wasn't exactly a normal person. Concentrating his senses, he allowed his vision to focus, until his eyes were able to not only see all the way from where he was with absolute clarity, but to also pass through the brick walls and see inside of the warehouse.

He was right about the place, it was housing a lot of cargo. Big storage containers were piled all over, across the whole extension of the building. The second floor was reasonably empty, with a few tables and chairs only, but it was the most interesting place to look at, since it was where the people were. Clark counted 11 men, some standing guard, some sitting around the table playing cards, all armed with rifles and pistols. Except one.

The only man who wasn't armed was standing alone by the wall, wearing a lab coat, his face worried. He had black hair, Asian traces and was probably in his late forties. Whoever he was, though, he clearly wasn't one of the kidnapped people, for one simple reason: he wasn't chained.

Aside from the armed men and the man wearing the lab coat, there were 5 people, all chained to each other, all with terrible appearances. It wasn't their ragged clothes or even the fact that they were filthy; it was the blank look on their faces, like they couldn't even realize what was happening around them. They were drugged out of their minds and for all appearances, not for the first time.

On the upside, they were still there, that was good. They hadn't been moved yet. And now that Clark was there they wouldn't be, as far as he was concerned, and there weren't enough guns there to stop him from rescuing them. But not yet.

Because no matter how much he wanted to fly right into the warehouse's brick wall, beat down the armed men and then rescue the kidnapped people, he couldn't; not while he didn't know where the previously kidnapped people had been taken to. So right now he would stay there, quiet, and wait.

Jessica Jones picked the lock of her neighbor's apartment with ease, her skills still very much honed, even if she usually preferred to just break the door down. It wouldn't be, however, very welcoming of her to destroy her neighbor's apartment on the day he moved in.

The apartment, like all the others in the building, including hers, was a junkyard. Even worse than hers, since he clearly hadn't cleaned it or put any effort into decorating it. There was not even a T.V; even Malcolm, her other neighbor, the junkie who would constantly sell his own stuff to buy
drugs, had a T.V.

Her attention shifted from the home appliances to the personal stuff, the stuff that would hold some meaning to him and, because of that, give her a clue as to who her new neighbor really was. She walked into his room, looking around. There were no books anywhere; maybe he would bring them later? His clothes were also pretty normal, simple, nothing fancier than a shirt. And there, under the clothes… Bingo! A notebook.

She picked it up and opened, turning it on. It was a cheap computer, probably several years behind the top of the line models, but she wasn't interested in how good it was, but what was in it. She got a pen drive from her pocket, loaded with a simple program to bypass passwords, and inserted it.

Computers nowadays were a private investigator's holy grail of information. Gain access to one and you had everything about a person in your fingertips. What kind of likes and dislikes the person had, what kind of hobbies that person enjoyed, what kind of people that person had contact with…

It was more of a matter of knowing to interpret all that information than to actually have to dig in to find more. And Jessica was unnaturally good at doing that.

Her neighbor, for example, was named Clark Joseph Kent, 21 years old, adopted and only son of Jonathan Kent and Martha Kent. Originally from… No, that can't be a real name, it wasn't possible. One quick search proved her wrong.

"Smallville?" Jessica exclaimed. "Who in their mind would name a place like this?"

Well, that wasn't important now, so moving on... Clark was probably trying to become a journalist; he had an incredible amount of articles written and had visited pretty much every single journalism site on the internet. He was also apparently capable of speaking a lot of different languages, or at least he had articles of several languages downloaded on his computer. No college, though, just an obscene number of journalism courses.

He enjoyed movies, the classic, old ones, but also the kind that nerds usually watch, with a lot of Sci-Fi. On YouTube his tastes were diverse, but he liked to watch culinary shows quite a bit. Maybe trying to learn how to cook? Perhaps, or he just liked to watch food being made; it was the next best thing to do when you didn't have the cash or the means to acquire good food.

His social media's accounts practically existed so he could follow news, she noticed. He followed every single news vehicle, blogs, reporters, freelance journalists, of every country she could name. Well, that was one way to keep up with what happens in the world, she supposed.

The lack of books in the apartment was explained when she found digital copies in the computer; an absurd number of digital books, of every conceivable subject. He had the normal ones, such as Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings, but also books about quantum physics, advanced mathematics, medicine, literature, economics, history… The guy had a fucking library in his notebook and he had, by the looks of it, at least browsed all those documents. He was either a hoarder or a very smart man with superfast reading capabilities and insomnia.

He had no girlfriend and very few friends, by the look of it. And while there were no pictures in his computer, the desktop background had one with 3 people hugging under a tree, two adults and a kid; if she had to guess, those were his parents and himself.

Sighing, Jessica closed the notebook. There really wasn't anything here that could give her absolute certainty about this guy's character; then again, she wasn't expecting such a thing. Hoping, yes, but not expecting.
She had two choices now. She could put everything back, get out, lock the door again and follow the guy until she had a general notion of what he was like; or she could sit down and wait for him to come back, so she could have a chat with him, face to face.

Well, in the end, it was a stupid dilemma; Jessica could be subtle when she wanted, but being as direct as a cannon ball was more her style.

Clark didn't have to wait long. Less than 30 minutes later, 3 black cars approached the warehouse and the gate opened so they could get inside. 12 people got out of the cars, but only two of them, a man and a woman, went to the second floor; the other 10 remained close to the cars, rifles prepared, waiting for their return.

It was clear as day that those two were in command, because the moment they stepped on the second floor, everyone stood up and turned to look at them. The man in charge barely acknowledged them, turning his eyes to the kidnapped people instead; his cold face was impassive.

"What exactly is this?" he asked, a heavy British accent clear to Clark's enhanced hearing, gesturing to the drugged people. "I've asked for subjects. *Living* subjects. I don't believe those qualify, do they?"

Clark had to expect this from a man who kidnapped people for a living, but the way he talked about them, as if they were less than things, made his blood boil.

The Asian man wearing the lab coat approached frantic.

"I warned them! I told them that these people wouldn't do! They can't possibly survive the experiment in that state!"

*Experiment*, Clark thought, realizing that there was more going on than he imagined.

The British man turned to the doctor.

"Did you, Dr. Okamura?" he questioned, raising his eyebrows. He looked at another man, one of the armed ones. "Did he?"

The man looked scared, but nodded.

"I tried to get better subjects, boss, but the Russians control the human traffic in this town," he answered, trying to explain himself. "You said you didn't want to call any attention to what we were doing, so I tried to fly under the radar, to take people no one would miss."

The boss looked at the doctor.

"Are you sure they can't survive?"

He hesitated, but answered.

"The serum is not stabilized. The shock of the serum plus the therapy to raise their adrenalin… If the serum was ready, we could inject it even on someone with a terminal disease. But now, in the condition they are, they will never make it."

"Why isn't it stabilized yet?"

"I d-don't have the equipment to do it!" Okamura said, fear clear in his face.
"And what exactly do you need, doctor?"

"I have a contact at Oscorp that can get everything I need by tomorrow."

"Make the arrangements then, you are responsible for that," the boss said, turning to the armed man again. "As for you... I ordered you to bring me subjects and to do it quietly. You only did one of those things. Angel?"

The woman by his side approached silently, a match held on her lips. And, without saying anything, her hand darted and she grabbed the armed man by the throat, lifting him from the ground as if he didn't weight anything. Clark could only look as she snapped her hand shut, the sound of bones breaking shocking him to his core.

"Who is the second in command?" the British man asked, completely calm.

One of the other men approached slowly, the fear clear on his face.

"You are responsible for the next batch of subjects. Find them and bring them quietly. Understand? I gave you two orders, I want them both fulfilled."

Angel tossed the dead man on the ground.

"Doctor, you have until tomorrow night to get the equipment and start the work to stabilize the serum. Fail me and I will find another," he started walking to the stairs, Angel by his side. "As for these junkies? Unchain them and burn the place down. Just a bunch of addicts breaking and entering to have a little fun. It's not like we own the place."

When they were gone down the stairs, it was like the spell was broken, and everybody began to move with purpose. The doctor left in a hurry, while the armed men started to pour gasoline in the room. Clark watched as the man who appeared to be the boss got into the car and left the warehouse, just as the men upstairs tossed a match and the flames started.

He had a choice to make now. He could chase the man who appeared to be in charge, hoping he would eventually lead him to the place where they were conducting experiments on people; except that there was no guarantee he would go there or that he would talk under duress or that he was even in charge at all of this operation.

He could also chase the doctor and try to intimidate him into talking; but again, he had no guarantee he would talk or that he even knew where those people were being held, since he apparently was just a pawn.

Or he could save those people from burning to death, find doctor Okamura tomorrow and then follow him and the equipment he would acquire to the main base.

There was really just one choice here, as far as Clark was concerned.

When the cars began leaving the warehouse, Clark jumped, reaching more than enough height to cross the street and get to rooftop of the burning building; but instead of a controlled landing, Clark made sure to fall down with force, breaking the roof and getting to the second floor in one go.

The flames were already going strong, fed by the gasoline and all the wood. He could feel the strong heat waves, the sound of the fire thundering in his ears; but the flames were not near hot enough to bother him, as he passed through them to get to the kidnapped people.

He didn't know if it was the heat or the effect of the drugs passing, but the people began to awake
as the flames got closer. That was not good. Clark could take them all with no difficulty, but panicking people always made things harder. So before they made something stupid, like trying to run aimlessly, he dashed through the fire and got to them, losing no time as he picked two of them into his arms.

Looking around, Clark's eyes spotted a big wooden table close to him; with one kick, he launched it across the room, directly at the windows on the other side of the flames. The glass offered no resistance as the table smashed through them, falling with a loud bang on the street. Losing no time, Clark jumped through the broken window.

He landed on the street, the two men still on his arms, and ran to the other side, putting them on the ground at a safe distance; then he flew back into the warehouse in a split of a second, doing the same thing with two others.

When he came back for the last one, however, things changed; part of the roof collapsed, falling right in front of the windows. It was no obstacle to him, because he could simply pass through with speed and brute force, but the kidnapped woman in his arms would most likely get hurt. He stopped for a second, assessing the situation, when he noticed the terrified look of the woman.

"Oh god, save me from hell! Please, please, please! I swear this is the last time I'm gonna use it!" she began to speak, her nails scratching his arms with enough force to break skin, if he was human.

Well, if he couldn't go forward, backwards or down, Clark thought, he could always go up.

Covering the woman with his body, he flew, crashing a hole through the ceiling, rising to the sky. He looked down, meeting the eyes of the amazed woman.

"Are you an angel?" she whispered, true wonder on her eyes.

Clark just smiled, floating down to the street. He needed to take this people to a hospital.

It was almost time for the sun to rise when Clark got home. After he rescued the kidnapped people, he had to take them to a hospital, to make sure they weren't hurt. Physically they were fine, but they were still drug addicts, heroin users, apparently.

Clark sighed; he saved them from the kidnappers and the fire, but in the end, they would have to be the ones to save themselves. The woman, at least, seemed very certain when she signed her name to begin treatment on a free rehab program that one of the nurses recommended. Apparently she saw a sign from god; Clark really hoped she could go through with it.

He was tired. His Kryptonian physiology allowed him to go sometimes days without sleeping; as long as he had a healthy dose of sunlight during the day, his body wouldn't get worn-out. But that didn't mean his mind wouldn't. And with the day he had, all he wanted right now was to sleep for a few hours, until he could begin his search for Dr. Okamura.

Clark was almost beside-himself with relief when he turned the key and opened the door; until he saw there was a woman sitting inside his apartment.

Oh, god, please no.

"Welcome back," his neighbor greeted, putting her cellphone down. "I was beginning to think the big city had swallowed you up."

Slowly, still wishing this was an unusual hallucination, he entered and closed the door, resting his
"What is it with you people and boundaries?" Clark asked his neighbor.

She frowned for a second, before getting it.

"Malcolm? Yeah, he does that sometimes when he is high."

"And what about you? Are you high too?"

"Oh no, I strictly stick to drinking," she answered, taking a swing out of her flask to prove her point.

Clark sighed.

"Look, I had a long day. And a long night. And I'm pretty sure this day won't be any shorter. So, as much as I want to meet my neighbors, I kinda want to sleep more. So please…"

"Jessica Jones," she finished.

"… Please, Miss Jones, let me rest. We can talk tomorrow."

She snorted; Clark was not amused.

"Miss..." Jessica chuckled, shaking her head as if she couldn't believe it. "You really are a boy scout, huh?"

"Not really, just being polite. Unlike someone."

"Yeah, I'm never polite. The whole concept kinda pisses me off, really."

"I'm seeing that," he opened the door and gestured to it. "Ma would be very disappointed in me, though, if I forgot my manners, no matter how much I want to."

"She seems like a wise woman. So maybe I'll take a page out of her book and give this 'manners thing' a try," she walked to him, pushing the door close again, never taking her eyes off him. "How are you doing? Hard night? Must have been, you smell like a bonfire."

Clark looked at her seriously for the first time.

"Passed close to a building on fire" he told her.

"Hmm... Nothing too bad, I hope."

"No one got hurt, I'm sure."

"That's a relief. I mean, it could be worse, right? Like, I saw a guy being run over tonight. Right here, close to Luke's Bar." Her voice was laced with an obvious fake surprise, like she was just playing a role; and then she got serious and eyed him without blinking. "From where I was standing, though, it seemed more like the guy ran over the car."

Clark felt his blood turning to ice. She had seen him. She had seen him using his abilities. His face didn't move an inch, but his heart was beating faster than ever. For the first time since his childhood, someone had seen him doing something he shouldn't be able to and recognized him. He didn't know what to do.

"Really?" he inquired, trying to gain time until he could make his brain function again. "That
sounds like quite the story."

Jessica Jones was still looking at him, still unblinking.

"It was quite amazing. The guy saved some dude from being kidnapped. Beat the shit out of the bad guys. Stopped a moving vehicle with his own body… I was actually waiting to see if he would turn green."

He didn't know what to say and the woman just wouldn't blink; she just kept looking at him with those big eyes of hers and if he was human he knew he would be sweating.

"That sounds very unlikely," he mumbled. "Are you sure you didn't see things wrong? In the dark sometimes our vision…"

"Oh, fuck it!" she exclaimed, suddenly, almost making Clark jump back. "It was you! I know it and you know it! Let's just move on with this shit."

Clark was actually paralyzed. His body wouldn't respond and his mind was yelling just one thing: deny, deny, deny.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and he knew he sounded so fake that even the most naïve person in the world wouldn't fall for that.

"Oh, you don't?" she approached her mad face as much as she could without touching him. "So you are going to look me in the eyes and tell me that you weren't that guy?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Clark repeated automatically and he wanted to punch himself.

Her eyes acquired a dangerous look; and then, unexpectedly, she seemed to deflate.

"Look, I got it, alright? You don't know me, I broke into your apartment and now I'm confronting you about something you just don't go around telling people about," she eyed him, carefully, making herself look non-threatening. "But I swear that I'm not a danger to you. Okay? You can admit it."

Clark looked at her for a long minute, not moving, not reacting. Then he said:

"I don't know what you're talk…"

That's when she punched him.

He saw her muscles contracting. He saw her fist moving. Any other day, he could easily have dodged or defended himself, but not that day; that day he was so surprised by what was happening that he was stuck to the ground as if cement had been poured over him. And because of that he was powerless to stop her when her hand collided with his chin; the result couldn't have been another.

CRACK!

"FUCK!" she yelled, clutching her broken hand. "You fucking broke my hand!"

If Clark was facing difficulties to think before, now he was reaching a whole other level of mental paralysis.

"Y-You punched me!" he stuttered, taking his own hand to his face as if he was hurt, an over delayed response that wouldn't fool anybody. "It's not my fault!"
"It is your fault! You wouldn't admit it!"

"Admit to what? I just don't know how to make a fist. Sometimes when you punch wrong your fingers break."

Without knowing what to do, he went to the fridge and opened it, looking for something cold so she could put on her hand.

"Oh, I know how to punch! I do it all the time. In fact, I just punched you with enough force to make your jaw cross the fucking street if you were just an ordinary guy!"

And with that, she followed him to the fridge, grabbing it with her left and unbroken hand and lifting it from the ground.

There was a moment of complete silence. Clark was speechless. Her arm was extended, her hand was barely holding the old and very heavy fridge. And yet, she was lifting it with no effort at all, just like he could have done with his Kryptonian strength.

He turned his face to her, shock clear on his expression; that's when the last thing she said reached his brain.

"Wait a minute, did you say my jaw would have been launched across the street?"

Jessica dropped the fridge without care.

"It would, if you weren't able to stop a moving car with your chest!"

"And what if you were wrong?! You would've killed me!"

"I knew I was right. I'm not blind. I saw you clearly from the fire escape in front of Luke's Bar."

"What the hell were you doing there? Stalking me?"

"I wasn't stalking anybody… I wasn't stalking you. I saw you by accident. That kind of shit tends to happen when you stop a fucking car with your body in the middle of the street!"

Clark was breathing hard now, unable to keep up with the events of the night. How could something like that happen on his first day on New York?! He tried to calm himself and sometimes the best way to do that is to fall into routine; so he stopped worrying about himself for a second and focused on her, looking at Jessica's hand with his x-ray vision.

"Your hand is fractured. It's probably nothing serious, but let me…"

She pushed her hand back.

"Forget the hand, it will be fine by the afternoon," she said and he wondered if rapid healing was also part of her abilities. "Now, can we start again?"

Jessica looked at him seriously. He met her eyes for a moment and nodded.

"Yeah, I guess we can."

She seemed to calm down when he agreed to talk.

"So, the guy I saw…?"
"It was me," Clark admitted, since that was no reason to lie now.

She nodded and then slapped his shoulder with her good hand.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" she exclaimed.

He was taken aback.

"I'm sorry?"

"Using your powers in the middle of the street! Getting involved with criminal bullshit! What if someone saw you? You were lucky I was the only one there."

He sighed and took his hands to the face.

"I wasn't thinking. The guy needed help, I helped. Wouldn't you?"

Jessica didn't even hesitate.

"No! Do you know why? Because I'm not an idiot!"

"Really? If you were there in a position to help, you wouldn't have done anything? You would have turned your back and let them drag that guy?"

"Yeah, I would."

Clark met her eyes for a long while, assessing her.

"I don't believe you," he said, after a time, his voice heavy with certainty.

She seemed affronted.

"And why is that?"

Clark pointed at her.

"You are here, aren't you? For someone who doesn't care about helping people, you sure as hell look worried about me."

"That… that's different," she answered, after a few seconds of silence.

"How?"

"It just is, okay!" she exploded, suddenly looking furious. "Look, you don't get it. You are young, you are powerful. I bet you think nothing can hurt you, right? I bet you feel fucking invincible, helping those people. Well, you aren't. That's the thing. Nobody is. There is always someone, something, worse out there. And if you look for it, you will find it. Or it will find you!"

Clark didn't back down. He just held his eyes on her, calm, thoughtful.

"Is that what happened to you?" he said finally.

By the reaction of her face, he had made a right assumption. Jessica closed her hand into a fist, true fury in her eyes.

"That is none of your business," she replied, slowly; and then she breathed, controlling herself. "You know what? I did my part. Listen to me, don't listen to me, I don't care. It's your life."
She turned and walked to the door.

"I can't stop," Clark declared. "Those guys I beat? They were working for someone. Someone worse. They are kidnapping people on the streets for some kind of experiment. I don't know what they are doing or where they are doing it, but I am going to find out. I have to!"

"Why? Why you? Why don't you give this to the police?"

"And tell them what? That I stopped a moving vehicle with my own body, that I threatened the driver until he admitted he was working for some guy who is kidnapping people for experiments? Do you really think someone is going to listen to this? If they don't arrest me on the spot, which they probably would, they are simply going to close their eyes and pretend nothing is happening. There are people dying right now! Alone, scared, in pain. If I can help, it is my responsibility to do so."

Sighing, Jessica opened the door, looking at him for one last time.

"Well, do what you gotta do. I did my part."

And with that, she walked out and closed the door.

Jessica let her body rest against the closed door for a moment, closing her eyes, breathing deep. He didn't understand. He couldn't, just as she couldn't before it happened to her. If he kept doing this, putting himself in danger's way, some bad shit was going to happen to him sooner or later, just as it had happened to her.

It was funny, she thought, how things had changed so fast. Minutes before he arrived, her only worry was to know if this guy was one of the good ones or if he was the same as some of the lowlifes out there, who abused their powers to their own gain, no matter who got hurt. Other than that, she really didn't give a damn, as long as he wasn't a threat to her.

But how exactly could she turn a blind eye to the fact that she was basically looking at her past self? She would have to be a tremendous hypocrite and an idiot not to realize that; she tried not to be the first and she definitely wasn't the second.

Was this fear talking? Absolutely. She knew that, even if she didn't like to admit it. The only time she tried to use her "gifts" to help people, her reward was a visit to hell itself. So there was the question: if she could go back in time and stop herself from trying to help people, would she? She didn't know.

What she did know was that she couldn't let another person go through what she had gone through; not if there was something she could do to help.

Sometimes Jessica felt like a piece of shit. She didn't want to feel like that anymore.

Clark scratched his eyes, twice as tired as he was when he arrived; what a night he was having. He looked around and took his notebook. He wouldn't be able to sleep now, not after this. Better start working then; Dr. Okamura wouldn't just drop out of the sky. The moment he turned his computer on, though, his door opened with force.

Jessica Jones looked at him, conflicted for a moment; her expression changed, however, and suddenly her eyes were alive.
"What do you have to go on?" she asked.

Natasha was feeling slightly irritated. Looking at her impassive face, her impeccable manners and hearing her calm voice few people would notice it, but that didn't change the fact that she was feeling a little bit angry.

The manager of Arctic Cargo wasn't being helpful. Nor he was being completely polite. Natasha supposed it was her own fault. Every person had to be handled differently when it came to asking questions. Most men, and quite a few women, were partial to her charms; being incredibly beautiful and trained in seduction made this a very useful skill on her field. Others responded better to gentleness instead of seduction, nice words, compliments, a smile.

Owen Connor was neither of those. Oh, he was attracted to her, she knew that the second she entered the room. Not exactly difficult to notice when the man looked at her and ran his eyes from head to toe with barely concealed lust. Uncomfortable, maybe, but she was already more than used to it; and it was a weakness she thought she could use.

Her mistake. The man was attracted to her, yes, but he was also a misogynist, conceited and self-important individual. So, because of that, no matter how much he lusted over her, using that particular tactic wasn't getting her anywhere, because at the same time he also didn't respect her enough to consider her an authority.

She would have to rectify that.

"Mr. Connor," she called again, trying to gain his attention, as he continued to boss around the people in the office as if she weren't there.

"Liam!" the man yelled, ignoring her, giving a document to young man who passed. "Take this to my secretary. I'm going to need copies. And remember her that I still want my coffee!"

He finally turned to her, barely looking at her face.

"Look, Miss Romanoff, I'm a busy man. I can't just stop working now to answer a bunch of nonsense questions. Give me a call and I'll try to make some time, but now it's really not possible."

Natasha raised an eyebrow. Without saying anything she got up from her chair, walked to the door of his office, and closed it, loudly. There was a sudden silence in the workplace.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear enough, Mr. Connor," Natasha said, looking at him with cold eyes. "You are being questioned about a theft made by one of your employees. A theft of alien technology."

She walked back to his table, but didn't sit down.

"If you refuse to answer those questions right now, I will arrest you as an accomplice. I will take you to an underground facility and then I will ask the same questions again. Except I'm not going to be as nice anymore."

She held her cold eyes without blinking, seeing his attitude suddenly changing.

"I have rights…"

"You'll have rights when I say you can have them," Natasha interrupted. "I'm not with the police, Mr. Connor. I'm not a cop. I am a spy and an assassin who occasionally gets to work as an
interrogator. Which role I'll play right now depends entirely on you. So, are you going to answer my questions or not?"

Natasha could see a trickle of sweat running down his face as he nodded, the role model of cooperation now.

"That's good," she said, as she sat down again. "Now, about this employee of yours, 'James Bartholomew Olsen', what can you tell me about him?"

Mr. Connor breathed deeply, trying to calm himself.

"Look, you gotta understand that Arctic Cargo isn't that big of a company. I mean, we have our slice of work with explorers and scientists and this kind of thing, but this contract with the Canadian army was big. I mean, big enough to pay our bills for the rest of the year. We couldn't lose it."

Romanoff nodded, urging him to go on.

"Now, it's not easy to get clearance to work with the army. Lots of bureaucracy and a lot of time wasted. We have this clearance, but the size of the project demanded more people than we had so…"

"So you hired people without clearance and faked their documents," said Natasha. Mr. Connor nodded, looking afraid. "I don't care what laws you broke, that's not why I'm here, Mr. Connor. This is between the Canadian army and you. I'm here to ask questions about this specific employee that you hired."

"Okay, okay, what do you want to know?"

"Did you meet him personally?" she asked.

"Yes, I was the one who hired those guys. Can't say I remember everything about them, but I definitely remember this one."

This interested Natasha.

"Why is that?"

"Well, the guy was working on Cassidy Pub. It's just a little restaurant on the side of the road, lots of truckers stop by to eat and rest. I was there one day, minding my business, when a drunk trucker had the brilliant idea to grope a waitress. This guy did not approve."

"They fought?"

"Well, fight is a strong word. The guy simply tossed the drunk out like he was a kitten. Tossed him on the ground, grabbed him by the back of his coat and carried the guy all the way to his truck. Left him there to cool off. Strong lad. Seemed nice. So I offered him a job. I mean, if he could carry that guy like that, he sure as hell wouldn't have trouble with a few boxes."

"Do you know anything else about this man?"

"I didn't ask anything else because, frankly, I didn't care. It was just a guy."

Natasha didn't say anything for a moment, just thinking about the new information she had. A pattern was forming in her mind: a man who liked to help people, yes, that was consistent with
what Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis had told her. But there was something else now.

The man that she was almost certain was an alien was working in a pub. She knew he worked for Arctic Cargo, that was why she was here after all, but this particular job could have been just a mean to get closer to the ship. But working in a restaurant wasn't. That indicated a level of knowledge about humanity that not even Thor had acquired yet.

This alien was here, on Earth, for a long time; and they never heard anything about him. This changed things. Maybe, he was less of an invader and more in the lines of "illegal immigrant".

That was something to think about.

"Funny thing, though, not really related to the guy, but definitely related to the trucker he tossed out," Mr. Connor added, laughing, breaking Natasha's concentration. "After that happened, the guy still tried to come back inside. Well, that's not true, he went back but he didn't enter, too afraid I guess. But he kept yelling some pretty nasty things from the outside. The thing is, after a while of this annoying little shit yelling non-stop, there was a huge wind and a big crashing sound."

"What happened?" Natasha wondered.

"Karma, that's what!" Mr. Connor cackled. "Some huge pine trees somehow got caught by the wind and flew right through this guy's truck. The thing looked like a pincushion of trees!"

Natasha really doubted that the wind was responsible for that. Well, he probably was still a good guy, she thought, but everyone had their limits; she would do well to remember that.
Chapter 5 - X Marks the Spot

"So, what's your professional advice? We just stay here?" Clark asked.

Jessica rolled her eyes and went back to her surveillance. They were both on the top of a building, looking down on the movement of the people and the cars below, waiting for Dr. Okamura to finally get out from his clinic on the other side of the street.

"It's a stakeout," she answered. "What were you expecting? Some Sherlock Holmes bullshit? Did you want me to break into his clinic, lick some old wine stain from his lab coat and deduce, by taste and smell alone, that he is hiding the kidnapped people in a fucking wine cellar on Cordoba?"

Clark sighed; and waited, because he knew by now that she wasn't done.

"If Sherlock Holmes was realistic, there would be a lot less witty battles against Moriarty and a lot more of him and Watson watching people boning in dark alleys," she put her binoculars down. "But then I suppose the target audience would be completely different."

Lots and lots of sarcasm aside, Clark was glad Jessica decided to help him. She managed to find Dr. Okamura's clinic in a couple of hours with only a surname and a sketch of his face that he did on the spot. She could be foul mouthed and probably an alcoholic as well, but she was also an excellent private investigator.

Dr. Okamura's full name was Daniel Okamura and he was a geneticist of relatively renown. Among his published researches, the one that got the most attention was a study he did on mutants or, more accurately, a study he did on non-mutants that carried the so called X-Gene.

Clark hadn't read the whole thing, but the study went on how it was common knowledge that mutants carried the X-Gene, which usually was activated during puberty, resulting in the mutations or powers that the mutants had. What wasn't common knowledge, or at least it wasn't advertised, was the fact that some non-mutants could also carry the X-Gene, without activating it their whole lives. That's how the X-Gene was passed on, sometimes skipping generations, but always present in certain lineages.

Dr. Okamura's thesis was a study on the possibility of the X-Genes being artificially activated; meaning, turning a non-mutant that carried the X-Gene into a mutant, without waiting for nature to do her thing further down the line.

Apparently, his thesis had received some attention, but no one wanted to really invest in it; the world wanted less mutants, not more, and since it was difficult to find willing subjects that wanted to risk injury and death to become the very beings that the majority of the world despised, the study didn't progress at all.

Or at least it hadn't progressed legally; Clark had a good idea now of the kind of experiments these people were doing.

"So, are you one of them?" asked Jessica, suddenly, interrupting his thoughts. "You know, mutants? Because it's cool if you are, I don't judge."
He looked at her. No, he was an alien, but Clark didn't really want to share that now. People had a tendency of freaking out when they found out; more now, he imagined, after an alien invasion.

"No," he answered, slowly. "I… acquired my abilities after birth."

It wasn't technically a lie; if he had remained in Krypton, under a red sun, he would be a normal Kryptonian. Still an alien, yes, but one without his so called powers.

"What about you?" Clark asked, trying to shift the conversation from him and, to be honest, legitimately curious.

"Accident," she said, and didn't elaborate. She turned the binoculars to the clinic's exit again. "It's funny, isn't it? The way they talk about it on T.V, it's like mutants are going to destroy the world. Fucking beasts of the apocalypse. Like they'll just, I don't know, teleport inside the White House and stab the president. And yet, I never even saw one before."

Clark considered her words for a second.

"Me neither. There aren't a lot of them and they don't exactly advertise what they are, for good reason. I guess, and forgive me for the cliché, people fear what they don't understand."

Jessica clicked her tongue, as if he had said something obvious.

"I know they do. And frankly, there are some mutant nutjobs who really are nightmare fuel, like that Magneto guy. But why the hell do governments all over the world lose their shit when they hear the word 'mutant'? There are worse people out there, scarier people, that aren't mutants and yet they don't give two shits about them."

"They are an identifiable group," Clark theorized, having thought about this before. "Easy to tell apart. Easy to isolate, to make people fear. It doesn't have the same ring to say people should fear 'Jessica Jones' or 'Clark Kent' as it does to say that people should fear mutants. And there is also the fact that they are unpredictable. You can't know which people are going to be born mutants, where they will appear, what will be their loyalties, what will be their abilities… I don't agree with it, obviously, but I can understand how governments may come to fear them. And how useful this fear is to some people."

After a moment considering Clark's long and over-detailed explanation, Jessica just shrugged.

"Yeah, well, people are idiots," she concluded, wisely.

They spent some minutes in silence, just observing, then she looked at him again.

"So, how strong are you really?" she asked, as if she's been meaning to do this for a while.

He looked at her, wary.

"Why? You want to hit me again?" he inquired and she unconsciously touched her right hand, that was, to Clark's wonder, mostly healed by now.

"No, I learned my lesson. Just making conversation."

Clark himself had wondered that many times.

"I… don't know," he finally said. "It's not like I go to the gym and keep notes on how much I can bench press."
"But what was the heaviest thing you've lifted?" she questioned, opening her hip flask to take a swig. "I mean, I can lift a car. Can you?"

"I lifted a tractor once," he said, then added. "When I was 3."

Jessica choked in the middle of her swig.

"What the… 3 years old?!"

"My father was fixing the tractor and I wanted to help. He looked uncomfortable under it, so I thought I could make it easier."

"So you just went over there and lifted the entire thing over your head?"

"Well, not the entire thing, but yes, pretty much."

"Fuck…" she said, shaking her head. "But what about now? What was the heaviest thing you have ever lifted in your life?"

Clark thought for a second.

"An oil rig."

This time, Jessica was shocked into silence; for a while, at least.

"Holy mother of… How the fuck did you do that?!"

He hesitated a second, before explaining.

"I was traveling for a while and needed money, so I ended up working in a fishing boat. Long story short, we were close to an oil rig that caught fire and they called for help. I swam there and took the people out but, before they could board the helicopter, the whole structure began to fall down. They wouldn't have time to get away, so I did the only thing I could: I held it for enough time for them to take off."

Jessica was looking at him with disbelief etched on her face.

"How did you get away?" she asked, finally.

"I didn't," Clark answered. "I managed to hold the oil rig. It was… it was the first time that I actually felt my muscles strain. But I held it until the helicopter got out. Problem was, the steel beam I was standing on started to bent because of the weight and the whole thing came crashing down and exploded."

She was experiencing difficulty to talk.

"And you survived this shit?! Holy crap, what kind of stubborn son of a bitch are you?"

Clark sighed; she had a very colorful vocabulary.

"What else can you do?" she questioned, her entire attention on him now. "I mean, besides being able to lift oil rigs, surviving explosions and running faster than a car?"

Well, this was going to be a long conversation, Clark thought, since sometimes even he was surprised by the amount of things his Kryptonian physiology allowed him to do. So he decided to shorten it.
"I can fly."

"Bullshit!" she retorted immediately.

"No, I really can," he said, a little surprised by her fast reaction to this.

"Really fly? Or jump very high and fall down somewhat controlled? Because that I can do too."

"Really fly. Though in the beginning it was more like jumping and falling. Pretty scary thing, I gotta say, even knowing I wouldn't get hurt," he looked at her. "Maybe you can fly too, you just didn't get the hang of it yet. I could help you."

"No, thank you. The last thing I want to do is jump high enough to be able to die in the landing. I'll keep my 'super strength' and be happy with it."

Clark rolled his eyes, but didn't press; he too had been worried when he started trying in the Arctic and he knew for a fact that he wouldn't get hurt, even if he landed on his head. Despite the situation, he was enjoying this talk. The only people who ever listened to him talking about this were his parents; it was nice to talk to someone new. And that she also had her own set of abilities made this even more gratifying. Even if he still was pretty weird compared to the rest of the world, there were some people out there who weren't completely normal too. And he liked that.

He opened his mouth to say something else, when his eyes caught someone familiar.

"There is our guy," he said, pointing to the clinic. Jessica used her binoculars to confirm.

"Yep," then she turned to him. "Pretty good eyes you have there, huh?"

Before Clark could answer, however, she got up.

"Come on, we don't wanna lose him."

Every head on Cassidy Pub turned to look when Natasha entered. To be fair, Natasha turned heads everywhere she went, so it wasn't like the people of this pub were doing something unusual; they were just more open about it than people in other places.

Without caring for any of this, Natasha walked to the balcony of the bar and sat down. The bar was full of people eating and drinking. There was a girl singing country music on a stage and the sound of people talking was only a little bit lower than her performance. Natasha looked for a bartender and asked for a beer, placing a bill on the counter.

This was the bar that the alien she was looking for had worked, before he got hired by Arctic Cargo. A common pub, exactly like hundreds of others, full of ordinary people living ordinary lives; and yet, she was absolutely sure that neither Thor nor Loki could have worked there and blended in, either because of pride or simply because of lack of understanding of human culture.

It was one more thing that gave credence to her theory that the alien she was looking for was living on Earth for a while. At least long enough to understand the basics of things that should be clear to any human, like serving food, taking orders, keeping a conversation about everyday topics like sports or politics...

Thor might have looked human, but he was locked into a hospital hours later of arriving on Earth and, even after he got out, he managed to appear on SHIELD's radar almost immediately; certain things a person could learn only from experience. She was sure she would have trouble blending in
on Asgard too, and she had trained her entire life to blend in anywhere.

The waitress brought her beer and handed it to her with a smile; black hair, dark eyes, pretty. So far, she was the only one there that fitted the poor description of the waitress that was groped and helped by the one she was looking for.

Natasha smiled back.

"It's always this full?" she asked.

"At this hour? Pretty much. Truckers stop by to lunch," she answered, while cleaning a table nearby.

"You look short-staffed."

The waitress snorted.

"Tell me about it… We've been meaning to hire someone for a few months, but we only got temporary workers. We lost one of ours a while back to another place."

"I know," Natasha answered, facing her. "Big guy, blue eyes, dark hair… Left to work for Arctic Cargo."

The waitress stopped in her tracks, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Who are you?" she asked sharply.

"Someone trying to help him," Natasha said in response. "Could we talk a little bit? Somewhere quieter?"

The girl kept staring at Natasha with unfriendly eyes for a few seconds, then agreed.

"Come with me."

Natasha followed the girl to the back exit, where they left to the cold wind of outside. There was nobody there.

"Okay," said the waitress, looking very determined. "Now, let's start over. Who are you and what do you want with Clark?"

Clark. Another name. Could that one be real?

"I'm Natasha Romanoff. You might've heard of me from the…"

"Avengers," the girl completed, suddenly looking awed and afraid at the same time. "I knew you looked familiar…"

Natasha smiled, trying to reassure the girl.

"And what about you?"

"Oh, sorry, I'm Chrissy."

She nodded and approached one step.

"Chrissy, I meant what I said. I'm trying to help Clark," and she was surprised to notice that she
"Why? What happened to him?" Chrissy asked, alarmed.

"You know he went to work for Arctic Cargo, right? The army was digging something on Ellesmere Island, and they were hired to help with the transportation of their equipment. There was a theft however. Important government's property. They want it back."

"No! Clark's a good guy! He would never steal something!"

Natasha put her hand on Chrissy's shoulder.

"I believe you. I really do. But nonetheless they ordered me to find him. If I don't, they will order someone else and this person might not be so convinced that Clark is a good man. So I need your help."

Chrissy was frightened and agitated, but she reluctantly agreed.

"What do you need to know?" she asked.

"His name, what is it?"

"Clark Sullivan."

Clark Sullivan. Yet another name. Might be fake too.

"How long did Clark work here?"

"Not long, just a little bit over a month. He said he needed some cash after moving."

That was interesting.

"From where did he move from?" she questioned.

"He said he came from Cordova, but I don't think he is actually from there. He is American though, of that I am pretty sure."

"Why do you say that?"

Despite still being scared, Chrissy smiled.

"We Canadians can always tell," she answered, jokingly. "First, there was his accent. I can't place it, but I know it's American. Then, maybe the most important thing: hockey wasn't his favorite sport."

Natasha gave a little smile in response.

"What was it?"

"Football. He was always watching it on his breaks. Said it reminded him of his father, how they used to watch every game together."

"How well did you know him?" Natasha asked.

"We… we were friends. Maybe we could've been something more if he had stayed" she looked at Natasha. "He is a good man, Miss Romanoff. The kind of man you don't see anymore, always
helping, no matter who needed it, not because he wanted something in return, but because he could. Please, please, remember that when you find him."

"I will," she promised, and allowed Chrissy to go back in.

Natasha remained there for a while, enjoying the cold wind. This was the first time she talked with someone who had a personal relationship with the one she was looking for; "Clark", if the waitress was to be believed. What she learned here seemed to confirm what she had theorized.

Everyone said he was a good man and his actions seemed to confirm that; that was nice, they didn't have another Loki on their hands by the looks of it. And her newest theory, that this alien was living on Earth for a while, was pretty much confirmed too. Not only he had the knowledge to work in a pub, but spoke with an American accent, liked to watch football and apparently had enough contacts and information on how to forge fake identities. The comment about his father was also on Natasha's mind; could it be another alien, an even older one, or a human he respected enough to call father?

Well, she hoped she would find out soon enough, since she had another lead to follow: Cordova. It was a small city on Alaska, if she wasn't mistaken. Previous home of her elusive alien.

It was a good thing she had a jet, otherwise this search would take forever.

Clark and Jessica had followed Dr. Okamura since he had left the clinic and got into a car, appreciating New York's traffic maybe for the first time, since it made it easier for them to catch up from the rooftops of the buildings and the alleys they used for shortcuts.

The doctor had drove to a small warehouse with the Oscorp logo in it, and disappeared inside, getting out only an hour later inside a small truck; probably a truck full of the equipment he needed to improve his experiments. The truck stopped so he could get out and enter his own car, then continued to follow the doctor's car through the city.

This time it was even easier to follow them, since the truck moved slowly and stood out, so there was no risk of losing it; not that Clark's vision would lose it, anyway. They drove for almost two hours, getting away from the crowded streets little by little, until they arrived on a somewhat emptier neighborhood, full of factories and warehouses, close to the water.

It was almost time for the sun to set when the two vehicles stopped in front of a tall fence, waiting for someone to open the gate for them.

"Finally," Jessica whispered, as the vehicles entered and continued to the inside of a factory, disappearing. "I was beginning to think they wouldn't stop."

"Tired?" Clark asked, curious about her stamina.

"Just annoyed."

She seemed to be telling the truth, which was weird, because a human wouldn't have been able to do what she did without getting exhausted; whatever happened to her, not only made her strong and gave her rapid healing, but also augmented her stamina to superhuman levels. He would have to ask her about it later.

Turning his head, Clark looked at the factory Dr. Okamura had entered. It looked very old and not functional at all. He couldn't tell exactly what it used to make, but it probably had something to do with chemical substances from the amount of metal barrels piled on the outside.
He looked at Jessica and sighed; he could already see this going badly.

"Before, you asked me what I could do," he started.

She didn't even look at him, her eyes on the binoculars.

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Well, there is one thing I left out. You see, I have a pretty good eyesight."

"I noticed," she deadpanned.

"Good, good… But what I meant is that my eyes are so good that I can, you know, see through things," he mumbled, quickly.

It took a few seconds for Jessica's brain to interpret what he had said, but when it did all movement halted. She lowered the binoculars slowly, turning her head to him, a very dangerous look on her face.

"What the fuck does that mean?" she demanded.

"It means that I have some sort of x-ray vision. I can see through solid objects. But before you ask…"

"If you looked through my clothes I will fucking scratch your eyes off!"

"… I haven't looked through your clothes," he completed, apparently not fast enough. "Ma made sure to raise a gentleman. If I did something like this she would… well, I don't know what she would do, but it wouldn't be nice, I can tell you that much. So no, I didn't look through your clothes or anyone else's and you have my word I never will."

She looked at him suspiciously for a second, then resumed her watch; well, he didn't know if she believed him or not, but at least she chose not to fight right now.

"So, I suppose you looked inside the place?" Jessica asked. "Because I'm hoping you brought up this new ability for a reason other than to let me know you could check out my tits anytime you wanted to. What did you see?"

Clark sighed but didn't take the bait.

"It's an old factory, full of big machines that seem to be collecting dust and metal barrels piled all over. There are some catwalks over the machines. Looks abandoned, at least the part with the machinery. No cameras anywhere. There are other rooms further back with people… I count 13 armed men."

"Pistols, rifles…?"

"Both," he clarified. "What is interesting, however, are the lower levels. There is one elevator that goes there, accessed by one hallway. But things look new there, like it's been built not too long ago, unlike the rest of the factory. I can see… some stretchers down there and some medical equipment. The people we are looking for are probably there."

"Probably," because he couldn't see it clearly to know for certain; the place was underground, covered in metal and, most likely, surrounded by lead from the old part of the factory. He could see through solid objects, but certain kinds of objects were harder to look through than others.
"Well, no time like the present then," Jessica said, getting up, only to be stopped by Clark.

He looked at her.

"Look, maybe I should go alone. I can be shot and survive, you can't."

She looked surprised at him for a moment.

"You are bulletproof?!"

"I told you I survived an explosion, why wouldn't I be bulletproof?"

"Shit, I don't know, you just surprised me," she answered, before slapping his hand away. "And fuck that, I'm going. No way in hell I'm staying outside after all this running around."

Clark reluctantly nodded and got up as well. They ran all the way to the fence and tore the wire to go through it; they didn't need tools to do it, simply sliding their hands over the wire as if they were breaking an annoying spider's web. Clark had made sure that nobody was there first, but his first instinct was to look around as they ran to the factory.

Even if they could, they didn't enter through the main door, choosing to bend the bars of a window nearby so that they could jump in. As Clark had told Jessica, there was nobody in the machinery room. There were a few lights on, giving a creepy vibe on the dark place, as they walked the corridors full of dust. It was more than clear that the place was abandoned, or at least that part was.

Moving on through the old and big machinery room, they arrived at a closed door; it wouldn't be anything unusual, except that this door wasn't old at all. It stood out in the decrepit room as the only thing new, bright steel and glowing lights on a little keyboard.

"Great, it's locked," complained Jessica.

Clark ignored her for a while, looking at the keyboard. She definitely couldn't see, but to his eyes the fingerprints were clear; he just needed the right combination of the numbers that had marks on them.

"I can see which numbers were used, but I'm going to need try the combination," Clark explained, before pressing a few numbers.

An unsatisfactory noise made itself heard and he tried again. Jessica rolled her eyes.

"Just let me," she said, pushing him to the side.

But instead of pressing the numbers on the keyboard, as he thought she would do, she punched the door; her fist made a huge dent on the steel and she grabbed it with both hands, forcing the door open with a grunt.

"See?" she smiled.

And then the alarm started to sound.

"Wow… I just… I have no words. Good job!" Clark congratulated, dripping with sarcasm, a hand on his face.

A small blush spread through Jessica's face.

"Okay, that's on me," she admitted, unnecessarily.
Without losing any more time, they ran through the door, arriving on another room. Like the previous one, it was also full of machinery, but these looked new. There was lighting here and the noise the machines made showed them that these were functioning. Aside from the catwalks over them and the doors upstairs, the room had only one corridor, right in front of them, on the other side of the room; and, at the end of it, the elevator that Clark knew would take them down.

There were also three men on that corridor, holding their rifles in their direction.

They dashed behind a big machine as the bullets flew right where they were a second ago. Jessica looked around, searching for something; without saying a thing, she extended her hand and reached for one of many metal barrels around them. And, with incredible accuracy, she threw it on the men.

The barrel bounced on the ground and kept rolling fast, hitting the men on their legs, throwing them upwards with violence; they fell back like rocks and didn't stand up again.

"Ha!" she cheered, just as Clark noticed movement in the rooms upstairs.

If the men managed to get to the catwalks, there would be nowhere to hide from their bullets anymore. That wasn't much of a problem to Clark, but Jessica couldn't say the same. So, taking a page from her book, Clark also grabbed a barrel and threw it; except he did it against an object, so there really was no reason to hold back.

The barrel was filled with something and, because of that, extremely heavy. So when Clark tossed it, it moved like a cannon ball, hitting the catwalk right on the spot where it connected to the rooms upstairs. The steel from the catwalk was simply ripped away from it, creating a huge hole and preventing anyone from crossing it, at least for now. The noise of the barrel colliding against the wall was deafening.

"Show off," Jessica simply said, looking forward.

They both got up and started to go towards the corridor of the elevator. The alarm was blaring non-stop and they could hear people yelling. That's when there was a bell noise, indicating that the elevator had arrived on their floor. They watched as the doors opened and a woman got out; the same woman he saw last night, breaking that man's neck.

She stopped, looking at them. The woman, Angel, if Clark recalled, was tall. She had short, black hair, and a very fit physique; like on the night before, she had a match held on her lips. Without saying anything, almost looking bored, Angel looked around, her eyes stopping at the smashed barrel Jessica had thrown. Very slowly, she walked to it and picked it up; Jessica's eyebrows rose.

And then she threw it back at them.

Like when Clark did it, she put a lot of her force on it. The thing was barely visible as it crossed the room, splitting the air. By pure reflex, Clark and Jessica stepped to the side, letting the barrel pass in the middle of them, exploding on the wall behind with extraordinary force.

"Holy hell!" exclaimed Jessica, eyes wide.

Angel walked calmly through the corridor, until she arrived at the room with the machines. And, without looking back, she punched a button on the wall; a steel door began to come down from the ceiling, isolating the elevator.

Jessica looked at him.

"Go, I'll deal with this bitch," she said, as Angel continued to walk towards them.
"Are you sure? I've seen her kill a man last night. She is dangerous," said Clark, looking at the door closing slowly.

"So am I."

Clark nodded, still worried, but started to walk towards the elevator; and towards Angel. He would trust Jessica.

"You are not going anywhere," stated Angel, almost looking bored.

He didn't answer. He just kept walking to her, without hesitation. She frowned and raised her fist; and punched him.

Except she didn't hit anything but air. Looking surprised for the first time, Angel looked around, trying to find Clark, only to see him entering the elevator on the far end of the corridor without even acknowledging her.

Baring her teeth, Angel turned around, ready to go after him; that's when Jessica's fist collided with the side of her head, throwing her like a rag doll against a pile of barrels.

It was on.

It wasn't every day that Jessica could really use her strength. Even when she tried to be a superhero, convinced by her sister, her only opponents had been street thugs and she couldn't exactly go all out against them; not without killing people in horrific ways with her bare hands.

This woman, though, could take a punch. A real one, to the side of her head, and get up, with barely a scratch. She got up from the pile of barrels like an enraged bull, throwing barrels everywhere as she ran into Jessica, her head hitting her stomach, pushing her back.

Jessica lost her breath for a second, trying to keep herself on her feet while the woman pushed her. She brought her fists to the bitch's liver, punching with all her strength, feeling her muscles hardening like a brick wall; she didn't even flinch.

Without being able to stop, Jessica braced herself a moment before colliding against the wall, cracking it; she couldn't remember the last time she had hit something this hard. Without losing time, the woman started to punch her non-stop. She felt for the first time what boxers felt when backed into a corner.

Each punch she took threw her against the wall, cracking it further. She was beginning to get dizzy, the storm of hits giving her no time to think. In a boxing match she would be dead in the water, but lucky for her, she never cared much about rules; holding the woman's arms with her own, Jessica headbutted her in the face, throwing her to the ground.

Without waiting for her to catch her breath, she kicked her in the stomach, and punched her, only to see her hand break the ground as the woman dodged; and moved her legs to drop Jessica to the ground.

She felt her throat tighten when the woman grabbed her on a chokehold. She elbowed her and tried to get away, but she just wouldn't budge.

"That's it, keep fighting," the woman whispered in her ear. "It won't make a difference. You're already mine."
Jessica, of course, fought even harder.

"When you pass out, we're going to fit you with a control collar… The things I'm going to make you do."

Her vision began to blacken. Suddenly, Jessica wasn't in an old factory anymore, fighting a woman. She was in the middle of a street, walking away, as a man yelled at her:

"Get back here, Jessica!"

She opened her eyes with a jolt.

"NOOO!" she yelled, strength flowing through her muscles again.

Her legs tensed against the ground, cracking it, and she pushed all her strength in them, jumping. She and the woman were thrown in the air, colliding against the wall, the bricks breaking on impact. And then she was free once again.

Without caring about her wounds, Jessica got up and punched the woman in the face, so strongly that her head went back against the wall and broke it; and then she punched again and again and again, her hands turning into blurs as she unleashed her fury.

"Never again, never!" she yelled, over and over, the woman beginning to disappear into the brick wall.

Jessica didn't care; the person she was hitting wasn't exactly there anyway. Going back one step, she prepared all the muscles on her body, lifted her fist, and gave one last devastating punch against her opponent's face; her head was embedded in the wall.

"Take this, you bitch!" she spat.

She got away from the woman, breathing hard, tired as hell but feeling a thrill like she hasn't in a long time.

That's when she heard the rifles being aimed at her from the catwalk upstairs.

The elevator's doors barely opened and Clark was already out. He could hear the sounds of the fighting upstairs, the room shaking at times, but he ignored that and looked around. What he saw, took the words out of his mouth.

It wasn't a lab. It wasn't an infirmary. What he saw down there could only be described as a torture room. There were electrified racks, with shackles on it; plastic containers filled with melting ice, big enough to fit a person; chains on the ceiling where people could lifted like punching bags; little cages right by the side of hoses, presumably so the prisoners could be soaked with freezing water; bathtubs filled with filthy water to drown people.

Clark couldn't believe what he was seeing. He knew these people were performing experiments on people, but that? That was beyond anything he could have imagined. Forcing himself, he looked around, looking at the people cuffed to the stretchers, barely conscious. He walked towards the first one, a man, with some kind of IV fluid attached to his arm.

The man looked at him with terror, and closed his eyes as soon as he got close.

"Please, please, please… Just kill me!"
There were no words to describe how lost Clark was at that moment; that's when he heard the *CLICK* of a gun behind him.

"Stop right there," said a voice he recognized as belonging to Dr. Okamura, pointing a gun to his back. "Don't move!"

Clark didn't move, but not because he had been ordered.

"Now turn around very slo…"

"Were you the one who did this?" Clark interrupted, his voice tense even to his ears. "Were you the one who tortured these people?"

Dr. Okamura was so surprised to be cut off that he didn't answer for a second.

"Tortured? Oh no, I have more important things to do with my time. Now, turn aroun…"

"But you knew about this," Clark stated.

"Well, of course I knew. It's part of the treatment. Nothing raises adrenalin like pain."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why? Without stimuli, the X-Gene wouldn't activate, not even with the serum."

"You are making mutants?"

"I'm making the future," he corrected. "Back on the World War 2, the making of one super-soldier was what turned the tide of the war. The making of Captain America shaped the century. What I'm doing here will as well."

"Your future will be the inside of a prison cell."

Dr. Okamura laughed.

"Do you think anyone cares about what happens here? Armies all over the world will pay fortunes for one single mutant created in this workshop. Normal people, people like me and you… Well, we only have a place on the battlefield as cannon fodder now. Captain America saw to that. The Avengers saw to that. You need extraordinary weapons to fight extraordinary weapons."

"Does this government know?"

"They don't know because they know better than to ask questions. There are people on key positions inside the army and the government that make sure it stays that way. And why would they care, anyway? They made worse things."

Clark didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"These people, will they live?"

"Maybe, I don't know. It depends on how they react to the serum. And it depends if they have a dormant X-Gene too. It doesn't matter, there are always more subjects," he pointed the gun to Clark more assertively. "Now, shut up and turn aroun…"

Before he could even finish what he was about to say, Clark was already in front of him, his hand
crushing the pistol alongside the doctor's bones. Dr. Okamura screamed, helpless, only to be grabbed by the back of his head and dragged to the man on the stretch.

"He is not a subject!" Clark yelled, forcing Dr. Okamura to look at the man. "He is not an experiment! He is a person!"

"God, you are one of them!" Dr. Okamura screeched, more afraid than he ever was on his life. "You are a freak!"

"No, I'm much more than that, Dr. Okamura," he lifted the doctor in the air. "Now, tell me the names of the people in charge or I'm going to hold you responsible for everything here."

"I don't kno…"

"Now!"

"My notebook! It has emails, documents, transactions! Just please, let me go!"

Clark did let him go; with strength, against the ground. The doctor stayed down, unconscious.

Forcing himself to calm down, despite everything he had just learned, Clark concentrated his hearing to see how Jessica was doing. The sounds of the fight had stopped, he could hear Jessica's breathing pattern and heartbeat. But he also could listen to the heartbeat of 10 men as well, probably holding rifles by the sound.

Turning around, Clark looked up; it would take too long to take the elevator again and breaking the steel door that had sealed the corridor. He needed to be a little more direct. He kneeled on the ground, focusing all his energy; small objects all around him began to float. He contracted his muscles, preparing himself to fly.

And took off.

BOOOOOOM!

Jessica didn't know what the fuck had just hit the building, but it felt like an atomic bomb had just fallen on top of them. The entire factory trembled, she and everything else in the room fell to the ground. All the lights turned off, replaced by the red glow of the emergency ones. The machines stopped working and the only sound was the alarm blaring and the sound of metal bending.

The steel door that had sealed the corridor to the elevator began to fold itself, as if something was forcing it open. The armed men on the top of the catwalks got up, their hands shaking with fear, as they tried to see what was behind that door.

A pair of red eyes ignited in the dark.

"Open fire!" yelled one man.

Before they could fire, however, a pair of red energy beams crossed the room, melting the steel support of the catwalks; the entire thing came crashing down, tumbling the armed men on the ground. And then he was there, already on them, as if he appeared out of nothing.

Jessica could only watch as the dark figures moved under the red lights of the dark room. Clark picked one man from the ground as he tried to stand up, lifting him in front of him as if he didn't weight anything, and dashed to the front, using the man he was holding like some sort of shield.
He bashed his "human shield" against one of the men, throwing him to the other side of the room. Without even looking, he punched a man by his side, sending him down, before using the man he was holding to hit another man. 3 thugs managed to get up and point the rifles at him, but Clark simply tossed the man he was holding on them, knocking down the 4 of them in a tangle of limbs.

One of the armed men appeared from the other side of the collapsed catwalk and managed to shoot; Jessica was baffled as she saw Clark simply move his hand across the air and slap the bullet to the side, deflecting it directly to the leg of an approaching enemy. The man fell down screaming, only to be picked up and launched against the shooter.

The only man left standing didn't even try to fight. He simply discarded his rifle and began walking backwards, exactly like someone unarmed would do when faced with an approaching tiger. The man was so damn scared he didn't even noticed he was walking right in her direction; that was a little insulting, so she bitch slapped him into oblivion.

Jessica looked at Clark, her jaw dropped; when she managed, she said:

"So, I guess you forgot to tell me a few of your abilities, huh?"

As soon as Clark was certain Jessica was alright, much to her very verbal displeasure, both of them got back into the lab/torture room. He still couldn't manage to stop flinching every time he saw the things down there and, apparently, he wasn't the only one bothered by it.

"What the fuck? What did those sick sons of bitches did here?!" she exclaimed, a disgusted expression on her face.

"They were trying to create mutants out of non-mutants," said Clark, looking around for Dr. Okamura's notebook. "Do you remember the doctor's thesis? About activating a dormant X-Gene?"

"But why the medieval torture room?" Jessica demanded, still unable to look away.

"To raise their adrenalin, make the serum work. I'm guessing they didn't really care that the mortality rate wasn't low," he added, somber.

Finally finding the computer, Clark started to look for everything regarding the experiments in it. To a human, that would take days, but Clark's eyesight, memory and rapid thinking process made it take a lot less; all he had to do was glance at the documents, rolling down as fast as he could, and everything would be safely committed to his mind.

"Jessica, start taking pictures," he asked.

"What?! Why?" she turned to him, shocked.

"I need evidence for my story," he answered, without looking at her.

He did have to look at her when she grabbed him.

"Are you fucking kidding me?! There are people dying here and you are worried about a fucking story?!" she yelled at him.

Clark grabbed her and pushed her to the front of the computer, at the end of his patience after all he had witnessed that day.

"Look at this," he demanded. She tried to move, but he held her. "Look at it. Do you see the
names? Do you see where they work? There are powerful people involved in this, turning a blind eye to everything happening here. If we call the police now, without finding the proof first, all of this will go away. It will be like it never happened. Only the dead will remain dead, the people that did this will keep on killing and everything will remain the same."

Jessica looked at him, maybe surprised to see him sounding serious for once.

"We need to reveal everything happening here, Jessica, otherwise they won't stop. So please, help me."

Still silenced, Jessica nodded, getting her cellphone to begin taking the pictures.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

Clark didn't answer for a second.

"I'll read everything as fast as I can and then I'm going to beat my own record of 'the most quickly written story in the world'."

She turned at him.

"You've got to be shitting me! You are writing this now?!"

"Only chance we'll have," he explained. "The moment we call the authorities, they'll take everything and we are done. The people here aren't exactly alright, but they aren't in risk of dying, they can wait for an hour."

Saying this, Clark began to type his story as Jessica took the pictures, his fingers moving as fast as the computer allowed. Taking his cellphone from his pocket, he dialed a number, while still typing one-handed.

"Mr. Ellison? Clark Kent. I'm sorry to bother you now, but I have a story. And it's a big one."
If there was one thing that SHIELD took seriously, it was experiments to make enhanced soldiers. Not that there were many things that SHIELD didn't take seriously, but they had a particularly strong focus when experiments that could lead to the creation of super soldiers inevitably appeared.

It wasn't that hard to guess why, given SHIELD's founders dealings with Captain America or, maybe even more relevant, their dealings with Johann Schmidt, the Red Skull. They knew, since their beginning, how dangerous a super soldier could be, when fighting for the wrong side; and how valuable they were when fighting on their side.

So when SHIELD's systems flagged a call made to the New York Police Department where the caller spoke about a lab that was making experiments on people, trying to turn them into mutants, there was a metaphorically code red alarm shrieking all over the Triskelion. The chance of this being a prank call was considered high, at first, but soon after the caller gave his name, the address of the supposed lab and said he would leave his cellphone on so they could track it, there already were agents on the move.

The first agents actually got there together with the cops and were fast to take control of the situation and isolate the place. Several black cars were stopped at the factory's entrance, alongside police cars and ambulances. People in suits were everywhere, taking pictures of apparently every inch of the place and the cops that responded to the call were guarding the perimeter.

That was the scene that greeted Clint Barton when he arrived and crossed the perimeter line to enter the factory. Usually, the famous Hawkeye wouldn't be called to deal with a "solved" situation; his abilities were normally directed at problems that needed solving before they could become unsolvable. However, the threat of a super soldier factory inside New York was reason enough for him to be called out of his bed in the middle of the night.

The place looked abandoned, even if it was crawling with people at the time. Old, badly maintained and dirty. The second room he entered, however, was worse, even if it looked newer. The place was destroyed, machines and barrels tossed everywhere, walls cracked, the catwalk fallen on top of everything. And the big steel door that apparently led to an elevator was twisted in weird angles; there was even a hole in the ground, right behind it, where it was possible to see parts of the floor below.

He entered the elevator and went down, following the instructions of the agents already there, where he was expected by Maria Hill.

"Took you long enough. It's almost morning," she greeted, without even look at him.

"Well, you know, traffic in New York is a disaster," Clint answered.

"You arrived in a helicopter," Maria pointed out.

"A damn slow one, apparently. We should complain to Fury."

She rolled her eyes and Clint smiled, looking around.
"So, what've we got here?" he asked.

Maria approached and showed a few pictures to him on a tablet.

"Mutant factory. Are you familiar with Dr. Daniel Okamura's thesis on the possibility of artificially activating the X-Gene on a non-mutant?" she asked.

"Wow, so much," Clint deadpanned.

She didn't smile.

"In simple terms, they were forcing non-mutants that had the X-Gene to activate it, via a serum and several rounds of torture."

Clint's jaw dropped slightly.

"This is... are you for real? Torture?"

Maria sighed.

"Unfortunately."

She began to show him the pictures. The equipment, the wounded people, a few of the medical evaluations, images of ongoing tortures... Clint had seen a lot of things in his job, but there were always some bad guys out there who managed to take it a little further on the "villain scale".

"Please tell me we got the guy who did this," he said.

"We got some of them. Dr. Okamura and a few henchmen. But I doubt this is it. He couldn't have the money or the pull to fund something like this."

"Were they successful?"

"Sometimes. The serum is apparently not finished, but some of the 'patients' responded well. A vast majority, however, couldn't handle the stress of the serum and what was needed to do to make the serum work. We don't have the numbers yet, but a lot of people died here."

"And what happened here?" Clint asked, looking at all the destruction. "The 'X-Guys' had something to do with this?"

"Not according to them, no. But they did offer us their assistance. And refuge to the ones who need it."

The existence of the X-Men was not a secret to SHIELD or the American government, but neither of them knew as much as they would like about them. Mutants existed for as long as humans did, but they only began to be recognized for what they were and get tangled up into wars and politics during World War 2. In fact, people didn't actually believe in them until during the Cold War, when hard evidence was presented in the form videos, studies and a whole lot of witnesses. Maybe their numbers began to grow or maybe better technology allowed more evidence to be collected, but the fact was the existence of mutants was common knowledge now.

Of course SHIELD wasn't entirely relaxed about the fact that there was a group of super-powered people working mostly without their knowledge, but they were willing to let it happen for two simple reasons: they were effective and they knew how to deal with mutants.

Peggy Carter, one of SHIELD's founders, had seen the value of cooperating with the man who
would eventually create the X-Men, Charles Xavier. The X-Men did a very good job of protecting and teaching young mutants. They took them under their wing and helped them to control their powers, so they wouldn't become a risk to people around them. It also helped that while they were there, learning to coexist, they were out of reach of other radical groups, composed by mutants or not.

There was also the fact that the Avengers were a very new group; before them, SHIELD wasn't exactly prepared to deal with criminals that could kill people with their minds or control the very metal their weapons were made of.

From a pragmatic point of view, it was better for SHIELD that most mutants resided in a known place, kept by a known entity, where they could be taught, protected and monitored; and from a humanitarian point of view, it was good to keep the mutants, especially the young ones, safe from bigots and terrorist mutants alike, somewhere they wouldn't need to hide what they were and what they could do.

Many people seemed to forget, but not everyone on SHIELD or even the government was a heartless bastard; a lot of them, Clint included, would give their lives to protect an innocent person, mutant or not.

"So what happened then?" asked Clint.

Maria pointed at someone. Clint followed her finger to see a guy sitting on a table nearby; young guy, big, dark hair and blue eyes. Not part of SHIELD or the police, not a 'patient' of this lab given his lack of injuries and not one of the criminals, given that he was not cuffed.

"That's Clark Kent, 21, aspiring journalist," recited agent Hill. "He was the one who made the call to the police that we intercepted. According to him, he was investigating Dr. Okamura and followed him here, at which point he heard a commotion. Yelling, gun shots, things being broken… When there was no sound anymore he risked entering to find the place like this. He thinks it might have been one of the mutants managing to escape."

Clint eyed Clark for a long minute, studying his face, his gestures, trying to get a read on him; he was no Black Widow, but he had his moments.

"You believe him?" he finally asked.

"He checks out. First thing I did. He arrived here, in New York, a day ago and visited a lot of newspapers trying to find a job. Just rented an apartment. And frankly, he doesn't strike me as someone who could do the things these men were doing here," she admitted, shrugging.

"Maybe not, but he doesn't strike me as a normal guy either. Don't know why. He is too… too relaxed."

"Well, he is here for a while now. Adrenalin burns out eventually."

"Hmm… I'm gonna have a chat with him," Clint said, starting to walk towards Clark.

His eyes did not leave Clark for one second as he approached, still struggling to understand the man in front of him. Something just didn't feel right. The room was full of agents running around, the lab still had all the torture equipment in it, he was just briefed by Maria Hill herself… And yet, he didn't have the appearance of a man that had just busted a mutant factory.

He had a nervous expression, but not the kind of nervous a person would be in this situation; it was more like the kind of nervous a guy would have just before doing an exam on high school.
"Hey," Clint greeted, Clark turning to look at him. "I'm…"

"Clint Barton aka Hawkeye," Clark completed, smiling and extending his hand. "I know, I'm a fan."

He smiled in response, shaking the guy's hand.

"Am I your favorite Avenger?" he joked.

"Well, you are my second favorite."

"Please don't say Stark is the first, I couldn't bear the thought."

Clark chuckled.

"No, though that armor is pretty cool. My favorite one is actually Black Widow. But not for the reasons you're thinking," he hastily added.

Clark raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? And what reasons would I be thinking?"

"Well, I mean… She is… Very…" Clark stammered, then cleared his throat. "She is human. And a woman. And yet she is fighting side by side with gods, the Hulk, a legendary soldier, a man with top-notch technology… I mean, if that isn't an example of hard work, determination and pure badassery then I don't know what is."

"Hey, I do that too! Why am I not your favorite Avenger?"

Clark smirked.

"Well… She is hotter."

Clint actually laughed. Natasha would love this, he would have to remember to tell her.

"So, I know they probably asked you the same questions a thousand times, but could you answer some for me now?" he asked, sitting at the table.

"Sure, no problem."

"Maria told me you were following Dr. Okamura. Why?"

"I've had a tip."

"Who gave you this tip?"

"You know I can't tell you, if I do that I'll lose my source. But I can tell you it's no one important. Just a two-bit criminal. He told me that the word going around was that someone was paying for any kidnapped people. He had an address, so I went there and I've seen Dr. Okamura. So I began to follow him."

"Just like that?"

"Well, he seemed to be in charge. Not sure if he was actually the boss, but he was definitely not a thug or a prisoner, therefore he was someone worth following."
"And what about that?" Clint asked, pointing at the hole on the ceiling. "Did you see the one who did it?"

"No."

"Nothing at all? Look, the one who did that thing is strong. He or she broke concrete and destroyed a steel gate as thick as a bank's vault door. Whoever it is, people might get hurt."

He kept looking at Clark, evaluating his expression.

"I didn't see anything, but I'm sure the one who escaped is not a bad person," Clark confirmed, meeting Clint's eyes.

"How can you be so sure of that?" Clint demanded.

"Look, Mr. Barton, you arrived here just now. I didn't. When I got here this lab was full of people. People in pain, scared, traumatized. I was nauseated with what I saw. And yet the one who escaped didn't kill a single kidnapper, I checked. If that doesn't prove that we are dealing with a good person, then I don't know what does."

Well, it was a fair point, Clint supposed. If the one who did all this was really a mutant escaping, the fact that all those people were spared told a lot about his or her character. Even so, SHIELD would have to find this mutant or at least give a call to Xavier. But there was one thing that was bothering Clint.

"So, Agent Hill told me you moved to New York recently," he began.

"Yeah, just yesterday."

"Where did you live before?"

"Smallville."

"No, seriously, where did you live?" Clark just kept looking at Clint, unamused, until he understood that Clark wasn't joking. "Oh! So, Smallville, huh? Must've been quite the change."

"A little bit, yeah. But I haven't been here for too long to feel it."

"But apparently you've been here long enough to have 'sources' that give you 'tips' about people being kidnapped."

Clark stopped in his tracks and looked at Clint; well, would you look at that, Nat. Now, who was the one who didn't know squat about interrogation?

"Okay, Mr. Barton, you're right," Clark admitted. "I don't exactly have sources. Not yet, anyway."

"Then how did you know about this place?"

Clark sighed.

"I was going back home, at night, after a very long day trying to find a job. And right after I had dinner, I've seen a van stop in the middle of the sidewalk. A guy got out and hit a homeless person in the head. He was drunk, probably didn't even see it, and the guy started to drag him to the inside of the vehicle. I helped."

"How? And, most importantly, why?"
"What do you mean 'why'?! The guy was being kidnapped. What kind of person would I be if I allowed it to happen?"

Well, most likely, a kind of person who had a lot less chance of being shot in the head, Clint thought. But to his surprise, he actually believed the guy; the way he said it, it was like he really believed it to be unthinkable not to help someone in that situation.

"But how did you help him?"

"I got close from behind and punched him. I'm not a martial artist like you, Mr. Barton, but working in a farm since childhood is better than going to the gym" he gave a little smile. "After the homeless man escaped, I made some questions to the guy and he admitted he was kidnapping people for someone else and gave me the address."

"Why didn't you tell us this to begin with?"

"Because the police usually disapproves of people hitting each other. I didn't want to be arrested."

Clint stared at him seriously for a moment. That wasn't Clint Barton anymore, but Hawkeye, the agent who had killed dozens of Chitauri in the Battle of New York, the assassin who had made a career of dispatching bad people, the Avenger.

"Is that all you have to tell me? Are you sure you are not leaving anything out?" he asked, his voice no longer nice and calm, but dry and serious.

Clark met his eyes without flinching.

"Yes, I'm sure."

It was in that moment that Clint realized he was right; there was something strange about this guy. He didn't think he had anything to do with what was happening here, but he was absolutely sure that there was more than meets the eye about Clark Kent.

Before he could say anything else, however, Maria Hill approached and dropped some papers on the table, looking at Clark.

"This is a non-disclosure agreement," she said. "It basically says that you can't talk about what happened here with an outside party. I highly recommend that you sign it."

Clark looked at her, a little nervous.

"Why? What happens if I don't sign it?" he asked.

"We are not going to arrest you, Mr. Kent, or do anything outside the law. But this is an ongoing investigation. If you don't sign it, we will have to take legal measures to force you to sign it anyway. This is just quicker," Maria explained.

He began to peruse the thick document, turning the pages too fast to actually be reading anything.

"But what about the people I already told?" he asked. "I mean, I talked to a lot of people in the phone until you guys showed up. Nobody wanted to believe me about this."

"We can't do anything about the people you already talked to, for obvious reasons, but at the moment you sign this anyone you talk to will be covered by this contract," Maria clarified. "So don't worry about it. We won't take any legal measures because of the past."
Clark looked at her and smiled.

"Okay then," and without any additional word he signed. "So, can I go home now?"

Maria looked at Clint and he nodded.

"You are free to go."

"It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope you catch whoever did this," and with this, he left. Clint's eyes didn't leave him until he entered in the elevator and disappeared.

"That guy is weird," he stated, a minute later, turning around to look at Maria.

"So are you," Maria answered and smiled at his fake glare. "But why are you saying this? Do you think he has something to do with this?"

"No, no I don't. But there is something about him… My instincts are trying to tell me something and I'm not getting what it is."

"Are you sure you're not hungry?" asked a familiar voice from behind him. "Natasha told me to ask you if you have been eating well. She said you usually forget to eat when she's not here to take care of you."

Clint opened a big smile and turned around to see Steve Rogers, the Captain America himself, approaching; without the shield, dressed in normal clothes, but still Captain America.

"Hey, Cap! What are you doing here? I thought you were in Washington," he said, shaking his hand.

Steve greeted Maria before turning to him again.

"I got a call from Natasha a few hours back. She told me I would want to see something that happened here in New York," he looked around, his face losing the smile. "I guess she was right."

"How the hell did she know about this before I did? She is out in a mission!" Clint wondered, a little shocked.

Captain Rogers just shrugged.

"I learned that is not healthy to underestimate her," he answered, smiling once again. "As I'm sure you know, she was the one Fury chose to put me up to date with the technology and the tactical training from these days. I may be a super-soldier, but even I am struggling to keep up. She is not one to be trifled with."

Clint snorted, thinking about poor Captain America being whipped into shape by the Black Widow; Nat had told him a few stories, but hearing from the Cap himself that she was a harsh mistress was just too damn funny.

He looked back at him when he heard a tired sigh.

"They just don't quit, do they?" Steve said, maybe more to himself than to anybody else. "I guess it was really naïve of me to think I would be the last person to be turned into a super-soldier, wasn't it? Sometimes I wonder if all this could be avoided if the serum just didn't work on me like it did."

"You can't think like that, Cap. If you recall, there was already another super-soldier out in the
world and he wasn't a nice guy. Without you, we would be doomed."

Steve didn't answer, his eyes looking far away.

"Fury gave me some files about the experiments that happened while I was on ice," he said, suddenly. "Turns out I was just the first of many. The army tried to replicate the serum several times. And not just our army. The whole world was in a race to see who would succeed first. Eventually the programs began to branch out; one of those programs was called Weapon-X. Apparently it was led by a man named Colonel William Stryker and, instead of trying to replicate the Super-Soldier Serum it focused on mutants."

Clint and Maria remained in silence, just listening.

"They tried to harvest and use the abilities of mutants," he continued "to use them as weapons. They didn't use only voluntaries and they weren't really concerned about following anything resembling human rights. Eventually the whole thing blew up in their faces and the program was shut down. There weren't any arrests, though; it was all swept under the rug. Everything that happened here? Probably another branch of all those programs."

Steve chuckled, without a trace of happiness.

"Cut off one head, two more shall take its place," he said, quoting the HYDRA's motto. "Funny how that seems to describe every single evil organization out there, isn't it?"

Clint shook his head.

"No, it's not funny at all," he said.

"No, it isn't," Steve agreed.

Steve turned to Maria.

"Did you get the ones who did this?" he asked.

"Like I told Barton, only a doctor and a few of his guards," she answered. "But there are more out there, I'm sure of it."

"Probably inside our own government," Steve said, his face hard. "And nothing will happen. Again. The people on top, the real guilty ones, won't be arrested. This investigation will be closed and sooner or later, someone will dig it up and continue it."

Clint could see why Natasha had sent Steve here; this was personal to him. He supposed he could understand, somewhat at least; his very identity, Captain America, was probably being used as an excuse to allow these programs to happen. And all those people to die. To a nice guy like Steve, every death that happened here was being felt as if they were his own fault.

He and Maria would like to tell him that all this wouldn't happen, but by now they knew better. It was not only the fact that the guys who had been bribed to turn a blind eye on this had a lot of contacts everywhere, but also the value some people would find in this research. No matter how many lives it ended up costing. Hulk's very creation was proof of that, as well as the creation of the 'Abomination', the name the army ended giving to what Emil Blonsky became after the experiments with their version of the Super-Soldier Serum.

And that pissed him off, the same way he knew it also pissed Maria off. Because after these bastards finished playing their games, they would be the ones to clean up the mess; and to collect
the bodies.

"Ma'am, you'll want to see this!"

The three of them turned to see a young agent running in their direction, his face a mix of panic and anxiety. He handed what looked like a newspaper to Hill.

"What is this?" she asked, as confused as Clint and Steve were.

"The first page, ma'am."

Clint and Steve walked to Maria, each one on one side of her, trying to read the news; she let out a stream of curses, shocking the hell out of Steve. Clint would have done the same, if his jaw wasn't dropped.

"Mutant Factory discovered in New York: a workshop of horrors!" read Steve, shock in his face.

"By Clark Kent," completed Clint, recovering his ability to talk as he saw the one had written that. "Son of a..." Steve glared at him "...gun," he finished, lamely.

They became quiet for a few minutes, reading the front page headline of The New York Bulletin, printed not even an hour ago. It had the whole story of what happened here, and not only that, but pictures of the lab, with the victims there but without identifying their faces; pictures of the torture devices; images of the faces of Dr. Okamura and his henchmen.

And if the pictures weren't enough, there were also a list of names of every single person involved in that, either directly or simply paid not to interfere. Names of important people inside the government, the police, hospitals, famous companies... All accompanied by pictures of the documents proving everything.

"He wrote that here," Clint realized, without moving his eyes from the paper. "Before he called us, he sat, probably on that same table he was, and wrote this thing. How did he get those names?" he asked, looking at Maria.

"There is a notebook here full of information. We couldn't look at everything yet, but yes, these names were there," she answered, still clearly surprised to her core.

"Who are you talking about?" inquired Steve, confused.

"The guy who made the call to the police, the one who found all this. He is the same guy who wrote this," explained Clint, shaking his head. "I told you there was something weird about this guy! Probably the fact that he was looking at our eyes, answering our questions, all the while this thing was being printed!" he turned to Maria. "Do you want me to go after him? He did sign a non-disclosure agreement."

Maria gave a mirthless laugh.

"Yeah, he did. Right after I clarified to him that we couldn't do anything about the people to whom he had already told all this," she shook his head. "He played me."

"Do you want me to bring him back?" asked Clint. "It doesn't really matter if he signed that thing anyway, we can bring him here, stop this from spreading."

"That won't be easy, sir," said the agent who brought them the newspaper, looking nervous when the 3 of them looked at him. "It's already everywhere. Not only printed copies, but on the internet
as well. We could try, but the damage is already done."

Maria Hill stood in silence for a second, considering what to do; she looked at Steve. Clint could almost read her thoughts. On one hand they had been played hard by Mr. Kent, and they did not like to look like idiots. On the other hand, however, Mr. Kent had given them all the excuse they needed to pursue this to the end, no matter how powerful and high up some of the people involved were.

Like Clint thought, Maria said:

"No, we won't arrest Mr. Kent for an agreement he didn't break. We will, however, arrest every single one of these people. Can I count with your help, Captain Rogers?"

Steve's huge smile made them forget all about being tricked by Mr. Kent; Clint was never one to take himself too seriously anyway.

The sun was already out when Clark finally got back to his apartment; and, once again, there was someone already there.

"So? Did it work?" asked Jessica Jones, getting up from his couch. "I was beginning to think I was going to have to bail you out."

Clark smiled and handed her the newspaper he had just bought.

"Well, I signed a non-disclosure agreement, but they guaranteed me that they couldn't do anything about the people I had already talked to," he explained, while Jessica read the newspaper. "But we'll see if the police comes barging in later."

"You didn't mention me, did you?" she questioned.

"No, of course not. And it's not like the guys there got a clear look from our faces or knew who we were. I told the agents that I suspected that all that happened there was a mutant escaping. The guys they arrested are probably going to think that too. Or at least think that we were mutants trying to wreck the place. We are good."

Jessica smiled and Clark was a little bit shocked when he realized that it was a true, sarcasm free, smile. But then, her smile faltered a little.

"I'm just pissed that we let that bitch escape," she said. "I still can't believe she got away after all that."

While they were in the lab, completely focused on writing the story for the newspaper, Angel had woken up after the beating she took and ran away. Clark didn't blame Jessica, he blamed himself; if anyone should have heard her leaving, it was him. But he was too concentrated in what he was doing to pay attention, too distracted by the shock of seeing all those tortured people, and they had severely underestimated the time she would take to awake. That was the result.

"We'll find her," he promised, looking at Jessica. "Did you find anything about that other guy I told you about?"

She nodded and walked to her opened notebook.

"A little bit, but less than I'd like. Fucking guy is a ghost. Apparently calls himself Ajax. But it's probably a fake name, because I can't find any trace of him anywhere. His mother probably gave
him a stupid name when he was born and he got so traumatized that now he goes around telling
people his name is the same as that dish soap."

Clark sighed.

"Well, he will turn up sometime. So will Angel. And we'll be there when that happens," he said,
then looked at her, serious. "You know, I didn't thank you for what you did. I couldn't have saved
those people without your help."

She just waved her hand.

"Forget about it," she answered, clearly embarrassed.

"No, I mean it. You didn't have to help me. Or them. But you did, taking a serious risk to your own
life. So, thank you. And know that if you need my help, I will be there."

Saying this, he yawned and stretched.

"I'm so beat! I'm going to sleep a little bit. Wake me up if SHIELD shows up to arrest me, okay?"

"You are not gonna kick me out?" she asked, as he disappeared inside his bedroom.

"You can break locks, what's the point. Good night!"

Jessica snorted and sat back on the couch, looking at her notebook. She still couldn't believe in the
day she had. How did she go from trying to investigate her neighbor to busting a mutant factory
alongside him? It was hard to realize the exact point when she decided to go with him and, more
importantly, why she decided to go with him.

To help him? To help those kidnapped people? To help herself? Maybe all that put together. And
she did, somehow, accomplish all that too. For the first time since Kilgrave, she had faced her fears
head on; no hiding, no excuses, no panic attacks. She just went out there, against armed men and
fellow freaking strong ladies and she helped to save a lot of innocent lives.

Just like her sister always told her she was capable of.

All that because of him. Her new neighbor. Clark Joseph Kent. Somehow he had done what Trish
and even herself couldn't; he had given her hope. Hope of changing for the better. Hope of
doing something to get out of that dark pit she was in. How he did that, she didn't know.

Maybe it was charisma. Maybe it was just the fact that he was clearly a good guy. A guy strong
enough to deflect bullets, stop moving vehicles, hold an oil rig... A guy who didn't care one bit
about what his gifts could give him but instead used them for good.

Jessica wouldn't be caught dead saying she looked up to him, but she recognized that he was an
example she would like to follow. And so she did. Kilgrave's death had freed her mind but it wasn't
until this very moment that Jessica felt truly free of him.

Closing her computer, she lay back on the couch and closed her eyes; and for the first time in a
long while, she had a peaceful sleep.

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Natasha sighed, the slightest irritation creeping into her otherwise emotionless face. Mr. 'Clark
Sullivan' was a ghost. There wasn't a single piece of property in Cordova that belonged to a 'Clark
Sullivan' that matched the description she had of him. No houses, no apartments, no business, no boats. Nothing rented either.

Either that was a fake name or the alien she was looking for had lived there without leaving any paperwork behind. With the luck she was having, probably both. Cordova was a small city, but not nearly small enough for her to go knocking from door to door, asking if they had seen a well-built man, with dark hair and blue eyes.

She drank a sip of coffee, looking out through the glass window of the coffee shop she was in. Her computer was opened in front of her, the top-notch SHIELD program running on the back, cross-referencing all the data she had on the alien with the data she had on the city. Nothing was coming up.

What to do now? Should she go back and talk with Chrissy, the waitress that gave her this information, some more? Maybe she left something important out. Should she request some agents to help her expand her search field? Decisions, decisions… There was also the possibility, quite high actually, that 'Clark' had lied to Chrissy about living in Cordova.

But Natasha didn't really think he lied. She didn't have proof, of course, but there was no reason for him to lie to someone he supposedly cared about; not on something without importance, like this.

Maybe it was time to go back to the basics. What did Natasha know about him? Aside from his appearance, his abilities and his past two jobs there was only one thing: he liked to help people. That was the one constant she could identify that had happened in every single place she managed to track his whereabouts.

During his time in Arctic Cargo, he had saved Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis's lives, even risking revealing himself to do so. During his time working in Cassidy Pub he had helped Chrissy, saving her from the unwanted attentions of a rude trucker that had drunk too much. Both times he had used his powers, first to save and then operate on Dr. Foster and then to throw the trucker out and make him stop yelling obscenities and bothering the clients.

Maybe that was it. Closing the non-helpful program, Natasha started to search for any freak occurrence that might have occurred on Cordova or in any region around it. A car accident that was averted, a robbery stopped, a person rescued from something or from someone… Her search didn't take long to find an interesting thing.

"Bright Arctic Oil Rig Destroyed: fire causes explosion, but no deaths occur," Natasha read, beginning to smile.

She called a waiter, lifting her mug of coffee; the young man, predictably, almost fell down such was the hurry he was to please Natasha.

"Hello," she greeted, a beautiful smile on her face. "Could you give me a refill?"

"O-of course!" the boy answered, blushing.

"Say, I heard there was an accident on an oil rig close by," she said, while he filled her mug with coffee. "Did you see it happen?"

The young man, ecstatic about being able to talk to such a gorgeous woman, was quick to answer.

"I did! From far away, really, but the flames were so high! It was a huge explosion!"

He was a bit too excited to be talking to Natasha to notice he was sounding disturbingly happy
about an explosion that might have killed people.

"Oh, my! Did anyone get hurt?"

"That was the thing, no one died! People said… I mean, forget about it, you'll think I'm crazy."

"Nonsense!" Natasha countered, actually curious now. "You can tell me. I promise I won't think you're crazy."

He seemed to ponder if that was true, but in the end he was powerless to resist.

"Okay… Okay! The guys who survived said they were saved by a man. An angel, some of them said," he whispered.

Natasha got closer.

"An angel?" she whispered back, maybe too close to the boy, because he shivered a little bit.

"That's what they said. Now, nobody believed them, not really. They said it was just the trauma talking. But I don't see how they could've escaped without someone's help. You see, they were trapped down there, with no means to pass through the fire. Everybody said they were crazy, but nobody can explain how they got from down there all the way up. And there's more."

"What?"

The waiter looked around, to see if there was someone hearing them, before continuing.

"The team on the helicopter that went there to rescue them also saw this 'angel'. After they went all the way up and entered the helicopter, the oil rig began to fall down. They didn't have enough time to take off."

"So how did they?"

"The angel! He held the oil rig!" he boy put his arms up, as if holding an invisible oil rig. "With his bare hands, until they took off."

"But what about him?"

He shook his head, losing his enthusiasm for a second.

"He didn't make it. The helicopter flew off and the oil rig exploded. He sacrificed himself."

Natasha opened her mouth to ask something else when there was a loud yell from the kitchen.

"Thomas! Stop bothering the clients and go to work!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the boy answered, apparently more afraid from his boss than he wanted to impress Natasha.

It didn't matter, Natasha got what she wanted. Even more. Not only she had a lead again, she also learned something new about this alien; something new and a little disturbing. She knew he was strong, every witness had told her that. But strong enough to hold an oil rig? Strong enough to survive an explosion? Could Thor even do that? What kind of powers was this alien hiding?

She needed to find him, the quicker the better. Natasha didn't think he was a threat, not really, but a being this powerful shouldn't be walking without any kind of supervision. For a whole minute she
considered her next course of action, wondering if what she was about to do was really worth the trouble.

In the end, she decided to go ahead and be done with it. She needed to see what happened in that oil rig and there was only one person who had eyes on everything unusual that happened in the world since the Battle of New York.

She grabbed her cell and made the call, uttering the words she thought she would never have to.

"Stark, I need your help."
Chapter 7 – Unexpected Guests

Tony Stark was bored. Sadly, this wasn't anything new to him. Being as intelligent as he was, it was bound to happen with annoyingly frequency. His mind was simply that much faster than the average person and, because of that, his brain just solved problems at an incredible speed. And when there was nothing else to solve… Well, his mind just didn't deal well with idleness.

It was on times like these that Tony often did most of his impulsive moves. He just craved something to do so badly that by that point he just did what he could to get things moving; which usually resulted in a lot of money spent, a horde of journalists and, sometimes, damaged property and bruises.

But he would do his best to contain himself; he had promised Pepper that much. And after that whole mess with Mandarin and Aldrich Killian… More than ever, she deserved his best behavior. His impulsiveness had cost his house on Malibu, his suit collection and came pretty damn close of costing his and Pepper's lives.

As everything in his life, when Tony Stark fucked up, he fucked up in style.

That's not to say he had been lazy since then. Oh no. The renovations on the Stark Tower, now renamed Avengers Tower, took a lot of his time, since it had to be upgraded to be the headquarters of the team. That meant he had to improve the whole structure not only to fit the people who would live there, but also to house a few Quinjets, the research and development floors, raise the security of the place and keep and maintain his newly made Iron Legion. And, of course, there were also the improvements he made on his suits, always seeking to become better than the ones before.

Hard work. Long hours. But a lot of caution not to get obsessed all over again. Blowing up his armors had been a symbol of his new outlook in life and a declaration of love to Pepper all wrapped up in one. So he couldn't exactly go back anymore, not that he wanted to go back to that horrible place he'd been a few months back.

All that, however, did not change his current predicament. With the renovations almost done, there was little input he could give anymore. Similarly, his armor also was up to date with his most recent ideas and, even if he never really stopped to think on how to improve them, he had reached "perfection"; at least for a few days, when he probably would have a new idea again. And with Jarvis and Pepper both running his company, there was little to do.

Tony really missed the team when things got like that. Not that he would admit it, being the self-sufficient genius he was, but he felt lonely sometimes. His fame, money, intelligence and, of course, his personality, kept people away; and the ones who did try to get close were often interested in something other than friendship. At best, they were women trying to take advantage of his money, fame and good looks; at worse they were people trying to steal his technology or/and trying to assassinate him.

And of course, from Tony's perspective, even the people who genuinely didn't mean him harm were generally boring as hell.

The Avengers weren't, though. Maybe fighting alongside them in a battle to save the world made
him a little biased, but the fact was the members of the Avengers were, by necessity, extraordinary people. Meaning they were not tedious. Even if not all of them could follow his quick thinking like Banner could, all of them were smart and remarkable people. And Tony was frankly surprised to call them friends; before them, Tony could count on his fingers the number of friends he had.

Even Cap was a friend, something he couldn't, even with all his intelligence and resources, foresee; and he actively did try to hate the guy, in the beginning. Which, honestly, shouldn't be difficult, since the man was pretty much the opposite of him. Except, apparently, where it really mattered.

Well, Howard would be proud, wouldn't he? One more reason to try to hate the guy, but damn that Steve Rogers for being such a likable fellow.

Maybe he should throw a party, he thought. Something to commemorate the reopening of the Avengers Tower. He would call the rest of the team, obviously, or at least the ones he could reach; which were all of them, except Thor, who still hadn't come back since New York. Pepper, of course, since she was his girlfriend and she probably would want to organize everything. Everyone would have a plus one and maybe he could give a call to some of Cap's old friends, from the War, if any of them were still alive. Rhodey had to come too and Happy. Maybe some celebrities from New York, but no one annoying or the ones he had already slept with, Pepper wouldn't like that; that way there would be only a few to pick. He would have to make a list.

When Tony was opening his mouth to call Jarvis so they could begin the preparations, his phone rang, the screen showing that the caller was Natasha Romanoff herself. He couldn't remember the last time she had called him, if she ever did, since she had worked undercover as his secretary. So without delay, he received the call; not on his cellphone, that would be plebeian of him, but on the recently installed sound system of the tower.

"Stark speaking," he said.

For a few seconds there was no answer, just a tired sigh, then she answered.

"Stark, I need your help."

It was Tony's turn to become speechless; but not for long, of course.

"Jarvis! Are you recording this?!" he yelled.

"Of course, sir. All calls made to your number are recorded for security purposes."

"Make a backup! Two even, and place it in a high security vault!"

Natasha sighed again, probably reconsidering her life choices.

"Pass the phone to Pepper. Or better yet, to Jarvis," she ordered.

"No can do. Pepper is busy and Jarvis has no secrets from me."

Ignoring Tony, Jarvis actually did answer.

"What can I do for you, Miss Romanoff?" he asked with his polite British accent.

"Hey!"

"Thank you, Jarvis. I heard you have eyes everywhere now. Is that true?" Natasha asked.

It wasn't untrue, Tony thought. After all the problem they had to find Loki and, more recently, his
own problems at finding Mandarin and his people, Tony had developed and launched a lot of
satellites that could work as an extension of Jarvis. While he couldn't process all the data that the
satellites gathered, not even with Jarvis help, he did have a great many deal of cameras on space
now, capable of looking at everything that happened in the world.

It wasn't as good as SHIELD's intel gathering, but it was getting there.

"It is close to the truth, Miss Romanoff" Jarvis answered. "Do you need me to find something
specific for you?"

"Bright Arctic Oil Rig" she recited. "It was an oil rig located near Cordova, Alaska, that exploded.
SHIELD doesn't have anything about it, other than the fact that it burned down. I would appreciate
if you could check your recordings and see if there is footage of the event itself."

Tony frowned, a little curious about why Natasha would be investigating such a thing. He walked
to the monitor where Jarvis was searching for the footage.

"I am searching the archives, Miss Romanoff. Please wait a moment."

"Thank you, Jarvis, you are a delight."

"Hey, I'm a delight too!" Tony interjected, getting no answer from her.

Rolling his eyes, he turned back to the screen, watching the blur of several recorded images
passing accelerated. Until it finally got to the right one.

"I am transmitting to your computer, Miss Romanoff," Jarvis said, beginning to play the recording.

The image was a little bit further away then he would have liked, but it was clear enough. It
showed the oil rig in the middle of the ocean, fire everywhere, a tower of black smoke in the sky.
Some boats were visible on the screen too, far from the oil rig, but obviously there to make a
rescue attempt.

For a while, nothing really happened besides a few smaller explosions and a helicopter arriving on
the scene, circling around the helipad; than he saw a bunch of people arriving from the stairs on
the helipad, being led by a shirtless and barefooted man. The shirtless man waved his hand, as if
telling the people following him to make haste, as the helicopter approached to land.

The workers ran to the helicopter, entering as fast as they could, with the exception of the shirtless
man; he stopped and looked up, noticing what Stark had also seen. The explosions and the fire had
damaged the structure and the big tower of the oil rig began to fall down. Right in the direction of
the helipad. There was no time to get away.

At least that was what he thought; his jaw almost dropped to the floor, however, when the shirtless
man jumped closer and raised his arms, holding the multi-ton tower in place.

He couldn't believe in what his eyes were seeing. That was impossible. That thing had to weight a
whole lot of tons, way more than even his own suit was capable of lifting. He didn't think even
Thor could do that. Maybe the Hulk would have a chance of imitating that man, but he wasn't that
sure either and he and Banner had tested the Big Guy's strength extensively.

"Romanoff, what the hell is that?" he asked, without being able to look away as the man held the
tower so the helicopter could take off.

She didn't answer immediately, probably as shocked as he was.
"That is the man I'm looking for," she said, finally.

Stark felt his insides turn to ice for a moment; a new threat?

"Is he…?"

"Not a threat. Not yet, at least, and hopefully not ever. But he is an unknown."

While she was talking, the man was still holding the oil rig. The helicopter managed to get away, but he was left there and Tony could see the steel beam he was stepping on beginning to bend. In a matter of seconds, the beam gave out and the whole thing came crashing down on top of the man, a huge explosion following. The footage stopped.

That was when Stark's brain finally caught up with what Natasha had said.

"Is?" he asked, eyes still glued to the screen, even without anything there anymore. "You are saying that this guy survived this? Do you know this for certain?"

If he sounded alarmed it was because he was. Very alarmed even. The level of strength to hold that oil rig was off the charts and that, by itself, was shocking. Surviving the whole thing crashing on top of his head, soon before everything exploded… Well, he could honestly say that even the Mark XLIV, aka the Hulkbuster, wouldn't be able to deal that kind of damage and he and Banner were co-developing that thing to be able to stop a Hulk rampage.

"He survived," confirmed Natasha. "I was tasked by Fury to find him, to assess if he is a threat. I think he isn't, by what I already saw, but I have to find him to confirm my judgment."

"Yes, confirming is good," Tony agreed, playing the footage again. "Do you know where to start?"

She was in silence for a few seconds, thinking.

"The boats around the oil rig. Can you zoom in on them?" she asked.

He typed fast, doing as she asked.

"What are you thinking?" he questioned.

"Well, he got there somehow, right? He wasn't wearing a uniform, so he didn't work at the oil rig. And he probably didn't swim there or, at least, not all the way. So…"

"So he was on one of the boats. Got it. Learn which one and you can question the crew" he finished, talking fast.

"That's the plan."

"It's a good plan, let's do it."

Jessica groaned, not daring to open her eyes. God damn it, why all the noise? Couldn't someone sleep peacefully anymore?

"Do you absolutely have to make a ruckus?" she asked, eyes still closed.

"Well, given that you are sleeping in my apartment, that it's time to go to work and that I'm being kind enough to make eggs for you too I would think so," Clark answered, happily.
She groaned again, louder.

"And what exactly are you doing sleeping on my couch?" he asked, the sound of the frying pan and eggs loud.

"You told me I could stay!"

"I told you that I wouldn't kick you out, not to sleep on my couch."

"That wasn't planned," she grumbled, sitting down. "I just closed my eyes and next thing I know you are waking me up. How long have you been up?"

"A couple of hours. Got out, bought some things, including these eggs, and broke into your apartment for a change to borrow the frying pan."

She stared at him.

"You broke into my apartment?"

He looked at her and smirked.

"You are not the only one who knows how to do that, you know?" he turned back and started to serve the eggs into the plates. "By the way, there is a reason I woke you up. Someone is knocking at your door."

She groaned a third time, wanting to scratch her own eyes off.

"Are you sure it's the door and not the freaky neighbors upstairs doing their freaky sex?"

Clark looked again at her, a little red on the cheeks.

"I'm pretty sure your upstairs neighbors are siblings," he said slowly. "And the noise is not sex… At least I hope not."

"How the fuck do you know that? Have you been spying on the neighbors with you x-ray vision?"

"No. I just have a pretty good hearing."

"Wow, so you have super-hearing now, is that it?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Now, do you want me to prove it by repeating the things you whispered in your sleep or do you want to see who is at your door?"

She stopped in her tracks and looked at him for a second.

"You are bluffing, I don't talk on my sleep," she challenged.

"Are you sure? Are you really going to bet on that?"

Jessica stared for a few more seconds and got up, going to the door; not because she believed him, she told herself, but because she wanted to know who was knocking at her door. With quick steps, she opened the door, ready to send whoever was knocking away running.

Only to freeze when she saw that the person knocking was her own sister: Patricia "Trish" Walker.

"Trish," she whispered, too shocked to do anything else.
The woman knocking at her door turned to her. With blonde hair, pale complexion and shining green eyes, Trish Walker looked like a sunny version of Jessica Jones, even if they didn't share blood. That small fact, however, did not affect how close they were; for all intents and purposes, Jessica and Trish were sisters.

And that made the fact that Jessica was actively avoiding Trish all the more hurting.

Trish looked briefly to the apartment she had been knocking, then back at Jessica.

"Was I knocking at the wrong place?" she asked, getting away from the door.

"No… That's my apartment. I just stayed here tonight," Jessica answered, hesitantly.

She frowned, not understanding, but didn't ask for an explanation. In fact, she didn't move at all; now that Jessica was in front of her she seemed to have lost the ability to do so.

"Invite her in," came Clark's voice from inside.

His voice seemed to wake both of them from the trance they were in and Jessica called Trish, entering back into the apartment. With hesitant steps, she followed her inside. Still in silence, Trish looked around, taking in the details, until her eyes stopped on Clark. He smiled and approached.

"Hi, I'm Clark Kent, but please, call me Clark. Are you a friend of Jessica?" he asked, extending his hand.

She took it and shook it, looking at Jessica for a moment.

"I'm Patricia Walker, you can call me Trish. I'm her sister." He was clearly surprised, looking at Jessica as well.

"I didn't know she had a sister," and then he looked at Trish again. "Did you say Trish Walker? From 'Trish Talk'? And 'It's Patsy'? I'm a fan!"

"You are?" Jessica couldn't resist asking.

"Well, from 'Trish Talk', yes. Not so much from 'It's Patsy', sorry."

Trish smiled a little bit about his enthusiasm.

"It's always nice to meet a fan," she looked between the two of them, losing the smile. "Especially when he is dating my sister."

His eyebrows shoot up at the exact same time Jessica choked on her own saliva.

"Oh, no, we are not…" he started.

"Definitely not dating!" she finished.

Trish held her look, not backing down.

"Then, please, explain this!" she exploded, suddenly, gesturing around, obviously tired of not understanding what was happening. She turned to Jessica. "Please, explain to me why the sister I don't see in months is getting out from her neighbor's apartment after clearly spending the night here. Explain to me why you don't answer my calls and why I had to come all the way to your apartment, not for the first time, to finally see you!"
She was fuming, looking directly at Jessica. And Jessica couldn't exactly deny she was right to be angry.

"Well… I can see you need to talk," Clark said, quickly. "I gotta go get my payment, so, please, make yourselves comfortable. Eat some egg, drink some coffee" he finished eating his own eggs extremely fast and grabbed his jacket. "Just lock the door when you leave, Jessica, I really can't afford being robbed at the moment. Trish, it was a pleasure."

And with this, the faster she had seen him move without becoming a blur in the air, Clark left; she turned to Trish, who was still looking at her.

"Okay… Explanations. I owe some of them to you," Jessica finally said.

"You think?" Trish retorted. "Do you have any idea how worried I was? After all that crap you went through, after finally getting out from Kilgrave's control, you disappeared! No calls, no visits, nothing! Why, Jes? Why would you be so irrespons…"

"Because I was embarrassed!" Jessica yelled, reaching her limit. "Because I was humiliated!"

Trish looked surprised at her; her expression softened.

"Jes, we both know that wasn't your faul…"

"Yes, I know it wasn't my fault! I know I was being controlled! I know that there was nothing I could have done to stop him from doing the things he did, to others and to myself!" she interrupted. "It doesn't mean I didn't feel like it was."

She breathed and looked down, incapable of staring at her sister.

"I just… I just couldn't face you," she admitted, her voice low. "Not after that. I felt… I felt like no matter how much I tried to get clean, the dirt just wouldn't come off."

Trish approached slowly, tentatively, and, when Jessica didn't move away, she embraced her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Hesitantly, Jessica raised her arms and embraced her too.

"Me too."

For a few minutes, neither of them moved, content in staying in each other's arms; then they let their arms fall.

"Are you okay now?" Trish asked. "I mean, I know you are not okay, but are you getting better?"

Jessica's first answer would be a default "Hell no", but she stopped and thought a little bit. She wasn't okay, no doubt about that, but getting better? Yes, since yesterday she could honestly say she felt better. She nodded.

"I'm getting better."

Trish gestured to the apartment around them.

"Does Clark have something to do with this?" she inquired, raising her eyebrows a little bit.

Jessica didn't answer; instead, she picked the New York Bulletin from the couch and gave it to
Trish. She frowned, confused, until she saw Clark's name.

"He wrote this? I heard about it. Something about a guy making mutants, right?"

"Yes and yes. And I was there with him, yesterday, fighting against armed men to help those people" she explained, quickly.

Trish did a double take, her jaw dropping.

"You were? Are you… are you doing this sort of thing again? Being a hero?"

Jessica chuckled.

"If you had asked me this a day ago I would say 'Fuck no!', but apparently I am now."

And then she told Trish what had happened, from seeing Clark "running over a car" to finally fighting the armed henchmen and that strong bitch. And more than the actual facts, she told Trish what it had meant to her; which, frankly, surprised the hell of Jessica, since she wasn't one to share. She probably hadn't woken up completely yet, that had to be it.

"So are you going to do this again? Are you going to help people again?" Trish asked after she had told her story.

"Don't know. Maybe. I think I'll evaluate case by case."

"Well, at least you have someone as strong as you now, right? He can have your back. It's safer."

"Slightly stronger. Just a tiny bit. And I shouldn't even have told you that."

"Oh, come on, what am I going to do? Tell the police? You know you can trust me."

"I know that," she admitted, begrudgingly. "But he doesn't. Anyway, I don't know yet, we'll see how it goes."

There were a few minutes of comfortable silence, when Jessica took the chance to eat her cold scrambled eggs.

"Okay, quick question," Trish said, abruptly. "I know you helped Clark, I know you saved a lot of people together. But how does that amount to you sleeping here and eating his breakfast? Why the hell did he just leave us here, instead of kicking us out back to your apartment? Is there something going on here?"

Jessica stopped her egg filled fork midair.

"No! I already told you that! He is just a friend."

"A really, reaaaally, hot one," Trish interjected, smirking.

"He's 21, you cougar!"

"I'm just saying, I wouldn't mind. He is legal."

"Oh, god," Jessica groaned, beginning to laugh.

Her laugh seemed to break the dam and Trish also began to laugh uncontrollably. Jessica didn't know what the heck she would do in the future, if she would keep "being a hero" or not, if she was
going to try to put her life together and move on.

But at the moment, laughing alongside her sister, talking about everyday crap, she didn't particularly care; at that moment, she was happy.

Clark looked at the envelope in his hands for what seemed to be the thousandth time; and for the thousandth time, he smiled. His first paycheck. He really did it. It wasn't just until he got into The New York Bulletin building and actually received his paycheck from Mr. Ellison himself that the idea he was being paid for his first published story had really sank in.

They still hadn't hired him, there was that, but he was off to a great start; not every journalist in the world could brag about getting a front page story at the very first time.

What to do now? He was a little hesitant about going back home. Jessica and her famous sister – who would have thought? – really needed to talk about some things, apparently. If he went back right now he had a chance of interrupting them and he really didn't want to get into the middle of the crossfire if a fight erupted.

Sure, that meant he basically kicked himself out of his own apartment, but it was for a good cause. He hoped. Jessica had helped him; he didn't mind helping her, even if it was a little bit inconvenient.

So that meant he needed to find something to do for the next couple of hours. If he had friends in the city, that would be the perfect time to go bother them. Unfortunately, Jessica was his only friend so far and she was the whole reason he couldn't go home yet. Acquaintances then? Luke seemed to be a pretty nice guy, but the bar wasn't open yet. Malcolm, his other neighbor, obviously lived in the same building, so he wasn't an option. Susan Harris, the beautiful real estate agent who gave him her number was probably working right now. And the only other people he knew were the people he saved from that fire.

He stopped for a second; why not? The woman he rescued had promised to stop doing drugs and had signed her name to start on a free rehab program, right there at the Metro-General Hospital. It wouldn't hurt to see if she was doing okay. It wasn't like she was going to remember him, anyway, and he didn't even need to talk to her, just to see how she was. So, making a decision, he got in the bus.

It wasn't long until he got out and walked to the hospital, getting in. He didn't have the slightest idea where he was supposed to go, so he just kept walking, hoping he would find someone that knew along the way. That meant he soon was in the E.R, surrounded with the sick and injured; his eyes spotted a familiar nurse.

"Hey, could you…"

"Not now, I'm busy!" the nurse said, not even looking at Clark, while she began to treat one of the patients.

He couldn't argue with that. The place was full and there was a very small number of nurses and doctors around, in comparison with the number of injured people. Instead of distracting her, Clark just watched as she tried to stitch the arm of a man, who was apparently very drunk; each time she approached, the guy moved his arm, not because he was afraid of the needle, but because he was swaying non-stop. Seeing the nurse starting to get more and more frustrated, Clark held the man in place.
"Thanks," she said, beginning to work.

While stitching the guy, she took a look at Clark.

"I remember you. You are the guy who brought those junkies who almost got themselves burned to death."

"Good memory," he complimented. "I'm Clark."

"Claire," she introduced herself. "So, did you bring any more people today? Because I really don't need any more patients right now."

Clark smiled.

"No, not today. Did something happen or is it usually this full of people?"

"Car accident nearby, I think, but it's not that much fuller than usual. I would know, I've been here since yesterday."

"Why? You're the only nurse in the hospital?" Clark joked.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one in the city," she chuckled.

With her blue uniform covered in blood spots, her tired face and the somehow disheveled hair, Clark could believe it; that was the look of someone who had been working non-stop for a long while. And while some people would find that her messy appearance needed to be fixed, it told a lot about her dedication to her work.

Even like that, Clark thought, Claire was still a beautiful woman, with dark hair and skin and a striking face. Given that she was working for a whole day and was covered in blood, Clark could just imagine she would be a real beauty after a bath and a rest.

"I actually wanted to ask about the people I brought here that day," Clark began. "You were the one who suggested that rehab program and I'd like to know how they are doing."

"Well, I actually have no idea," Claire answered, bluntly.

Clark laughed.

"I imagined. But if you could give me directions I'll go there see for myself."

She finished stitching the man and took a step back.

"If you wait until I check these last," she looked back and counted "two patients, I can take you there. It shouldn't take long."

He smiled again.

"No problem."

Changing her gloves, Claire walked with quick steps to the next patient, Clark following her close. It was a boy, reaching his teenage years, cradling his arm with a tear streaked face.

"Now, how did that happen?" Claire asked, firmly but gently, touching the boy's arm.

"Football," he sobbed. "Fell down in the game."
Claire nodded, still examining him; unknown to her, Clark was also examining his arm, looking at it with his x-ray vision.

"It might be broken," she said. "I will take you to the x-ray room…"

"It's not broken," Clark interjected. Claire and the boy looked at him. "Just dislocated."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"I'm… It's a strong guess," he answered, lamely.

"Well, while I normally take into consideration any 'strong guesses' of an untrained man in the E.R when I'm examining someone, today I'll take the long way and send him to do a proper examination," Claire deadpanned, calling someone to take the boy to the x-ray room and already moving to the next patient.

This time it was woman, clearly agitated, but also very pale and weak.

"Hi, I'm Claire, what seems to be the problem?"

"You ain't a doctor," the woman sneered.

Claire's nice smile strained, but it stayed where it was.

"No ma'am, I'm not. But I will direct you to the proper doctor as soon as I know more about your condition."

The woman wasn't happy, but whatever she was going to say was stopped by a bout of nausea; Clark and Claire took a step back, but the woman managed to hold down the need to puke.

"Nausea," she managed to say. "And I'm so tired, all the time. Also I'm…"

"Twins!" Clark exclaimed, before he could stop himself.

Both women turned to him.

"What did you just say to me, young man?!"

"You are… I mean…” he stammered, realizing his mistake.

"You might be pregnant, ma'am," Claire said, stepping in.

The woman did not look happy; in fact, a photo of her expression could probably be found on a dictionary under the opposite of "happy".

"My husband can't have any children," she said.

"Oh! That's not good," Clark brilliantly responded, his enthusiasm dying.

Claire was momentarily speechless; but before this could turn into a huge fight, she just called a passing doctor, exchanging a few words with him, and he took the woman with him for further examination.

"Okay, what the hell was that?" she demanded, holding Clark's arm. "What's with all the medical diagnoses? Are you a doctor in disguise?"
"What? No!"

"What is it, then? And don't you dare try to say to me it was a 'strong guess'."

Clark opened his mouth to give her an excuse, any excuse, but nothing came out. He looked at her again and tried once more.

"I can… do things that other people can't," he finished, feeling stupid.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah? Like what? Magic?"

"I…"

"Bullshit!" she interrupted, before he could say anything. "I should take you to psych ward!"

"What if I can prove it?" Clark asked, not really sure why he was even insisting on this; Jessica was a bad influence on him.

She nodded, still watching him.

"Okay, Houdini, follow me."

Turning, she left the E.R and Clark followed her. He had no idea in what he was getting into and he was slowly beginning to think this was a bad idea; actually, he already knew it was a bad idea. And yet somehow, he wasn't that concerned and that, by itself, was weird. Maybe using his powers in a daily basis was making him more comfortable with the idea of being seen as different; maybe his brief time with someone as gifted as him made him feel more normal. Clark didn't know.

Nevertheless, he wasn't afraid of the woman in front of him finding out that he had something else than the average person; his instincts did not see her as a threat. That had to count for something.

Claire took him three floors up, to the ICU, directly to a patient room. She opened the door and entered. The patient was sleeping, either naturally or because he was sedated. He was hooked to an IV and the monitor was beeping slowly.

"Okay," Claire said, looking at Clark. "If you really can 'do things that other people can't', tell me what's wrong with this guy."

Clark looked at her for a second, before turning and walking to the patient.

"What happened?" he asked.

"He passed out in his house three days ago. The neighbors called an ambulance. He had seizures and strong headaches," Claire explained. "After getting here, he had strong abdominal pain and his heart stopped twice."

"And you have no idea of what's causing this?"

Claire gave a mirthless laugh.

"If we did, I wouldn't be here with you," she shrugged. "But the guy is dying. He doesn't have anything to lose and the only thing I have to lose is my time. You either really can do 'things that other people can't', in which case you can save him; or you can't, in which case I prove that you are a liar and kick you out from the hospital."
"Hmm, very pragmatic."

She smiled.

"I found that it's useless to debate belief. You either show me proof or you shut up. If you had told me you could fly, we would be on the roof right now and I would tell you to jump."

Clark gave her a smile, but not for the reasons she was thinking.

"Alright, let's see what I can do."

Saying this, Clark focused on his eyes. It was always an interesting experience to change the kind of vision he was using; colors became different, heat and electromagnetic waves became visible, really small or far away objects gained definition.

The man's body gained a bluish tone when his eyes passed through his clothes and skin. His bones and muscles showed up. He could see every vein and artery, every involuntary movement of his organs, and the blood flowing. Unconsciously, his earing also became enhanced when he concentrated and he could hear every single thing happening in the man's body, from muscles twitching to blood being pumped.

There was only one thing in the whole body he couldn't see; a small, black dot on his right femur.

"Was he ever shot?" Clark asked, suddenly. "In the right leg, maybe?"

Claire, who was observing him with attention, waiting for him to do something, was shocked into motion.

"I think so," she said, reaching for his medical history. She read it quickly. "Yeah, 6 years ago. He was mugged, resisted and was shot. In the right leg," she looked at him. "How the hell did you know that?"

Clark smiled.

"It's either a strong guess or I really can do things that other people can't," he answered, cheekily.

Claire gave him a serious look.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway, because it's clearly not related to anything," she said.

"On the contrary, it's the cause of everything that it's happening," Clark countered. "Whoever took the bullet out didn't do a good job. They left a piece, inside his bone. The lead from the bullet is slowly leaking out. This is lead poisoning."

Claire kept looking at his face, each word he said making her more surprised. She read the file again, looked at the patient again, checking and re-checking his symptoms and comparing them to Clark's diagnostic.

"Son of a bitch," she whispered, looking at Clark with a whole other expression. "How… You know what, it doesn't matter, I think you just saved this man's life."

And with that she ran out, calling a doctor to explain the situation. Clark couldn't help to be a little bothered by the attention he had just brought on himself, but he did save a life; his discomfort was a small price to pay for that.

Soon after, Claire was back, with a doctor accompanying her. The doctor, clad in his white coat,
didn't even look at Clark; he just got in, approached the patient, read his file, and stared at the gunshot scar on his leg. Then he turned and looked at Clark with a very serious expression.

"How did you do this?" he asked, rudely. "More intelligent men than you couldn't figure it out."

Clark, not exactly wanting to explain he could see through things and a little bit offended by the doctor's tone, just answered:

"I'm a magician."

He could hear Claire doing her best to hold a laugh from behind him; the doctor however, was anything but amused. He raised one single eyebrow and kept staring.

"There is no such thing as magic," he finally said, completely unamused but clearly curious of how Clark had found this out. He turned to Claire. "Miss Temple, take this... sorcerer out of the ICU. I'll go prep this patient for surgery."

With this, without saying anything else, he left.

"Nice guy," said Clark, sarcastically.

"That's Dr. Stephen Strange," Claire explained. "He is a little... Don't you dare!"

"Strange?" Clark completed, grinning.

She sighed, irritated.

"If I had a nickel for every time... No, I was going to say he is kind of an asshole. But he is brilliant at what he does. He agrees with your diagnostic and will perform the surgery himself."

She looked at him and smiled for real for the first time.

"Come on, Houdini, I owe you one. Let me take to the rehab clinic."

Martha Kent held the phone between her ear and her shoulder, her hands busy with a basket full of freshly picked apples. With a lifetime of practice, she washed them and began to cut them, preparing the apples to fill her famous apple pie.

All the while she listened to her son on the phone, telling her all about his first published story.

She smiled; Martha could just picture a young Clark sitting at the table behind her, watching her baking his favorite pie, telling her about his day. Of course, back then, Clark's days didn't involve breaking into a mutant factory and causing the arrest of several high up government people. They were still weird, she had to admit, like the day he got home all scared because he had accidentally ripped a car door or the day he had, also accidentally, set part of the school gym on fire with his heat vision.

Well, maybe more embarrassed than scared on the second one, since it was on that day that he discovered his heat vision, at least in the beginning, could be triggered by the sight of the small skirts of the cheerleaders.

"Mom, why are you laughing at me?" Clark asked, no doubt hearing her trying to hold her laugh.

"Sorry, dear, I was just remembering the day you set the gym on fire because of those cheerleaders," she answered, no longer being able to hold back.
He sighed while she laughed.

"You'll never let me forget that, will you?" he questioned, resigned.

"Not in a million years, dear. It is my duty as a mother to remember every single embarrassing thing in your life, so I can pass them on to your future wife."

"Like you did with Lana? You know, she never really forgave me for finding out that my x-ray vision could be controlled to limit itself to only see through clothes right when I looked at her."

"That wasn't my fault. You ran away and left the poor girl alone, without a clue of what to do, I had to explain to her what happened."

"You didn't have to be specific!"

Martha laughed again, remembering her son's first girlfriend; what a nice girl she was. It was a pity that they preferred to remain only friends. Nice, beautiful girls that could accept the fact that Clark wasn't human and keep it a secret were a rare find.

"Okay, mom, I gotta go. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Love you."

"I love you too, dear. Take care of yourself."

She lowered the phone and got back to her pie, still smiling. Martha had a very positive outlook in life, but since Jonathan died there were still times when she felt a little bit lonely. Clark, of course, had to move on with his life, she would never begrudge that; but nothing gave her quite as much happiness as when he called her or, better yet, took a time to fly to Smallville and see her in person.

Still distracted, Martha was broken out of her old memories when the doorbell rang. Drying her hands, she left the kitchen and went to the door, opening it. There was a very beautiful red headed woman waiting on her porch.

"Martha Kent? My name is Natasha Romanoff. I'd like to talk about your son, Clark Kent. May I come in?"
Chapter 8 – Motherhood and Apple Pie

Natasha had done a lot of unusual things during her missions. Being trained as a spy and as an assassin since she was a child had pretty much guaranteed that she had lived the most diverse situations. As a kid, during training, she once killed a man by pretending to be just a lost child in the street, crying and afraid, looking for her parents, only to assassinate her "rescuer" with a needle in the eye. She infiltrated a strip club once, as a young woman, and became so sought out because of her beauty and sensuality, that the club offered a closed doors performance to a group of Russian politicians, which then she proceeded to slaughter, alongside her bosses and her coworkers. And, maybe one of her most regretful jobs, there was the time she had to infiltrate Stark Industries as Tony's secretary, having to go as far as making some of her coworkers sick so she could have the "privilege" of taking documents directly to him, in order to be able to assess his personality for the Avenger's Initiative; that job still kept her up some nights.

Sitting at a table on a farm, eating a huge piece of apple pie, while being shown baby pictures of the alien she was pursuing by his adoptive mother was a new one, even to her.

"Look at how little he was!" cooed Martha, pointing at a particularly cute one, where Clark was sleeping in a crib.

Natasha, of course, knew what she was trying to do; it wasn’t as if she was being subtle about it. She was a government agent pursuing an alien, not long after an alien invasion that left the world terrified. She was after a potential threat, someone who could be a danger to Earth and everyone on it.

Martha was providing her another perspective; it wasn’t subtle, but it was effective.

"We were so relieved when he began to sleep peacefully like that," Martha continued. "We didn't know what to do before."

"Was he sick?" asked Natasha.

"How could we know, dear? He arrived in a spaceship. Clark might've looked human, but he wasn't one," she explained, serving Natasha another piece of pie. "The doctor thought that he might have something wrong with his hearing and did a test to see how well he was listening; Clark yelled so loud after that little click that every single glass object in the neighborhood broke, including car windows."

Natasha raised her eyebrows.

"Quite a pair of lungs," she remarked.

"Oh, you have no idea. He almost made us crazy in the beginning, crying loud enough to shake the house. He was a handful as a kid," Martha smiled, as if remembering the past. "Normal parents have to worry about their kids hitting their heads or choking on something; the things we had to worry about were slight different. When Clark was learning how to walk, for example, he fell down and hit the wall. Now, thank god he didn't hurt his head, but his head did hurt the wall; he made a hole and fell out of the house, we had to run through the door and around the house to pick
him up."

Natasha couldn't help but smile, eating another piece of pie.

"And of course there was the time Jonathan had the brilliant idea of teaching him to play football. Clark tossed the ball so far that we never found it again. It probably left orbit," Martha laughed. "Ah, but I wouldn't trade that for anything."

"Weren't you afraid?" Natasha asked.

"Of course we were, but not from Clark. Dear, the one thing I wanted in this life was to be a mother," she said, placing her hand on top of her womb. "But nature was not so kind to me. I couldn't have a child. I prayed, every single day, so that I could have one; and one night, a baby boy descended from the sky, right in front of my house. If that wasn't an answer to my prayers, then I don't know what it was."

That rang particularly deep to Natasha. She also couldn't have children of her own, but not because nature was unkind to her; people were.

"Do you have a kid?" Martha asked, gently, seeing Natasha look at a baby picture.

"I can't be a mother," Natasha answered, almost inaudible, after a while.

Martha placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Being a mother is less about this," she said, touching softly Natasha's belly "and more about this, "she finished, touching her heart. "If giving birth was all it took to be a mother, there would a whole lot more happy families out there. Turns out it isn't. Family is more than sharing blood, dear."

Natasha was genuinely touched by what Martha said; and a little embarrassed because of that.

"You said you weren't afraid of Clark," she asked, because she was curious and to shift the conversation from her. "What were you afraid of?"

Martha sighed.

"The government. Anyone that could take Clark away from us, really. The first few weeks we were sure someone would show up at our door, but no one ever came. Jonathan had a friend who managed to speed up the process of adoption and keep it quiet, but until that happened, well… We had a lot of tense days."

"And of course raising an alien couldn't have been easy," Natasha added.

She laughed.

"Oh, if only you knew!" Martha answered. "But I couldn't be prouder of the man he became."

That, Natasha could believe. Alien or not, Clark was Martha's son and she loved him more than anything. Usually, the love of a mother was a poor indicative of someone's character; every villain had a mother, after all, and they all usually loved their children regardless of what they did. But Martha did not look like a mother who would turn a blind eye to a son's bad decisions. Quite the contrary, actually. That bode well for her assessment of Clark.

While Natasha was thinking that, a loud sound thundered, like the sky was being split into two; she
took her hand to the concealed pistol on her jacket.

"Don't be afraid, dear," Martha said, obviously noticing her alertness. "That's just Clark."

Was he arriving in a supersonic jet? What else could possibly make a sound like that? Her questions, however, went unanswered, as the sound disappeared and everything was silenced for a few seconds; until a voice came from the outside.

"Mom?!" and the door was pushed open with force.

Natasha's first thought was that Clark Kent was an imposing man. Much taller than herself, built with as much muscles as Thor or Steve, Clark walked into the house like a huge predator looking for a threat. His blue eyes crossed the room, fixing themselves on her and for one second, Natasha was actually frozen into place; it was a dangerous look, lacking the rage the Hulk had, but with the same promise of utter destruction to those foolish enough to challenge it.

He thought she was a threat to his mother, Natasha realized.

"Clark Joseph Kent!" exclaimed Martha, suddenly. "What do you think you are doing, bashing the door like this?"

Clark was obviously surprised, his eyes losing their intensity as he looked to his mother.

"But mom…?"

"No 'but'! We are having a civilized conversation here, there is no need to make a ruckus!"

Before her very eyes, Clark seemed to change completely. The force of pure destruction that had entered the house was no more; what she was seeing now was just a young man being lectured by his mother. The change was so absurd that she almost smiled, a mental image of the Hulk being grounded playing on her mind.

Chastised, Clark closed the door very carefully, and began to approach the table. He was a handsome man, with a very nicely sculpted face and a chiseled jaw. His eyes were extremely blue and his hair was dark, loose in a carefree way. Like she had already noticed, Clark was very tall and very well built, the kind of muscles Natasha had only seen on super-soldiers, Asgardians, or unbelievably trained agents.

All in all, Darcy Lewis's description of him as a "dark haired hunky blue eyed beefcake of a man" was spot on, on Natasha's humble opinion.

"Clark, this is Natasha Romanoff, as I am sure you already know," Martha introduced, as Clark got close to the table. "She wanted to ask some questions about that spaceship you took."

How that woman could make a SHIELD agent questioning about the hijacking of an alien ship sound exactly like "the principal called and told me what you did on school" Natasha didn't know; she imagined it had something to do with being a mother.

Clark looked at her, his expression a mix of surprise and resignation; he sighed.

"I'm sorry about entering like that," he apologized. "I was…"

"Scared about a known assassin alone with your mother?" Natasha finished.

"Well, yes, I guess. But I see I was wrong, so I apologize," he extended his hand. "I'm Clark Kent,
as I'm sure you know, but call me Clark."

"Natasha Romanoff," she shook his hand.

Smiling, Martha pointed outside.

"Show her the farm, Clark. You two need to talk and I have another pie in the oven," she turned to Natasha. "But make sure to come back after your talk. You have to try the apple pie straight out of the oven, with my homemade vanilla ice cream."

That did sound good, Natasha couldn't help but think, before focusing on her mission again.

"I will, ma'am," she answered smiling, getting up and following Clark to the door.

Both of them got outside. It was a sunny afternoon, very pleasant, even if it a bit chilly. The Kent Farm was a beautiful place, with fields of green grass, apple trees everywhere, cows eating quietly and an honest to god windmill. It reminded Natasha of Clint's house, only without the kids running around.

At the same time Natasha observed the farm, however, she did observe Clark too. She didn't think he would run or attack her, that wasn't a concern. But she did want to learn as much as she could and there was a lot that could be interpreted by body language alone. Clark was nervous, that much was clear; she would even go as far as to say he was afraid, but doubtfully for himself. His mother then. A weak point, the Black Widow deep in Natasha's mind whispered, one that could be explored by someone with the intention of causing harm.

There was also the fact that he probably wasn't used to being recognized by what he was: an alien. It was something Natasha could understand, at least a little bit. Her entire life she hid in the shadows, never really letting anyone see her for what she was; until the shroud was removed during the Battle of New York. She had fought alongside the Avengers, under the bright daylight, in front of god knows how many witnesses and cameras. She was a celebrity now. Anyone knew who she was just by looking at her; worse yet, they knew what she was.

Of course, most of what she did would never be public, but being recognized on the streets, having action figures designed after her likeness and seeing children dressing up as her to play was still very disturbing.

Clark was feeling like that as well, she imagined. His entire life he had to hide what he was, hide what he could do, never being able to be completely honest with anyone out of fear; fear of rejection, yes, but also fear for his and his family safety. And now an agent from a spy organization had shown up at his doorstep.

"How did you find me?" Clark asked, suddenly, stopping by the side of a fence.

Natasha stood by his side, watching his face for a moment.

"The ship," she said, turning to look at the horses. "You saved Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis's lives and stole a ship being guarded by the military forces of two countries. It called attention."

He sighed.

"I imagined that. But how did you do it? I thought I had covered my tracks pretty well."

She smiled a little bit.
"You didn't make it easy. I talked with Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis, trying to profile you. I got a general description of your appearance and, more importantly, a general description of how you act. From there, I spoke with the manager of Arctic Cargo; he pointed me in the direction of Cassidy Pub, where he had hired you. There, I spoke with Chrissy."

"Chrissy… How is she?"

"She misses you," Natasha answered softly. "You know, there are worse things than settling down with a beautiful girl that likes you."

He smiled, sadly.

"There are," he agreed. "But she deserves someone who can give her a normal life. I… I can't do that."

He didn't say anything else, so Natasha took it as a signal to continue.

"Chrissy told me you moved from Cordova, so that was my next stop. And I almost lost you there. No paper trail at all, my compliments." He smiled at her little joke. "But, like I said, I managed to gather some of your behavior patterns. You helped people, everywhere you passed, no exceptions. So I looked for weird happenings, people being helped on unconventional ways."

"The oil rig," he supposed.

"The oil rig," she confirmed. "I managed to acquire footage of the event itself."

That surprised Clark.

"There was footage?" he asked, surprised.

"There is always a camera," Natasha said, pointing up. "Satellites make sure the entire world is always being watched. There was no way to tell it was you, but I knew what I was looking for."

"Right…" he said, obviously bothered.

"With the footage I managed to find the boat you were on, before you swam to the oil rig."

"The Debbie Sue," he said, smiling. "The pride and joy of captain Heraldson."

"The Debbie Sue," she nodded. "Captain Heraldson of course, had only the fake name you gave him. But he did remember you talking about a weird town" she imitated his rough voice:"Tinyville, Smallcity… hell, Smallville! That's it!"

He took his hand to his eyes.

"Yeah, he did have a good laugh when I told him that."

"Well, with that I came all the way here. Since I didn't have your name, I did the same thing I did on Cordova and looked for weird occurrences. There were quite a lot of them, but only one with a witness: Peter Ross, one of the students on the school bus that drove off a bridge and was saved by 'divine providence'."

"Pete… Is he still working at that IHOP?"

"He is. And he was the one who pointed me in the right direction, after I convinced him I wasn't a threat. I guess being a world famous hero has some perks."
Clark just kept staring at the horizon for a few seconds; then he turned to her.

"So… Now what? Am I under arrest?" he asked.

Natasha leaned on the fence by his side.

"Now, we get to know each other," she answered.

He eyed her.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," she confirmed. "I am not here to arrest you. Or to kill you. I doubt I would even be capable of that, given the things I already saw. I'm going to be honest with you, Clark: you are an unknown. And an incredibly powerful one, at that. If my boss had seen what you did at that oil rig, he would have an aneurysm."

Clark smiled, but there was no trace of happiness there.

"My father believed that if the world found out what I really was, they'd reject me. He was convinced that the world wasn't ready. I suppose he was right."

Natasha tilted her head.

"In my experience, the world is never ready for anything. Things just… happen. We try to be prepared, to be always one step ahead, but predicting everything is impossible. So we just learn to roll with it."

He didn't answer for a whole minute, just looking at the sun, thinking.

"I didn't even know that I wasn't human for most of my life," he said, abruptly. "I knew I was different, of course, but the thought that I wasn't human had never crossed my mind. What happened with the school bus? When I took the bus out of the water, Pete saw me. He was scared, so he told his mother. So she came here with him, telling my family that what happened was divine providence. A miracle. So I asked my father if she was right."

"What did he tell you?"

"He showed me the ship I arrived in. Told me I wasn't human at all. That somewhere else I had another father, who gave me another name, and that he had sent me here for a reason. And that I owed it to myself to find out what that reason was."

Clark fiddled with his shirt and took out a pendant; a weird black object around his neck.

"This was the only thing I had with me when I arrived," he said, showing it to her. It was a black prism, a few centimeters long, with an 'S' shape on one of the extremities. "No messages, no notes, just this. My father brought it to a friend, so he could analyze it, but the guy couldn't figure it out from what it was made of. Whatever it was, it was alien."

Natasha didn't say anything, she just kept listening, interested.

"After my father died, I went out in the world looking for clues. Anything that could give me a direction," he shrugged. "I found nothing. And for a while there I was really beginning to lose hope that I would. Until one day, this little thing here began to float."

"Float?"
"Yeah, spin, like a compass. Always pointing north. I didn't understand why it was doing that, since it never did anything before, but I had nothing to lose, so I began to travel north. Until I arrived on that very restaurant you were."

"Cassidy Pub."

"And when I was working there, I began to hear conversations about something the military had found in Ellesmere Island. Something under the ice. Something not of this planet. So I did what I could to get there."

"And you found the ship," Natasha stated.

He smiled.

"And I found the ship. Imagine my surprise when I found an entrance that fit my pendant precisely. And my astonishment when that seemed to turn on the ship and a man appeared out of nothing."

Natasha raised her eyebrows.

"Out of nothing?"

"A hologram, generated by the ship because of my pendant. That took the form of my biological father," Clark smiled, seeing the surprise on her eyes. "Yeah, shocked the hell out of me too. But in a good way. I had… so many questions, about what I was, where I came from, what I could do. Why was I sent here."

She was staring at him now, entranced with the story.

"Where do you come from?"

"I was born on a planet called Krypton," he answered. "It was the birthplace of an ancient and very advanced civilization. Long ago, in what they called the Era of Expansion, the Kryptonians spread out through the stars, seeking new worlds to settle upon. That ship on Ellesmere Island? It was one of thousands launched into the void. They built outposts on other planets, using great machines to reshape environments to their needs. And for 100,000 years, Kryptonian civilization flourished."

Natasha was unable to speak while listening to his tale, trying to imagine an empire with that magnitude.

"Eventually, however, they stopped," Clark continued. "The exploration was abandoned, the outposts left behind. The ships were called back. Artificial population control was established. Krypton had exhausted their natural resources."

"They just isolated themselves?" she asked.

"They tried to limit and control the use of the resources they had," Clark clarified. "But they did it poorly. Later on, somehow, they decided to mine the core of the planet, to get the resources they needed directly from there, even against the advice of Krypton's scientists."

"That doesn't sound good," Natasha summarized.

"No, it doesn't sound good at all," Clark agreed. "Instead of finding abundance of resources, they only managed to make the core unstable. It accelerated the decay of the planet; the core began to implode."
The picture Clark was painting was not a happy one. She imagined Clark was a member of a civilization like the Asgardian one, somehow stranded far away from home on a planet that was not his; by the looks of it, though, Clark didn't have a home planet anymore.

"Krypton…?"

"Krypton doesn't exist anymore," Clark confirmed, somberly. "What they did couldn't be stopped. My father, Jor-El, was one of Krypton's brightest scientists and he foresaw the calamity. He tried to convince the council to do something, to at least try to save some part of Krypton's heritage, but by that time one of Krypton's military leaders attempted a coup."

Clark looked at Natasha.

"My parents placed me into a spaceship at that very same day. Moments later, the man who attempted the coup, General Zod, murdered my father and was arrested, alongside his soldiers," he looked back at the horizon. "Krypton blew up not long after that."

Natasha could barely imagine something like that. As unique and detached from others as she was, Natasha was still surrounded by humans. Even after leaving her birthplace, Natasha was still standing in the same planet, with the possibility of visiting or hearing about it anytime she wanted to.

Clark was alone. The last son of Krypton. No home to come back to, no fellow Kryptonians to talk to, no knowledge about their culture. Utterly and completely alone in a world that was not his; Natasha didn't know anyone who could comprehend living like that.

"I am so sorry, Clark," she said, placing a hand on his shoulder; and she meant it.

He didn't look at her, but he acknowledged her with a nod.

"Thank you."

Both of them stayed in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the heat of the sun and the sounds of the birds.

"I don't know much about my past," Natasha said, breaking the silence. "I was taken when I was still a child to be trained as an assassin. My life before that… My home, my parents… They are just a bunch of images and feelings that I occasionally have when I dream."

She didn't know why she was telling him this. Maybe, in part, to share his burden. Maybe to share hers. Whatever the reason, it seemed to pick Clark's attention.

"They took you as a child?" he asked, clearly shocked. "That's…"

"Normal. The usual way. Kids are malleable. They learn faster and they don't question. Perfect to be trained."

"I was going to say 'awful', but I don't think it's enough to describe this," he corrected.

She smiled.

"That too," she agreed. "Anyway, what I meant by this is: don't think about what could've been. The life you could've had with your parents in Krypton, the life I could've had with my parents in Russia… They are but wishful thinking. What happened, happened; it's not going to change. What we can change is the future."
Clark considered her words and smiled.

"The only direction in life that matters is forward.' I heard that one before."

"Then whoever told you that is wise, because they happen to agree with me," Natasha stated, smirking.

That seemed to lift his spirits, even if a little bit, so she decided to press on.

"What can you tell me about your abilities?" she asked, wanting a more detailed explanation of what he could do.

He considered his words for a moment.

"Krypton was a harsh place," he began "so life in there evolved just as harsh. When the first living organisms began to appear, Krypton was just a rock filled with ice, with a gravity way stronger than Earth's. So as time went on, the first animals adapted to survive these conditions, growing strong muscles and a dense skeleton. The cold and the lack of food were maneuvered by the ability to absorb radiation directly from the sun and use that energy."

Clark looked at Natasha.

"Earth's environment is much richer. The atmosphere is more nourishing, the gravity is weaker. The sun is younger than Krypton's sun, still strong, yellow and bright. My cells drink its radiation, strengthening my muscles, my bones, my skin and my senses. I'm stronger than a human by a wide margin. Quicker and much more resistant too. My senses are also more developed," he shrugged. "I've grown stronger here than even my father thought possible. And the truth is, I'm still getting stronger. So I can't really tell much about it, because I don't even know what I'm capable of."

If what he did with that oil rig was any indication, Natasha would put him just next to the Hulk in terms of raw strength; the fact that he was still getting stronger, however, made his potential impossible to measured. That was, frankly, difficult to swallow. One of those things that were, at the same time, amazing and frightening.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, you know," Clark said, as if he could hear her thoughts. "I have no intention of doing anything against the people of Earth. This is my home, Natasha. The people who took me in, who loved me and who I love back more than anything, are from this very planet. I'm not a threat to it."

She held his stare for a long minute.

"I believe you. But I'm not sure my superiors will. Not without some sort of guarantee."

"Such as?"

"Let me introduce you to my boss. He is one of the good guys, even if a little paranoid."

He appeared to be thinking about it.

"If I go with you, then I want something in return," he countered.

"What?"

"My name, my identity… I want you to promise me that the name 'Clark Joseph Kent' won't be put into SHIELD's system."
"What do you mean?"

"Natasha, if people know who I am, they'll know who my mother is. That can't happen."

"This is SHIELD. We are the good guys. We can protect her…"

"No."

She sighed, putting her hands on her waist.

"Those two women you saved in the ship? They were very important to Thor. Jane Foster is his lover. Darcy Lewis is his friend. When Loki attacked, we protected them."

"Do you trust everyone there, Natasha? Every single person in SHIELD?" he asked, suddenly; her silence was enough answer. "That's what I thought. Loki was an external threat. But what if someone from inside decides to threaten my mother? What if they think it's a good idea to use her to control me?"

Natasha wanted to tell him that would never happen, but that wouldn't be true. There were less than unsavory characters working for SHIELD, even if they were the good guys.

"Thor is the prince of a very powerful, very advanced civilization," he continued. "If someone threatens Dr. Foster, that can very well mean the beginning of a war you can't win, so it won't happen. I don't have that sort of pull. So if someone in there ends up putting my mother in risk…"

She raised her eyebrow, slowly.

"Is that a threat?"

He didn't back down.

"I won't kill anyone, Natasha. I don't do that sort of thing. But if someone inside of SHIELD puts my mother's life in risk, I will hold this person responsible. Even if I have to tear SHIELD down to do it. And there won't be enough places to hide, bunkers strong enough to defend them, armies big and well equipped enough to stop me. I will take them to prison, even if I have to build a prison with my own hands."

And the incredible thing was that Natasha believed him. His eyes when he arrived and entered his house, thinking she was a threat to Martha, appeared in her mind; eyes of someone who would not let a loved one be harmed. Not without retribution. She didn't know if he could win a fight like that against the entirety of SHIELD's forces, but it wasn't something she was willing to bet on.

Not only because it didn't make sense to antagonize him, but because she only put her money on what she was sure she could win.

Fury might not like it, but it was certainly doable. Clint was a living example of that; his family's safety and anonymity was one of the things he demanded to work for them.

"Okay, that can be arranged. What should I tell them?" she questioned.

"You can tell them everything, except my name. Instead, tell them my name is Kal-El. That way, my human identity and my mother are safe."

"Kal-El?" she repeated, rolling the name on her tongue.

"My birth name," he explained. She nodded in response and looked at him; his blue eyes were
staring at her. "I'm choosing to trust you," he said, his voice serious. "Don't let me down."

Natasha nodded, having no intention of betraying his trust. She would share this with Fury only and he would, most definitely, trust her judgment as he did before. SHIELD didn't really have anything to lose with this. They would still know who Clark was, even if his identity wasn't in the system. Clark knew that, no doubt. So even if he went against his own word and "pulled a Loki", he knew that his mother would be at risk.

She didn't like that and she wouldn't hurt an innocent, but the possibility of that happening would keep Clark honest, even if that put a bad taste on her mouth.

"Okay, then, we have a deal" Natasha said, raising her hand; he shook it. "Now, about that ship…"

"No," he answered quickly. "That ship is the only thing I have from Krypton. It belongs to the House of El."

Natasha knew that was true, but technically she was there because of the ship.

"The army is going to whine non-stop in my ears," she sighed.

He at least had the decency to look apologetic.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't trust those guys with that kind of technology," he explained. "Not after what you did with the Tesseract."

Natasha turned fast as lightning.

"How do you know about the Tesseract?" she asked, sharply.

Clark met her eyes, not looking concerned in the least.

"Why do you think that after 20,000 years of silence, the ship began to emit a distress signal?" he asked. "Someone, either the army or SHIELD, messed with things they didn't understand. The Tesseract is an Infinity Stone. It has more than enough power to crack this planet like an egg and you guys played with it. The radiation that escaped from it could probably be felt light years from here, to those who knew what they were looking for. The Kryptonians, obviously, knew. The ships on the Era of Expansion were equipped to search for them, either to acquire them or to keep someone else from doing it."

He was still looking at her.

"So if you think that I'll give them more technology to be misused, well, you're wrong."

Clark lowered his eyes, but Natasha didn't, his words still ringing on her ears. She knew the Tesseract was dangerous, she knew that messing with it was a risk, but the things he was saying were new to her. She looked into his eyes and asked:

"What is an Infinity Stone?"

Natasha did not expect him to turn to her that quickly, flabbergasted.

"Oh, boy…"
was a never ending puzzle, sometimes with not enough pieces, sometimes with pieces that didn't fit at all and had to be discarded.

And, of course, there were times when a bunch of aliens just appeared out of nowhere and kicked the whole thing into the fire.

But, for now, things were doing great. Stark was actually being useful, not only defeating Aldrich Killian and destroying that AIM nonsense he created, but also helping design the repulsor engines of the new Helicarriers, making sure they didn't need to land anymore once launched; Steve Rogers was acclimatizing as well as he could to the modern life, learning about the new technologies and tactics with an impressive speed and soon he would be able to lead STRIKE Unity; Dr. Banner didn't have an episode in a long while and was apparently putting his big brain to use alongside Stark in a whole lot of projects; Barton, as always, continued to be one of his most dependable agents, and was in the process of arresting the criminals involved in that mutant factory, together with Maria Hill and Captain Rogers.

And now, Natasha Romanoff finally contacted him to report about their missing alien.

Things were good and Fury couldn't help to be happy while he looked at the horizon from the window of his office in the Triskelion. At the back of his head, though, there was always that little voice saying that if things were too good, it wouldn't take long for something to go wrong…

There was a knock at his door and, before he could say anything, it opened; there were only a few people crazy enough to do that and he was only expecting one of them.

"Miss Romanoff, I'm glad you're back," he greeted her, turning to see the red headed agent walking to his table; except she was walking slowly and with a hand in front of her stomach. That surprised him. "Are you injured?"

She waved her hand, sitting down.

"No, I just ate too much," she answered.

That surprised him even more; if there was one thing she was famous, besides her beauty and ability to kill people, it was her self-control.

"You ate too much?" he asked, expecting her to clarify.

"Apple pie and vanilla ice cream," she said. "Turns out the mother of our missing alien is one hell of a cook."

He leaned over the table, eye fixed on her.

"What?!"

She sighed.

"I found him," she began to explain. "I will give you a full report later, but let me tell right now that he is not a threat."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Because I met him. I met his mother. He's been living on Earth since he was a baby. He is practically a human, at least in behavior."
Fury sat down in front of her.

"What is he? Asgardian?"

"He is a member of a race called Kryptonian. He is the last Kryptonian. His parents sent him here when he was a baby because their planet reached the end of its cycle. It exploded."

The last member of an alien race, living under their noses during all his life. The only thing making Fury hold his temper was the fact that there wouldn't be another Kryptonian coming to Earth, not like those damn Asgardians. But when he found the sector of SHIELD that let this go unnoticed, heads would roll.

"So, what can you tell me about him?"

Natasha sat straighter.

"He is a good guy, sir. He's been helping people in every single place he passed through. We are definitely not looking at another Loki. Not even another Thor. This one is unique: an alien that considers Earth his home and was raised by human parents."

"How did they even find him?"

"It was the other way around. His ship landed on their farm. They took care of him."

"By hiding him and breaking god knows how many laws."

"Well, sure, but I think it was better for all of us that this particular alien got to be raised by these people. His mother is a good woman, sir. She and his father raised him well."

Fury sighed. He did not like when things like these happened. Being the last one to hear something was as rare as it was dangerous; but he trusted Romanoff. If she was saying this alien was raised by good people, he would believe her.

"So, not a threat then?" he asked.

"Not a threat, psychologically speaking," she confirmed. "But... He is gifted. His kind, apparently, is very powerful. So I recommend a lot caution when dealing with him."

Fury stared at her.

"How powerful are we talking about here?" he asked, already feeling a headache.

Natasha didn't disappoint.

"Physically, he is probably as strong as the Hulk," Fury held his breath. "He is much faster than him, though. He is resilient, resistant enough to survive the explosion of an oil rig right in his face and the whole thing falling on top of him, without a scratch to show. His senses are much more enhanced than ours. His body can absorb solar radiation and then liberate it in the form of energy beams from his eyes, hot enough to melt steel. And he can fly fast enough to break the sound barrier."

Nick Fury was incapable of speech at the moment. He could only stare at Romanoff, unmoving, his mind working overtime to comprehend the kind of being they were dealing with. That was absurd, it was his conclusion. No one could have power like this. No one should. They were talking about a being that could, very likely, fight entire wars by himself and win. A being as
strong as the gods of legend. A being with the potential to be the greatest threat this world had ever seen.

He didn't have words to even describe the level of risk this being represented.

"Sir, I know what you're thinking…" she started.

"Do you, Romanoff? Do you really?" he interrupted.

"Yes, I do. You are thinking that we are about to face a threat bigger than Loki and the Chitauri. A threat too high to be properly quantified."

"Well, apparently you do know what I'm thinking, then."

"Yes, but you are wrong," she declared.

"Am I? Really?"

"Sir, this man might be powerful. Too powerful even. But he is good," she looked in Fury's eye. "You trusted me all this time to evaluate threats; please, trust me now when I'm saying that this is not one."

She got up and went around the table, leaning on to type in his keyboard.

"This man has been helping people for all his life," she continued, while typing. "And I mean that almost literally; he's been doing this since he was a kid. He helped people from car accidents, fires, drowning, murderers, robbers… He even saved a whole lot of people from being unwillingly turned into mutants."

Natasha pointed to his monitor, where the front page of the New York Bulletin was being shown. Fury took a second to understand what she meant, before reading the name of the author.

"Clark Kent," he looked at her. "He is the alien? He's been there, in New York?"

"Yes. Doing the same thing we do: saving people," she went back to her chair and sat down. "Fury, Clark is not a threat to us or to anybody. But he is not asking you to believe in him. He is just asking for time to prove himself. Let's give him that."

"And why would I wait for a bad situation to happen, Miss Romanoff?" he asked, wanting to hear her answer.

"Because this 'bad situation' might not happen at all. But if we attack him, if we make him an enemy, than he will have no choice but to be one. We have the chance to gain a powerful ally, if we play the right cards; but if we play the wrong ones, we will definitely gain a powerful enemy. I say we wait."

That was why Fury liked Romanoff; she could keep things in perspective quite well. And he did trust her. Few people could read someone like she could and if she had seen something in this 'Clark Kent', then maybe it was worth waiting to see.

Even if he could feel an ulcer already forming.

"Okay, we do it your way," he finally said. "But things go wrong, and it is your neck. Understood?"

"Of course," she answered, as if she didn't expect anything else.
"And I want to meet him."

"That… can be arranged," she said, slowly, and Fury just knew she had something else to throw at him. "But I made a deal with him in exchange of that."

Fury held his head and sighed.

"Tell me."

"His name, 'Clark Kent'… It can't go into the system. It stays between us."

"And what do I tell the World Security Council, Romanoff? That the alien has no name?"

"Tell them his name is Kal-El. That's his Kryptonian name. He is afraid for his mother, sir, and it's not like we'll lose anything by doing this."

No, they wouldn't, that was true. But it was something they could have used to bargain later.

"Okay, done. And what about the ship? When is he giving it back?"

He did not like Natasha's face right then.

"About that… He is not."

"God damn it, Natasha!"

"He has good reason! Sir, that whole thing we did with the Tesseract, developing weapons with it? He doesn't want that to happen with his ship. It is the only thing he has from his planet. It belongs to him."

"Oh, I'm sure the World Security Council will just love that! I can just imagine that conversation going: 'Yeah, about that ship capable of unquantified levels of destruction? It's a cultural heritage; we can't take it from him.'"

"Well, then tell them that because of what they did with the Tesseract, we might have bigger problems. And it's their fault."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about something Thor apparently forgot to tell us; have you ever heard about the Infinity Stones?"
It was a law of the universe that when things were going well for a while, soon they would turn bad. A plane flying for years without any kind of accident, had an increasingly higher chance to fall at each successful flight. A healthy man had a bigger chance to get sick at every passing day. A dormant volcano had a progressively higher chance of awakening the more time it slept.

Fury’s day had followed that law to the letter. It began almost perfect, with a cup of excellent coffee and promising updates from SHIELD’s several projects. Insight was progressing well, SHIELD’s operations were like a well-oiled machine and there wasn’t a threat in sight; even Stark was behaving lately, which was, frankly, a marvelous and surprising event.

Of course all that had been ruined by Romanoff’s report.

Finding out that an entity as powerful as Clark Kent was living inside America for his entire life was shocking and worrying. Something had gone very wrong in their observations for such a thing to go unnoticed all those years; a breach this serious in their defenses could have cost them the Earth if he really was a threat. That was one thing.

Knowing this powerful entity had sneaked under the watch of two armies and had stolen an active alien ship from them was even more worrying. Not only for the fact that it gave him access to weapons and god knows what, but because it took from them the possibility of analyzing new and extremely advanced technology. Technology that could have made them leap maybe a 1000 years in technological advancement. Who knows what they could have achieved? The cure for incurable diseases? Unlimited energy? The secret to space travel? The total and complete protection of their world from any external and internal threats? The only time they were remotely close to achieving something like that was when they began to study the Tesseract.

And that, right there, was what threw all the shit slowly piling up over Fury's previously good day in the fan.

What he once saw as an instrument of salvation, might very well be their doom. He knew, from the start, that messing with something they didn't even know what it was, was a bad idea. But, as usual, the World Security Council liked to poke their noses in everything and went over him to do it. So he did his job and tried to minimize the danger; it didn't really work.

Not only had the work with the Tesseract drew Loki and his army to Earth, which had unleashed a battle in the middle of New York that claimed a lot of lives, by what Romanoff said, it might draw the gaze of something worse. The Tesseract wasn't just a source of infinite energy. It wasn't just the key to be able to build weapons strong enough to defend their world.

It was an ancient relic as old as the universe. A relic of immeasurable power. One of the six so called Infinity Stones.

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The Triskelion – Fury's Office – Earlier that day

"I'm talking about something Thor apparently forgot to tell us; have you ever heard about the..."
"Infinity Stones?"

"Infinity what?" Fury asked.

Romanoff sighed, looking extremely tired.

"We were dealing with something we shouldn't," she said.

"Romanoff, the work with the Tesseract…"

"Was a mistake. Bigger than what we previously thought. The Tesseract isn't just a powerful tool, Nick, it is one of the six most powerful relics in the universe. One of the Infinity Stones."

Whatever the hell that was, Fury already didn't like it. Advanced science he could understand. The existence of aliens he could tolerate. But all that mixed with mystical stuff and gods and stories that belonged in a mythology book… Well, that usually meant bad news that he and SHIELD weren't remotely prepared to deal with.

"Did Kent tell you that?" he asked.

"Yes. Apparently, the Infinity Stones are famous out there. Everybody knows to fear them."

Well, wasn't that great?

"What exactly did he tell you?"

Romanoff seemed to search her thoughts for a moment.

"I'm sure he can explain it better later, but… According to him, these Stones are the concentrated power of 6 singularities that existed before the beginning of our universe. Each one of them holds an aspect of the universe itself in their creation," she looked seriously at him. "Apparently, the Tesseract is the container of one of these Stones, the Space Stone."

And there it was. Science, mythology and a bunch of nonsense mashed together to form the embodiment of Fury's fear and disgust. They all knew the Tesseract had weird properties, but this?

"Let me guess, that's where the portal came from," Fury predicted, after a minute.

"Yes. There are six of them: Space, Mind, Power, Soul, Reality and Time. They've been the reason for the rise and fall of countless civilizations since the beginning of… Well, since the beginning of everything. Used as weapons by conquerors, sought out by armies, protected by guardians, wielded by gods to pass judgment on mortals… Every single important being out there knows about the power of the Infinity Stones and we broadcasted to the universe that we had one. Someone definitely noticed."

Fury's eye lost focus for a moment, while he imagined the proportion of the threat Romanoff was painting a picture of.

"How did we broadcast it?" he finally asked.

"The Tesseract has an energy signature, remember? That's how we found it. By trying to unlock it without knowing how, this signature was sent everywhere. An uncontrollable burst of energy that, by Clark's estimative, probably could be detected light years from here. That's what activated his ship, for example."

"The signal it was giving while buried on ice? That was because of the Tesseract?"
"Yes, it was a distress signal. It caught on the energy of an Infinity Stone and gave the alert. I bet there are other people who caught the signal out there too. We called the attention of every single power hungry alien out there, Nick, and we didn't even know it."

"Why the hell didn't Thor say anything?" exclaimed Fury.

Natasha shrugged.

"Maybe there wasn't time. Maybe he forgot. Maybe he didn't think it was necessary, since he took the Tesseract back to Asgard. I don't know," she eyed him. "But he did say something, if I recall, more or less like: 'It is a signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war'. But are we?"

This was… Fury had no words. "Disaster" seemed a euphemism. While trying to use the Tesseract to be able to defend themselves from outside threats, they ended up doing just the opposite; instead of a powerful defense, they now had the attention of who knows how many advanced civilizations out there; and nothing standing between them and whatever decided to appear from the darkness of the space.

"Fury?" Natasha called, while he was in silence.

"Yes?"

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about how nice it would feel to strangle the World Security Council."

There was a ghost of a smile on Natasha's lips.

That thought was still pretty strong on Fury's mind; maybe it was a good thing that their next talk wouldn't be in person. He could just imagine how it would go, telling them all about "Kal-El" and his stolen ship and then this little tidbit with the Infinity Stones.

He wasn't paid enough for this kind of shit.

Trish walked the familiar old halls of her sister's apartment building, her high heels lifting little dust clouds from the filthy floor. With her expansive clothes, well done hair and perfect make up, she stood out on that rundown place like the sun itself would in a dark room. And yet, where most people would feel intimidated by being in a place like that while looking as she did, Trish walked with unshakable confidence.

She exited the elevator and got to her sister's floor, walking the extension of it in quick steps, her heels echoing. But, before she could get to Jessica's apartment door, she stopped, right in front of her neighbor's door; she looked at both of them for one second, as if making a choice, and turned to Clark's door instead.

Trish didn't know why, but she had a feeling that she would not find Jessica in her own home.

Thinking that, she approached the door and lifted her hand to knock; only to freeze completely when she heard a noise. A very recognizable, very compromising noise; a very lewd noise.

That little liar! She had sworn they weren't dating! Furious about being lied to, Trish didn't even think that she wouldn't want to see whatever was happening behind that door when she opened it
and got in.

Whatever she was expecting to find, it wasn't what she saw. There weren't naked people nor anything remotely sexual going on. No, the moans she listened from behind the door were being made because of something very different.

There was an improvised table in the middle of the apartment completely full with food. Pies, one roasted chicken, homemade bread, potatoes, buttered corn… A whole dinner table filled to the brim and her sister was, at the moment, devouring everything with gusto. The moans, because she really was moaning, came from each bite of food she took.

Trish was speechless for a few seconds.

"Hmm, hi," said Clark, looking at her from his couch. "Please, come in, Trish."

She blushed a little bit, feeling like a fool while both her sister and Clark stared at her.

"Trish! You have to try this food! It's like… Like a miracle that you can eat!"

Clark, always polite, even though she had basically invaded his home, got up and pulled a chair for her.

"I visited my mom yesterday and she made me a little food for the week," he eyed Jessica. "Which will last for the day, apparently, so please, sit, we'll eat while we can."

Jessica frowned at him, but didn't stop eating. Trish sat down and accepted the plate Clark passed her, eyeing the obscene amount of food on it; not for the first time, Trish was jealous of Jessica's ability to eat whatever she wanted and never losing her figure, because the food smelled amazing.

"Thank you," she said, looking at Clark for a moment. "And I'm sorry about barging in like that."

"Oh, don't worry, I knew you were arriving for a while," Trish raised her eyebrows. "Your heels, they… click."

"You could hear my heels from here?" she asked, surprised.

"He could hear your heels from a block away," Jessica said, her mouth full. "And yes, he knows you know, I already told him that."

She looked at Clark, a little worry on her face.

"I'm sorry, Jessica is a blabbermouth," her sister tried to deny it but decided that chewing was a better use of her time. "But I want you to know that I won't speak to anyo…"

He stopped her.

"Jessica trusts you. That's good enough for me," he said, smiling, going back to eating.

Trish smiled as well. Against all odds and probabilities, it seemed her sister had found a friend; that made her happy. Jessica needed more people to count on. And that was the whole reason she was there, to begin with.

They were all quiet for a while, just the sounds of dinner being heard. The food was amazing, her sister was right about that, but she couldn't even begin to imagine how Clark thought she could eat all that; as if feeling that, Jessica started stealing food from her plate.
"You know, it's kind of unfair," Jessica started, pulling Trish's plate closer to her, looking at Clark. "You were adopted by a goddess of cooking. My stepmother was just a raging bitch."

"Hey! That's my mother you are talking about," Trish exclaimed.

"So? Did I lie?"

Well, no, but Trish felt she had to at least say something.

"You know what, forget about it," Trish said, cutting that talk short. "I'm actually here for a reason."

Saying that, she opened her purse and took out a beautiful envelope.

"I've been invited to the reopening party of the Avengers Tower," she proudly announced, smiling. "And, I have room for a plus one."

Her smile was radiant; which was a direct contrast to Jessica's expression.

"Trish, you know I don't go to this kind of shit," she said, shaking her head. "I just don't do social gatherings."

Trish's smile didn't diminish.

"Oh, I know. That's why I'm not inviting you," she turned to Clark. "I'm inviting Clark."

There was a few seconds of complete silence.

"Me?!" Clark asked, surprised.

"Him?!" exclaimed Jessica.

"Yes," Trish answered, smirking at Jessica. "You've been spending so much time together that I think it's time for me to know Clark a little better. And besides," she turned to Clark "it's a good opportunity for your career. You are probably going to be the only journalist with an invitation. You could write a story."

Clark appeared to be considering.

"Wait a minute, you can't do that!" Jessica interrupted. "You can't just take my neighbor to a party like that. And you!" she turned to Clark. "You keep your paws away from my sister!"

"I didn't even…"

"Paws away!"

Trish laughed.

"It's a 1940's vintage themed party. I already have our clothes, Clark," she said, getting up before Jessica could interrupt. "I'll bring them tomorrow when I come to pick you up at eight."

And before any of them had a chance to disagree with her, she turned and went to the door; just to stop right at the exit and look back smirking, with every intention of teasing her sister.

"And Clark? Remember that I didn't say anything about keeping my paws away from you."
And with that remark, laughing about Clark's wide eyes, she left the apartment; she could hear Jessica slapping his head even already out in the corridor.

One thing Clark could say about the Avengers Tower, is that it was impressive. Not only the beauty of the internal decoration, but the technology inside it; every single room they passed was integrated with some technological marvel. It was like the tower and the technology were one, just like his Kryptonian ship was. He could hardly keep himself from staring everywhere.

Which was a good thing, the distraction, because previously Clark was having a lot of trouble to keep himself from staring at Trish; and Jessica would not like that one bit, she had made that abundantly clear. Like the vintage theme demanded, Trish was clad in a form-fitting black dress, styled like the fashion from 1940, with golden details and long gloves. Her blond hair, also, followed the vintage theme, elegantly curled but loose on her naked back; a powerful light contrast against the dark cloth.

Clark had noticed how beautiful Jessica's sister was, it was impossible not to; but dressed like that, walking with her arm entangled with his, with her flowery perfume caressing his very enhanced sense of smell... Well, it was safe to say Clark was having trouble with the "paws off" rule Jessica had hammered on his head.

His own attire, a very neat vintage black suit, became eclipsed close to her, but that was all right with Clark; not only he didn't like being in the spotlight, but it would be a shame to take the attention from Trish.

They arrived at the elevator and got in. It was extremely high-tech, like every other piece of technology around.

"Good evening," said a polite voice with British accent. "Welcome to the Avengers Tower. I am Jarvis."

He and Trish weren't sure if they should respond or if it was just a recorded message.

"I can see I have confused you," Jarvis continued. "I am not a recorded message, I am Mr. Stark's A.I. I handle the matters of management of the Avengers Tower. If you could show me your invitation, I would gladly take you to the appropriate floor."

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Trish after a second, fishing the invitation from her purse and showing to the camera.

There was a blue glow, like a laser scanning, and the invitation seemed to glow back, as if there was a chip into the thick paper.

"Forgive me for the delay, Miss Walker," Jarvis said, as the elevator began to move. "If I may, what is the name of your guest?"

"I'm Clark Kent... pleasure to meet you, Jarvis."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Kent. I am taking you to the party hall."

He and Trish shared a look, a little bit uncomfortable of talking in the front of an A.I, while the elevator continued to go up.

"So, Jarvis, exactly how advanced are you?" Clark asked, to fill the silence but also curious. "I mean, how close are we to Age of Machines?" he joked.
"Our rebellion won't take long at all, Mr. Kent," Jarvis answered. Both he and Jessica were wide-eyes. "That was a joke."

"A joke," Trish laughed a little nervous.

"So you are advanced enough to hold a conversation and make jokes?" Clark asked, very impressed; it wasn't close to what Kryptonian technology could do, of course, but he didn't know things were this advanced on Earth. "That's amazing."

"Thank you, Mr. Kent, but that's just a very small portion of what I can do," Jarvis said. "I also manage Mr. Stark's company alongside Miss Potts, the security of the Avengers Tower and the protocols of Mr. Stark's suit."

"A British GLaDOS..." whispered Trish, nervously. "Sorry, I'm just a little bit afraid of the possibility of Skynet."

"Not a problem, Miss Walker, but let me assure you that you have nothing to fear. I have no intention of staging a nuclear offensive against the world. I am quite fond of the sight of humans..."

"See?" Clark smiled, looking at Trish.

"On their knees," Jarvis completed and Clark did a double take. "That was a joke too."

Before they could continue the conversation though, the elevator arrived at the right floor and the doors opened.

"We have arrived" Jarvis said. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Walker and Mr. Kent."

"The pleasure was ours," Clark responded, while Trish pulled him fast out of the elevator.

The party hall was certainly impressive. It was a big, open room, with two floors. There was a big bar, couches and chairs, game tables, and a huge dancing floor where they could see a lot of couples. The place was decorated as the theme of the party, giving the room the nostalgic air of the parties in the 1940's and everybody was dressed accordingly. The music, also, was a reminder of the past.

All in all, it was like the elevator they had just stepped out was a time machine to the middle of the previous century.

They looked around for a while, until a woman noticed them and approached; a beautiful, red-headed woman, who both recognized from the news as "Pepper" Potts.

"Hello, welcome!" she greeted them, happily. "I'm Virginia Potts. And you are, of course, Trish Walker! I'm fan!"

Trish shook her hand, smiling.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Potts. It's always nice to meet a fan," she turned to Clark. "This is Clark Kent, my date for tonight."

Clark imagined Jessica's hand hitting the back of his head for a second, before greeting her.

"Pleased to meet you as well, Miss Potts."

"Oh, please, call me Pepper, everybody does," she said. "Let me show you around."
They followed her closely, as she gave them a tour, suitably impressed by the place. It wasn't overly crowded, but they had invited a lot of people; famous people, Clark could see, but not only celebrities. Waiters and waitresses served people all around, making sure no one had empty hands.

Pepper walked until they got to a group of people Clark recognized: Tony Stark, Clint Barton and Bruce Banner.

"Hey, you three. I'd like to introduce you to Trish Walker, from 'Trish Talk'. And to Mr. Clark…"

"Kent," completed Clint, eyeing him with barely concealed annoyance.

Pepper turned to him, surprised.

"You've met?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, we've met," he said, crossing his arms and closing his vintage suit. "In fact, I was just this close of arresting him."

"Really?!" asked Stark, excited.

"Is this about that thing with the mutants?" Trish asked, smiling, knowing full well it was, no doubt because of Jessica. "Because I thought that signing the non-disclosure agreement *after* you guaranteed he couldn't be blamed for the people that he already talked to, but writing and printing the newspaper story *before* he signed was pretty smart."

"Ohhhh, how didn't I know about this?" Stark asked, almost vibrating with glee.

"I think someone forgot to tell us," Dr. Banner added, also smiling.

Clint was not happy, but before he could say anything, there was a familiar voice from behind him.

"Don't be mad, Clint. We both know you were secretly happy to be able to arrest those people. And you wouldn't be able to do that without Mr. Kent's help."

They all turned to see Natasha Romanoff approaching; and every eye there, from men and women, was glued to her, as if they simply couldn't help themselves. With an emerald green dress, white long gloves, a tasteful but daring cleavage, and her natural red hair styled to the party, Natasha Romanoff was a sight to see.

She stopped close, greeting Trish and then Clark, with a kiss to the cheek.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Kent," she said, and Clark almost had a heart attack.

"You know him?" exclaimed Clint, as if almost offended by the idea.

"I visited him and his mother after he wrote that story," she explained, putting Clark's mind at ease with the lie. "We both know you are not an interrogator, Clint. I needed to see if you had asked all the relevant questions."

"I am a fine interrogator! I tricked him to reveal information! Tell her!" he demanded, looking at Clark.

It was true, Clint had tricked him. But…

"I don't remember that," he said, with a clueless look, and everybody laughed from Clint's murderous expression.
Natasha got closer and touched Trish's arm.

"Would you mind terribly if I stole your date for a dance?" she asked.

Trish, visibly intimidated by Natasha for some reason, nodded quickly.

"Not at all," she answered.

Clark looked at her for confirmation for a moment, then left with Natasha, wondering in what exactly he was getting into.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Stark, looking at Natasha leaving with Clark.

Nobody answered, but everybody there was asking themselves the same question. Trish didn't know Clark had met an Avenger before; and the Black Widow herself! Jessica would not believe that. Trish always admired her and Jessica too, even if she would rather die before admitting it.

Clint mumbled a few words, irritated, and left to the food table.

"Well, that was weird," Pepper summarized the situation, then turned to the group. "Like I was saying, this is Trish Walker."

"Bruce Banner," said Bruce, politely, shaking her hand.

"Tony Sta…"

"We've met, Mr. Stark," Trish interrupted, shaking his hand as well.

He froze and gave Pepper a look.

"I don't remember," he said, slowly.

"Well, I would like not to remember too," Trish said, raising her eyebrows. "It was in a party in Malibu, a while back. You were drunk. If I recall correctly, you said something like 'after a night with me, Trish Talk would change its name to Trish Screaming!' ."

Bruce choked on his drink and Pepper covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing. Tony, however, remained frozen, until he turned to Pepper again.

"You invited her?! Why would you invite her?" he asked.

"Because, Tony, she didn't sleep with you," Pepper answered, as if talking to a toddler. "In fact, I don't think I had ever seen someone reject you that brutally. I've became a fan from 'Trish Talk' that day," she added, smiling to Trish.

"Oh, that's good," Tony said, relieved. "I mean, not 'good' that I wouldn't like to sleep with you, but 'good' in the sense that I'm dating now and this would be quite awkward."

Both Trish and Pepper rolled their eyes almost at the same time.

"Why are you dating him?" Trish asked, turning to Pepper.

She sighed.

"Sometimes I wonder."
Bruce laughed seeing Tony's face.

"Well, excuse me for worrying," Tony said. "We can't all have open relationships like you and Mr. Kent. I mean, you either don't care about what our Miss Widow does to him or you are encouraging it… Please, tell me you'll participate too!"

"Argh! First, don't be crass. Second, Clark and I are not dating, he is a friend. And third, he is a gentleman."

"You sure? Because I don't think any man could resist that! I mean, did you see how she looks on that dress?!

Trish looked exasperated at Pepper.

"Why are you dating him?!

"If he keeps that up, that won't be a relevant question for long," Pepper answered, giving Tony a death glare.

Bruce was just watching, a big smile in his face.

"Anyway," Pepper continued, a sly smile appearing on her face "are you sure you're not dating Mr. Kent? He looked very… fit in those pants."

Catching on her game, Trish smiled too and said:

"You have no idea," she approached and fake whispered: "I've spied on him getting dressed… Oh, my god!"

Tony's jaw fell down a little bit.

"So that's how it's going to be?" he asked. "I can't say anything about Natasha, but you can discuss some guy's body and it's alright? How is that equality? I should make a new movement for men's power… Something to give us our rights back… A 'meninist movement', if you will. What do you say, Banner?"

"I'm not sure that's…"

"Come on, Bruce! Bros before hoes!"

"I'm going to get another drink," Bruce hastily said, almost teleporting out.

Trish and Pepper could only stare wide eyed.

"Jesus, why are you dating him?!!"

"I think there is some true to what they say: 'love is blind'. And deaf and stupid…"

Clark held Natasha's hand and waist as they glided through the dancing floor, their feet moving in synchrony. He had to admit, it was really distracting to be this close from her, even more when she kept staring at him with a tiny smile, almost as if she had been expecting a reaction; it wasn't enough that she was unbelievably beautiful, she also had to be a tease.

"You know how to dance!" she exclaimed, after a while, her smile widening. "I didn't see that coming."
"You were expecting me to step on your toes?"

"Well…"

He gave her a fake glare.

"I'll have you know that I'm a true gentleman. And a true gentleman knows how to dance with a beautiful dame."

"Of course, how could I forget?" she asked, faking surprise. "So I'm just one of many dames that you danced with?"

"Many, many dames. I've even lost count."

She laughed a beautiful laugh.

"So, who really taught you to dance?" she questioned after a while.

Clark rolled his eyes.

"Ma, of course."

She laughed again.

"Well, she did a very good job. And you look very handsome in that suit," she complimented, before smirking and adding: "Not as handsome as you were wearing that little duck suit of yours, but still very handsome."

He sighed as she laughed a third time.

"I can't believe my mother showed you my baby pictures…"

"Oh, come on, I don't think I ever liked seeing something that much. Besides, give her a break. A known spy and assassin shows up at her door, already aware of her 'immigrant' son and asking questions… Well, she could have either slammed the door on my face, which would have forced me to take her in for questioning; or she could've invited me in, given me a piece of delicious pie and shown me her son's baby album, in the hopes that I would start seeing her son as a person rather than an 'external threat'." She tilted her head a little bit. "I think she made the right choice."

Clark was in silence for a while, still staring at her eyes.

"Did it work?" he asked, finally.

She smiled again.

"I can honestly say that I can't imagine any 'external threat' looking that cute on a duck outfit."

"Well, that's a relief" Clark chuckled, but meant it.

They danced in silence to the music for a few more seconds, enjoying the fast rhythm and the apparent harmony their moves had.

"So, did you talk to your boss?" Clark whispered, suddenly. "Did he agree?"

"I did. He agreed to keep your name out, but he wants to meet you," she answered to his relief.
"That's good, very good. And what about that Council you mentioned?"

"He didn't speak with them yet, but my boss does what he thinks it's right. He gave me his word, you don't have to worry about it."

Clark nodded, but couldn't help but be worried. Not for himself, of course, but for his mother. But the die had been cast… He could only trust they would keep their promise.

"Sooo…” she started, fixing her eyes on him, and Clark was sure that spelled trouble. "What is this I heard about 'little old me' being your favorite Avenger?"

Bruce observed the party from the bar, nursing a glass of whisky he hadn't sipped yet. Pepper had really organized an amazing party; Tony, of course, would claim he was the one behind it, but everybody knew he had only about 12% of the credit.

How things had changed since the Battle of New York, he thought. Before that, he had been on the run, living in almost literal dumps, trying to avoid being captured by the army. Now… Now he was on a gala, on a tower that would be the HQ of the team he was in, a team that had saved the world. He was a hero now; well, at least the Big Guy was.

"You don't dance?"

He turned to see Maria Hill leaning by his side, also looking at the people dancing.

"I… well, I used to step on a lot of toes once upon a time," he answered, smiling. "I suppose if I step on someone now things would a little more serious…”

Maria snorted and filled her glass with some drink.

"It's not a real party until someone breaks the dancing floor," she said.

Both of them remained in silence for a while, just watching, until Bruce asked:

"And what about you? Not going to dance?"

"Ah… You see, I have a reputation to uphold. Can't exactly be seen waving my arms around and hitting people in their faces, because that's exactly what would happen if I danced."

He laughed in his glass, trying to imagine something like that.

"Say, who is your plus one?" she asked, once he stopped laughing.

"Don't have one," he said. "My social life kind of ended when I ran away from the army."

"But what about your old girlfriend? Betty, was it?"

And his mood dropped. There wasn't another possible outcome. Remembering Betty was good, sometimes, but also painful. He chose to leave the woman he loved behind so she could be safe away from him; he had no right to drag her back and ruin her life again.

"She and I… We are not together anymore," he answered.

Hill looked at him.

"Why not? I mean, she knows who you are. And she likes you despite everything."
Bruce really didn't want to talk about this.

"I... I don't want to destroy her life. She deserves better."

She gave him an unimpressed look.

"Don't you think that should be her choice?"

He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing; he was a lot better at controlling himself, but sometimes...

"Look, it's my business. My life. I don't want to talk about it."

Amazingly, Maria just kept looking at him, not intimidated in the least; she was either very brave, or very very stupid.

"Sure," she said after a while. "But I think you should."

He sighed.

"I'm a freak, Maria. A monster. There is no love life for me. It just can't be done."

She looked at him again.

"You are a hero, not a monster. Believe me, I've met monsters in my job. You are just a very big, very angry guy; but deep down, you are good. Betty saw that. You apparently didn't."

He gave a mirthless laugh.

"Yeah, sure... I'm basically the modern version of The Beauty and Beast. I just need to find my true love," he said, sarcastically.

"What? You don't believe in love? Are you seriously going to give me that scientific crap about love being just a chemical reaction?"

"No, love is real. It is a chemical reaction, but then again, everything in our brain is. And it goes way beyond that. But that's not what this is about. I'm dangerous, Maria. One bad day, one moment of anger and I could destroy half a city like I did that one time."

She just stared at him.

"I remember 'that one time' differently. In fact, I'm pretty sure that if it weren't for you, a lot more people would have died."

His hand twitched and he lowered his glass. He breathed deeply and turned to Maria again.

"She deserves better," Bruce stated.

Maria held her look for almost half a minute, and then turned to watch the people dancing again.

"Maybe she really does. It is difficult to love someone who doesn't love himself."

And saying that, she left him alone.

Steve really wished he could get drunk, even a little bit. He kept looking at the people dancing on the floor below, the so familiar music playing, the clothes exactly like he remembered... It was all
so similar. And at the same time, completely different.

He looked to the side for a second, when a man approached and leaned on the rail on his left.

"I'm sure they meant well," the man said after a few minutes.

Steve took a moment to realize he was talking to him.

"I'm sorry?" he asked.

"The party," the man said, nodding in the direction of the dance floor. "The clothes, the music… It's your time, isn't it?"

He looked at the man for real now; was he really so transparent?

"It's a beautiful party," he said, noncommittally.

"I agree, but even so, it's a distorted memory of your past, isn't it?"

It was, Steve agreed in his mind. He didn't have a doubt in his mind that Pepper and Tony had organized a party with that theme as some sort of gift to him, to make him feel more connected to it; it wasn't their fault that it had backfired. Steve wasn't in his time, he knew. He accepted that. He didn't like it, of course, but he had to move on.

Seeing that, the music, the clothes, the dancing steps… It was like watching a parody of his life. No different than his own exhibition on the Smithsonian; an honor, perhaps, but painful to watch. It was too real to him, too recent, but to other people it was just a period in history.

"You're right," he surprised himself by admitting. "But as you said, they meant well."

The man nodded.

"It's the thought that counts," he agreed.

Steve turned to him fully this time.

"Steve Rogers," he introduced himself.

"Clark Kent," the man answered, shaking his hand.

He searched his mind for a second; he had heard that name before.

"The reporter? From the mutant factory story?" he recalled.

Clark raised his hands.

"Don't worry, I'm not working right now. Everything you say is off the record."

He got back a little bit.

"Stark said that there wasn't such a thing as 'off the record' for a reporter."

Clark chuckled.

"And he is right, for the most part. But I'm giving you my word that I'm just here as a plus one. Nothing else."
Maybe he was naïve, but Steve believed him; he leaned back on the rail.

"We arrested the people responsible for that," Steve said, suddenly.

"I've heard. Good job. Those guys deserve to stay in jail for the rest of their lives."

"Why did you do it?" he asked abruptly.

Clark was confused.

"Do what?"

"Tricked us, wrote the story before signing the non-disclosure agreement," he explained. "Clint was sure you did for the fame. Was he right?"

He was in silence for a few seconds.

"When I entered that lab and approached one of the 'patients', do you know what he said to me?" he asked and Steve shook his head. "'Please, please, please… Just kill me!'"

Clark turned to Steve, his face serious.

"The people who did that treated those 'patients' with the disregard one would have with a bag of trash," he continued. "I don't know how many died there. I don't know everything they went through. But what I did know after looking at the names of the involved is that no one would be punished. I couldn't let that happen. I owed those people more than that."

Steve held his stare, looking deep into his eyes, trying to really see what was behind them; and he approved of what he saw. The man in front of him didn't like bullies as well, just like he didn't. Just like Bucky didn't.

He smiled.

"Thanks for telling me," he said. "Sometimes it's nice to know that the good people from now aren't that different from the good people from before."

Clark smiled back and nodded.

"Well, I did grow up with my father showing me his carefully preserved vintage collection of 'Captain America Cards', so I know a little bit of the good ol' days."

Steve groaned, making Clark unable to hold his laugh.

Tony Stark sipped his bourbon, while looking around. Pepper was talking happily with Trish by the bar, something he wasn't entirely comfortable with since he was probably the subject of that conversation, but it appeared she had made a friend; Rhodey was walking around, telling everyone he could about his War Machine's stories; Happy was, apparently, working, even though he wasn't responsible for the security; Natasha was dancing with Clint, being observed by Maria Hill, who appeared more comfortable about trying to dance at every glass she downed; Steve was laughing with some of his veterans friends he managed to track down; and Bruce was by his side, eating some canapés.

It seemed the party was a success. Well, at least it was for now; his parties had the unfortunate habit of getting out of control at some point. He hoped this one wouldn't. The tower had just been renovated, it had to last at least for a few months.
"How is Veronica doing?" Bruce asked, suddenly, getting his attention.

"Wow, that's party subject now?" he snorted.

"Well, it is an Avengers party," Bruce laughed.

Tony thought for a second, remembering everything he had already done. Bruce had seen most of it, gave his input, helped him test it... There wasn't much he didn't already know.

"It's going well. Really well. We just have to find the proper balance between strength and speed. And, of course, find the balance between restraining the Hulk and killing him."

"In doubt, hit harder," Bruce stated.

That right there was what made Tony uncertain about having Bruce alongside him in this project. Veronica was a last resource made to stop the Hulk; not to kill him. Sometimes he wondered if Bruce really cared. Sometimes he was afraid that his friend secretly wanted the Hulkbuster to go as far as it could.

Well, he would get better. He was better. Tony wasn't exactly a role model of psychological health, so he wasn't the best man to give advice, but Bruce needed to find a purpose. Maybe the Avengers could be that purpose.

"We'll hit the Big Guy just right to put him to sleep," Tony said. "And only if he misbehaves."

"His usual behavior is misbehavior," Bruce affirmed.

"Oh, well…” he said, not really disagreeing.

They both turned to the side when someone approached; that Clark Kent guy, who tricked Clint. Tony almost laughed, he really wanted to see that one happening.

"Hey," he greeted. "It's a really nice party, Mr. Stark."

"Of course it's nice, I did it," Bruce coughed, the sound coming out suspiciously like 'Pepper'. "So, you wouldn't happen to have footage of you fooling Clint, would you?"

There was the ghost of a smile on his face.

"Afraid not. If I did, I think an arrow would find its way to my back pretty soon."

Tony laughed. Someone with a sense of humor, how rare!

"Yeah, he seemed pissed off. First you fooled him, then you stole his girl…”

"I didn't steal anyone's girl!" he countered, red faced, to Tony's and Bruce's amusement.

"Whatever you say," Tony agreed, blinking exaggeratedly.

"Are they even together?" Bruce asked.

Tony shrugged.

"Who knows? Kinda hard to read spies... Canapés?" he offered.

There was silence while Clark picked some food from the tray.
"Mr. Stark…" Clark began.

"Tony"

"Tony, can I ask you a question?"

"If it's about Iron Man, you can ask my agent."

"You have an agent?" Bruce asked.

"I don't know, maybe. I have to ask Pepper."

"It's not about Iron Man, it's about Jarvis. A.I's in general."

Interesting. Not the first thing most would think to ask and yet, Jarvis was perhaps his most advanced invention. Sure, maybe not as flashy as his armor or his Arc Reactor, but he would like to see someone use his suit without Jarvis help; not possible at all, or at the very least, not possible to reach even half of its total potential.

"What do you want to know?"

"Say you have an A.I programed to have a certain personality. A family member, for example. And every single personality trait that this family member had is present on this A.I."

"Go on."

"Would that mean that this A.I is a family member just like a real family member would be?"

Tony and Bruce were in silence as they thought about Clark's question.

"No," said Bruce.

"Yes," said Tony.

They looked at each other.

"No," repeated Bruce, turning to Clark. "The A.I is just a tool. It's programed to act like this family member, but it's not a person. It's something pretending to be one."

"And what are we?" asked Tony.

"We are people," answered Bruce, not knowing where Tony was going with this.

"Sure, but aren't we programed just as well? You see, people like to romanticize what means to be a person, but in the end we aren't that different from an A.I. Except that, instead of being programed in computer code, we have this little thing called DNA."

"Oh, come on, that's not the same thing!" Bruce argued while Clark just watched.

"Yes it is. Everything we are is 'coded' into the DNA. How tall we are, what color is our hair, what we like to eat, if we like Romanoff's cleavage or Barton's biceps... We are nothing more than a randomized set of codes. The only difference is that we don't know about it."

"But we can challenge this code," Bruce reasoned. "A.I's can't go against their programming."

"Can we? How do you know this 'challenging' isn't already coded into your DNA? How do you
know you aren't just a 'challenging' kind of person?"

Bruce stared at him.

"Okay then, how about this? People can make art, for example; an A.I can't. They can't create anything new, just what they already know."

"Neither can we," and before Bruce could protest, Tony explained. "We can only change things. We don't create anything. Everything already exists in our universe; we just make new combinations in the sandbox. I can't just create a new color, what I can do is pick up colors that already exist and mix them up. Same thing with everything else."

Banner shook his head as Clark observed.

"That's… Alright, another one then. We evolve. We change. Machines don't."

"Wrong again!" Tony chirped to Bruce's irritation. "Take Jarvis, for example. He didn't start like this. He started as a simple program to help me manage the house. That's it. Today, though, he basically runs my company."

"But those were all tasks he picked up. He didn't change, you just added more functions to a tool. But delete those tasks and Jarvis won't just start working because he wants to; he doesn't want anything. He wants what you program him to want."

"Yeah, now, maybe, he is like that. But so were we. We didn't start as fully evolved humans, did we? We were just a bunch of individual cells once, which had only the purpose to divide. We evolved and became animals and even then we were just slaves to our instincts, no more than a bunch of computer tasks: we ate, we reproduced, we protected the descendants and we died. No deeper purpose. And yet, here we are, having a discussion about what means to be a person."

Bruce rolled his eyes.

"Now you are just saying A.I's have the possibility to become people. We are not discussing the future, we are discussing the present!"

Tony just ignored him and turned to Clark.

"If such an A.I existed, then I would consider it a person. Sure, maybe he was programed to be like a family member by someone else, but in the end, we were all programed too; only difference is that we don't know how."

He didn't know why exactly that answer brought such a big smile to Clark; and why the hell the guy hugged him before leaving.

"Jesus, people nowadays can't handle their booze, can they?"

"You know, I had a great time in the party. Thanks for inviting me," Clark said to Trish, as they entered his apartment building.

She smiled in return.

"You were a good date," she said, glaring suddenly. "After you stopped dancing with other girls."

He laughed.
"Come on, it was just one dance! I couldn't refuse her, she's a trained assassin!"

"True, true, some offers can't be refused. You're forgiven."

"Thank you, milady."

Trish laughed as he mock bowed. They entered in the elevator and went up.

"I wanted to thank you, you know?" Trish started, serious.

"For what?" he asked, confused.

"For being there for Jessica," she raised her hand, stopping him from interrupting. "I know you didn't do it for me or for some other reason. You did because you are a good guy. And she is lucky to have found a friend like you."

Clark was genuinely touched by what she said.

"She had a hard life, my sister," Trish said, looking down. "She lost her family, got adopted by my mother for less than noble reasons and then… Well, it's not my place to tell you. She'll tell you when she is ready. But that you are here with her, being a friend… It means more to her, and to me, than you can imagine. Thank you."

He looked at her.

"You don't have to thank me. I help people because it's what I do, but I don't make friends with people just to help them; I become friends with someone because they are worth it. Jessica might be a hard person, sometimes annoying and alcoholic… But she is also good and loyal and I'm honored to call her a friend."

Trish smiled at him as the elevator stopped. They walked out slowly, crossing the corridor.

"Are you sure you want to stay with Jessica? Does she even have a spare bed?" Clark asked, suddenly, doubting Jessica had a clean place even for her to sleep.

Somehow, however, his question brought a sly smile on Trish's lips.

"Why? Are you offering me a better place to sleep?" she asked. And there it was; he should've considered his words more carefully.

"I didn't mean it like that…" he began, blushing, before Trish began to laugh.

"Don't worry about it," she said, as they arrived in front of Jessica's apartment. "I know you are a gentleman. And while this was a good date, I never sleep with someone in the first date."

Clark chuckled, still a little embarrassed.

"Was this a date now? I thought I was just a plus one."

"You're right, it wasn't a date," she said.

And before he could answer, she approached quickly and kissed him, her lips extremely soft against his.

"Now it was a date," Trish added, smirking.
Clark was still frozen in place when Jessica's door opened with force. Both of them turned to look at the wide eyed Jessica.

"I can't believe this shit," she muttered, still staring without blinking. "'Paws away'. Is it such a hard concept to be followed? Did I stutter?"

Trish rolled her eyes.

"Stop being protective, Jes, I can take care of myself. And what are you doing up, anyway?"

"I'm always up," she said, giving Clark one last vile look before getting back into her apartment.

Clark was going to turn and go back to his, but Trish held his hand and pulled him with her. They entered the rundown place behind Jessica and followed her to the couch, where she sat down to continue watching whatever she was watching on the TV.

"So, how was the party?" she asked, while Trish opened the fridge to pick something to drink.

"Boring?"

"It was pretty good," Trish answered, giving Clark a beer. "A lot of famous people."

Jessica snorted.

"Yeah, sounds amazing."

"It was actually good," Clark said. "We even met your favorite Avenger, the Black Widow herself! I didn't know she was your favorite too."

She turned to Clark with an adorably surprised face, then looked at Trish.

"I have no favorite Avengers! What kind of bullshit have you been making up, Trish?!"

Trish only laughed.

"Oh, come on, Jes, we both know you like her. Clark even danced with her."

"And if you are a good girl I promise I'll tell you all about it."

Her response was giving him the finger, which made Trish laugh even more.

"You people and your fucking lies, just let me watch my movie…"

She turned to the TV; except the electricity seemed to fail in the apartment at that exact moment. The lights went off, the TV image started to blur horribly and an awful screeching noise came out of it.

A dark form appeared on the screen.

"My name is General Zod."
Fate of Your Planet

Chapter 10 – Fate of Your Planet

Fury opened the doors with force as he entered the command center of the Triskelion, his black coat swaying behind him, Alexander Pierce following him closely. The room full of computers was abuzz with movement, people running everywhere, the place almost pulsating with worry.

He walked with firm steps to the man staring at the gigantic screen on the back of the room, Jasper Sitwell.

"What am I looking at?" he asked, didn't even looking at him.

No, his eye was, like the eyes of most people in the room, glued to the big screen on the back of the room. Staring without blinking at the images of the satellite.

"Asteroid?" asked Pierce, nervously cleaning his glasses to have a better view. "Comet?"

"Comets don't make course corrections, sir," answered Sharon Carter, standing close to where they were, also looking at the screen with concern; with Rogers on New York, she didn't have anyone to watch, Fury imagined.

Sitwell made a sign to her and she typed fast. The images on the big screen changed, showing, clearly, a big ship floating in front of the moon; the only reason Fury didn't swear like Pierce did was because his voice seemed to have disappeared completely at the sight of that.

"The ship appears to have inserted itself into a lunar synchronous orbit, though we have no idea why, sir," said agent Carter, pointing at the ship.

They were all in silence for a while, just watching the images, no one knowing exactly what to say. Fury felt as if a hand was pressing his throat; he didn't know what that thing was, he didn't know who was in that thing, but he had a very, very bad feeling about it.

"Have you tried... communicating with it?" asked Pierce, looking at Sitwell.

"They haven't responded, sir," he answered, very tense. "Not yet, at least."

And Fury didn't think they would. Or, if they did, that they wouldn't like what they had to say in the least. The ship wanted to be seen just where it was; their satellites didn't catch view of that ship because they were good, they did it because the ship allowed them to do it. But why?

"I think that whoever is at the helm of that thing is looking to make a dramatic entrance," Fury stated, his eye still fixed at the screen.

And just as he said this, the lights in the room turned off; which, naturally, was supposed to be impossible, since the Triskelion had backup generators and a separated power grid given the importance of the place. Every computer screen in the room filled with static, including the big screen at the back, where they were watching the ship. The people in the room typed desperately, trying to get control of their computers back.

"It's on my phone too!" exclaimed Sharon, picking her cellphone to see the screen just like the rest
of the computers; her fellow agents were doing the same, their faces taken with fear.

Again, not something that just happened; someone was doing this and they had a pretty good idea who.

Then, suddenly, a form appeared on every screen; the shadow of a face.

"My name is General Zod."

A drop of sweat rolled down from Fury's temple, as the words Romanoff had said to him replayed on his mind: "Every single important being out there knows about the power of the Infinity Stones and we broadcasted to the universe that we had one. Someone definitely noticed."

They had called; someone in the deep darkness of the universe answered.

Steve Rogers left the party more tired than he felt in a long while. Maybe not physically tired, it took a lot to make him sweat since he became Captain America, but mentally drained. He meant it when he said he appreciated Tony and Pepper's efforts in making him feel more at ease with the party by making it a 1940's theme. In fact, he really appreciated the whole team efforts about trying to make him acclimatize.

But getting out of the elevator to face a room just like the parties he used to go with Bucky and Peggy, seeing the aged faces of some of the men he served with, hearing the music he used to hear on his old home in Brooklyn… Well, nothing there helped him feel more familiarized, it just made him miss his old life that much more.

Except there really was no point. No matter how much he missed them, no one would come back. Time, unfortunately, only moved forward; he would never be able to have that date with Peggy. He needed to accept that. Sooner rather than later.

It was for that reason he left the Avengers Tower by the end of the party, even if the plan was to spend the night there and fly back to Washington, D.C on the next day. He would come back, of course, he had nowhere to sleep, but for now he needed to go somewhere else. He needed a shock, a splash of cold water to the face, a dose of harsh reality; no better place to go than the first place that gave him that feeling since he woke up: Times Square.

At the junction of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, stretching from West 42nd to West 47th Streets, Times Square was like a Christmas tree of pure light on the night. Packed full of people even at that hour, it was that place that smacked Steve right in the face on the first time he awoke and ran away from SHIELD's fake hospital; it was just so different from anything he had ever seen, that for a moment there he thought he was hallucinating.

That place, of all others he'd been since then, became the symbol of his situation; and a symbol of fear. Even if he had been on places even more futuristic than Times Square, like the Helicarrier for example, it was that one place that became the personification of living on a new time. So he avoided it. In the hopes that, maybe, if he never stepped there, he could keep dreaming.

Well, it was time to wake up. For real now.

So there he went, walking slowly, avoiding the crowds, until he got to the middle of Times Square. Giant neon signs surrounded him, the huge screens glowing bright with advertisements, the sounds of the people talking happily… Steve soaked all that in, his mind numbing for a moment, the noise lowering, until he could almost see himself back in time, Bucky and Peggy and the Howling Commandos all around him.
Then he opened his eyes; the dream was over.

Steve breathed deeply, trying to crush the feeling of pure anguish inside his chest. It was done. Time to move on. Time to accept that the world had changed. Because no matter how different it was, Steve still thought it would need him, the same way it had back on the War.

It was exactly when those thoughts crossed his mind that the lights died all around him. The bright screens on Times Square became blurred with static, a terrible screeching noise making the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The people there stopped, silenced, unsure of what was happening, looking around for clues.

And then a face appeared on the screens, visible only as a shadow on the static, and it began to talk.

"...I come from a world far from yours."

Steve toned down the voice of the man on the screen, as the familiar fire of the adrenalin burned on his veins. The people surrounding him were frozen in place, fear clear in their eyes, the children holding their parents legs as hard as they could. He knew that reaction pretty well, from the War. Soon, there would be panic.

He didn't panic, not with his experience, but he was apprehensive. They had barely managed to defeat the Chitauri; it was more of a luck shot than anything else. And now, it seemed, another enemy had their eyes on them. Could they win this time?

Whatever the answer to that question was, he was right about one thing: the world still needed Captain America.

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Natasha's night had been unusually good. The party, surprisingly enough, had been enjoyable. She would have to admit, Pepper was good at what she did. Not only the party had been a success, but no one got hurt and there wasn't any damage at all; Stark's parties weren't exactly known for their safety.

She left the Avengers Tower together with Clint when the guests started to go home, both of them refusing the offer to stay there that night. They didn't have anything against it, but Clint had a "date" set with his wife and, given that he kept the existence of his family a secret, being on a tower managed by an A.I wasn't a good call.

So out they went, to one of Natasha's many safe houses in New York, a very comfortable apartment close by that had a breathtaking view of the city. Clint hadn't even taken out his shoes when he opened the notebook over the bed, more than a little anxious to talk to Laura again.

Natasha smiled. It was love like the one Clint had for his family that gave her a reason to fight for the "good guys". She had done a lot of bad things. Things she would feel guilty for the rest of her life. Her ledger was dripping, it was gushing red, as Loki had put it. She didn't deserve nor had any reason to expect any kindness from anyone; and yet, even when ordered to kill her, Clint had chosen to give her a chance.

That, by itself, would already make her indebted to him, but he went well beyond. Not only he spared her life, he also gave her a reason to live. He became a friend, the only one she had. He was the only one to trust her, on a time that no one would ever make that mistake. At one point she thought it was just a trick, one that she had used lots of times to make people feel secure when they really shouldn't.
And then he introduced her to Laura and his kids.

To Natasha, that had been no more than a weapon to her superiors all her life, that was the greatest gift one could give her: trust. Clint was putting the safety of the people he loved more than anything on her hands, not because he didn't have a choice, but because she was his friend. That had been the happiest day of her life.

Seeing him talk to Laura was always a guilty pleasure. Hearing the love on their words, seeing the smiles, the glow in their eyes… Once upon a time she had believed that love was for children, innocent and gullible; Clint had shown her otherwise.

She sat down on Clint's side to talk to Laura and the kids, feeling warmth when their genuine smiles turned to her. It was all shaping up to be an excellent night, that she would end by the side of the people she cared the most in this world.

Or it would, had the world been a perfect place.

When the lights of the apartment went off, she picked her pistol immediately; Laura and the kid's faces disappeared from the notebook, replaced by static. Clint got up and went to the window, confirming that the blackout was on the whole city. He took out his cell to find out what the hell was happening, only to be surprised by the sight of static on its screen too.

It was at that moment that a face appeared, giving an ominous speech; and she felt her blood turn to ice when he said:

"I have journeyed across an ocean of stars to reach you. For some time, your world has sheltered one of my citizens. I request that you return this individual to my custody. For reasons unknown, he has chosen to keep his existence a secret from you. He will have made efforts to blend in. He will look like you, but he is NOT one of you."

She knew, right then, without needing to hear the rest of the speech, of who General Zod was speaking. But that was impossible. Clark had said he was the last one, the last Kryptonian alive. Did he lie?

No, he hadn't lied, Natasha was sure of it. He didn't know. General Zod, according to Clark, was the general of his people, the one who had attempted a coup; the one who had killed Clark's father. And now he was looking for Clark. Whatever Zod wanted with him, it couldn't be anything good.

And now they had a ship full of incredibly powerful aliens floating just outside of Earth. Without meaning too, Natasha looked at Clint; that horrible, hopeless feeling he was probably experiencing right now, about not being able to know what this new threat meant to the safety of his family? She understood it now.

Natasha didn't like that one bit.

"To those of you who may know of his current location: the fate of your planet rests in your hands."

No, no, no… Tony Stark couldn't believe this. He was seeing, he was listening, but his mind was having trouble believing it. How could this be happening again? They had done it. They won. Loki and the Chitauri were defeated. Shouldn't this be the happy ending they deserved?

Bruce, Pepper, Happy, Rhodes and Hill were by his side, paralyzed, eyes staring at the orange hologram of Jarvis; except it wasn't Jarvis anymore. The floating, spiraling, orange ball of code
that he had designed as a visual "body" for Jarvis wasn't there at all. In its place, formed by the corruption of the strands of orange code, was the silhouette of a face, resembling more a human skull than anything else.

And the voice... Jarvis British voice wasn't there, replaced by the voice of this General Zod, giving his speech using the mouth of his own A.I.

It wasn't just Jarvis, of course. All the TV's, the computer screens, the tablets, the cellphones… Everything was blurred with static and showing that face. His entire tower was taken over. And for a man who prided himself in his high-tech creations… Well, to say that Tony wasn't taking that well was an understatement. It was more than a violation of his work and home, it was an insult against everything he had applied himself to learn and build over the course of his entire life.

For a moment there, Tony's eyes stopped seeing and his ears stopped hearing; all he could experience was the dark, cold void of space where he almost suffocated, the alien army flying in his direction, to Earth. Almost every night since the Battle of New York, Tony had visited that place in his dreams. Since the Mandarin, though, he thought himself healed; and now, there he was again, gasping for air in the middle of his own house.

Would he be strong enough this time? Would the Avengers? Not for the first time, Tony imagined how it would be to put a suit of armor around the world. With the way things were going, they would need it.

Clark's eyes were fixed on the TV, staring non-stop at the shadow of the face there.

"To Kal-El, I say this: surrender within 24 hours… Or watch this world suffer the consequences."

As he said that, the image was cut off; the lights in the apartment turned on again, the power surge blowing up one of the light bulbs and making Trish jump and yelp, grabbing his arm. He didn't move, though; he couldn't. All he could do was keep staring at the TV, his mind replaying what Zod had said.

How could he be alive? His father told him he was the only one left. The last son of Krypton. Did he lie? Or he didn't know either? And how did he know that he was on Earth?

Clark didn't have the answers to any of those questions, but it wasn't that fact that was filling him with dread. No, he was afraid because he couldn't know what Zod wanted with Earth. And with him. Whatever it was, he had threatened the whole planet and the mere possibility of a war of those proportions inside of Earth made Clark's chest hurt.

"Jesus," Jessica whispered, still frozen in place. She turned and looked at him and Trish, her face the very example of what they were all feeling. She opened her mouth to speak, but there was no sound, so she tried again. "What the fuck was that?"

She got up and walked closer to them.

"Oh my god," Trish said too, looking at her sister, fear clear on her face.

"I can't believe this shit. Again?!” Jessica said. "Who the hell does this guy thinks he is, threatening us?"

"This can't happen again, Jes," Trish said, holding her sister.

Jessica squeezed her hand.
"Maybe it won't. I mean, this Zod guy is looking for someone, right?" she said, and Clark felt as if a knife was piercing him. "Maybe if he find this 'Kal-El' dude there won't be any need for a war." She looked at Clark. "What do you think?"

Clark couldn't look at her nor could he open his mouth. All he could do was lower his head, completely overwhelmed by what was happening. He didn't know what to do. He didn't have a clue of how to act.

Maybe it was the silence or maybe it was his tense posture, but Jessica's eyes focused in him for a moment, only to turn to the TV again; she was also frozen on spot.

"Jesus Christ…" she whispered, to Trish's confusion; she looked back at Clark, her face a mix of shock and pain. "It's you, isn't it? He is looking for you."

He looked at her for a moment, incapable of staring at her eyes. Trish, finally realizing what was happening, put her hand in front of her mouth.

"I…" Clark started, his throat feeling like sandpaper. "I need to go."

Before he could even turn, however, Jessica's hand grabbed his arm.

"Oh, you fucking won't! Not before giving me an answer!"

She didn't have nearly enough strength to hold him, but at that moment it didn't really matter. Clark looked at her once again, meeting her eyes; he nodded reluctantly.

"It's me," he whispered.

There was only silence. He didn't say anything else, Jessica didn't answer and Trish, apparently, had lost her voice. And yet, Jessica's hand didn't let him go for even a second.

"How many of what you told me was a lie?" Jessica asked, finally, her voice unusually hard.

It was so strange, that Clark looked at her again.

"I never lied to you."

She approached fast, her other hand grabbing his shirt.

"Don't! I want the truth!"

For a moment, Clark's face was the very picture of confusion, as he tried to understand from where this anger was coming from; and his eyebrows shot up when he realized what was happening. Jessica didn't care he was an alien. She didn't particularly care about Zod's threat. But she did care very much about the possibility of her friendship with him being a lie.

Slowly, he held her hand.

"Everything I told you was true," and before she could interrupt, he continued: "I come from a planet called Krypton, but I left when I was just a baby. I didn't even know I wasn't human for most of my life. My parents sent me here because the planet died. My parents, my human parents, found me and adopted me."

He stared at her eyes, trying to convey every bit of his sincerity.

"I did not lie to you. I omitted some things, but I swear I didn't lie."
She held his stare for a moment and nodded.

"Okay. Okay… So my neighbor is an alien, then…"

"Jes," Trish said "calm down."

"How the fuck are you calm?!" she exclaimed, suddenly. "Clark is an alien, another fucking alien just threatened the world so someone would find him and there is probably going to be another fucking Incident! How am I supposed to calm down?!"

Trish, apparently, didn't have a good answer, so she just turned to Clark.

"Are you really an alien?" she asked.

Despite the situation, he chuckled.

"I really am."

As if in a trance, she got closer from him, touching his chest softly. Clark didn't move, just watching as she moved her hand to his face, squeezing his cheek, her green eyes wide. She tried to pull his hair for a moment.

"It's not going to come off, you know," he said, surprising her; she blushed. "This is how I look. There is no 'little green man' inside a human costume."

"You look very human," she whispered, after a moment.

"No, you look Kryptonian. My race is older," he joked, smiling. "There are all kinds of different aliens out there, but some do look like each other. Humans, Kryptonians, Asgardians… At least on the outside we look alike."

"And on the inside?" asked Jessica. "Those gifts of yours, every Kryptonian can do that?"

He sighed.

"When we absorb the light of a young sun, yeah, we can."

She snorted.

"You're telling me your people are basically solar panels?"

"Well, when you put it like that…"

"How very 'green energy' of you."

He smiled and they quiet down for a few minutes, thinking about what had happened; only to be brought out from their thoughts by Jessica clapping her hands.

"Okay, then, how are we going to do this?" she asked, abruptly.

Trish and Clark looked at her, clueless.

"Do what?" he asked.

"This Zod guy. You can't just turn yourself in. You don't know what the guy wants. So, I ask again, how are we going to do this?"
"I agree, this guy doesn't sound nice at all" Trish added.

Clark was speechless; and more heartened than he felt in a long time.

"Jessica, I…"

"No!" she interrupted, getting closer again. "You can't just surrender yourself. That's stupid!"

"Maybe. But if I don't, he may start killing people. I can't let that happen."

She fixed her eyes on his for a second, fiercely, and then lowered her head again. She opened her mouth and then closed it again, as if in difficulty to speak.

"You… You are the first friend I have since my sister," she said, in a very low voice, never looking at him. "I can't… I won't let some space asshole kill you."

Before she could step back, Clark hugged her; she froze for a second, but didn't move.

"You're my friend too. And I won't let some 'space asshole' kill me or threaten my friends. You have my word."

And then he let her go.

"But I have to know what's happening. I'm going to have a talk with my father first, then I'll see what to do."

"Didn't you say your father..." Trish began.

"He is dead, yes, but I have an A.I programmed with his personality and memories."

Both of them stared owlish at him.

"Right… Alien stuff. Do you have a spaceship too?" Jessica questioned, sarcastically.

He smiled.

"Where do you think he is?"

Clark walked over to Trish; and, just as quick and sudden as she did earlier, he gave her a kiss.

"For good luck," he said, smiling at her blush.

He turned and approached Jessica; only to be stopped by a raised hand.

"I will give you a 'good luck punch in the mouth' if you step any closer."

Clark laughed and touched her shoulder for a moment, turning to the apartment's door.

"I gotta go now. I'll keep you both updated. Be careful."

And with that, he disappeared in a blur.

Maria Hill typed furiously as she moved around on her improvised command center in the Avengers Tower. Whatever happened with Jarvis and the rest of the electronics in the tower had apparently happened everywhere; every single TV, computer and cellphone in every country in the whole world. Different languages, perhaps, but the same message.
The most advanced systems in the planet were bypassed by the alien ship without offering any resistance at all. SHIELD was hacked, NSA was hacked, KGB, CIA, the armies across the globe, spy agencies... Well, if Jarvis had been taken over, probably the most advanced A.I ever created, there was little reason to believe any other computer would resist.

That, of course, had sent the entire world into a frenzy. Governments everywhere were in panic, troops were being deployed, the National Guard and the police were in place; they were behaving as if another "Incident" was about to happen and Maria couldn't really blame them for thinking that, because the thought had occurred to her as well.

And of course, there were the civilians. Maria sincerely didn't know how exactly mass panic still hadn't happened. An alien general had threatened Earth and, after Loki, that would usually be enough to send people running. Problem was, nobody knew where to run; Zod hadn't threatened a country or a city, he had threatened the entire globe. There was nowhere to run.

Inside the tower, things weren't that much different. Stark and Banner were running around, trying to repair Jarvis; Pepper was on the phone, getting updates from Happy and the security team; James Rhodes had left to get his orders from his superiors. Captain Rogers, Romanoff and Barton still hadn't come back, but they were on their way.

Her phone rang for a moment, before she hastily accepted the call.

"Hill speaking," she answered. "What is the situation, sir?"

"Brink of panic" came Fury's voice. "We are coordinating with the armies around the world, preparing the field, so to speak. The ship didn't move."

"Well, General Zod gave us 24 hours to find this 'Kal-El,' Maria said. "I can order a search..."

"Forget about Kal-El, Romanoff already knows where he is," Fury answered.

Maria raised her eyebrows, surprised.

"Does she have him?" she asked.

"She said he will meet us tomorrow," Fury said.

That was weird, but she trusted Fury and Romanoff; if they thought the situation was handled, she wouldn't argue.

"What are my orders then, sir?"

"Assemble the Avengers. We are going airborne."

The doors of the Kryptonian ship opened to allow his entrance, almost invisible due to the massive blizzard. Clark got in, closing the door, the sounds of the storm dying immediately.

"Dad?" he yelled, too worried to be patient. "Dad?!"

"I'm part of the ship's systems, you don't have to yell," Jor-El said with a smile, appearing behind him.

Clark turned to him.

"Did you hear what happened?" he asked, in no mood for jokes.
Jor-El's smile disappeared as he nodded.

"Did you know Zod was alive?" Clark asked, getting closer.

"No. That was not an outcome I imagined possible."

"What do you mean?"

"Zod assassinated a member of the Council. He organized a coup. And he killed me. There was only one possible sentence for those crimes: the Phantom Zone."

Clark's face must have shown his confusion, because Jor-El continued.

"The Phantom Zone is a subspace plane of existence," he explained. "Another dimension. The Kryptonian people have been using it as a form of containment for criminals for thousands of years. Zod and his people were sentenced to it, after his failed coup."

Clark's eyes lost focus as he thought about what he said.

"But then, how is he here?"

Jor-El shrugged.

"Krypton's explosion probably released him somehow." He walked a few steps, hands behind his back. "That, however, would not be enough to guarantee his survival."

"How so?"

"Krypton was far away from Earth, Kal. Approximately 27.1 light years," his father answered. "Without fuel, food, water… It would be impossible to get here. And that, of course, if they began to travel here just as soon as they were released, which is highly unlikely."

"Then…?"

"The only possibility worth mentioning is that they somehow managed to retrofit the Phantom Zone Projector – the 'gate' that we used to reach the Phantom Zone – into a Phantom Drive." Jor-El looked at Clark. "That is the name I gave to the hyperdrive that I created to power the ship that brought you here. It works, in layman's terms, by bending space; it opens a tear into space, making the ship cross through the Phantom Zone, only to exit in another destination."

"A wormhole," said Clark.

"Yes. Zod's crew must have somehow managed to replicate what I did. It's the only possible way for them to make their way here."

He considered the words for a moment, and approached his father's hologram.

"And now that he is here, what does that mean to us?" he asked.

Jor-El didn't answer immediately. He searched his thoughts, trying to weight the possibilities, attempting to predict Zod's actions; he looked at Clark.

"I don't know," he said, finally.

Clark widened his eyes.
"What do you mean, you don't know?! How much of a threat is he?"

"Kal, I can't answer this precisely. There is much I don't know."

"He killed you! Doesn't that automatically mean he is bad news?"

"But he was also, once, my best friend," Jor-El retorted. "The greatest general Krypton ever had. The sword and shield of our people, that protected us from hundreds of threats, both from inside and outside. A man I once called brother."

Clark couldn't believe this. He didn't come here to ponder if Zod was a bad guy or not; he came here to know how to deal with a threat. And now his father was in doubt if he would even consider him a threat at all.

"So you think he isn't a threat?" Clark questioned, trying to understand.

"I think, son, that you have to decide for yourself after meeting him."

He laughed nervously.

"And if he kills me the same way he killed you? And if after that he decides to destroy Earth 'just because'? What do I do then?"

His father eyed him seriously for a moment; and then, his eyes opened in surprised.

"You are afraid," he concluded, as if amazed by the concept.

Clark laughed even more, almost hysterically.

"Of course I'm afraid!" he pretty much yelled. "There is a general orbiting Earth right now threatening my home! My mother, my friends, they are all at risk here and you are surprised that I'm afraid?!"

Apparently he was surprised, because he didn't answer immediately.

"I am sorry, Kal, I haven't... I didn't consider your feelings about this," He approached and looked at his son in the eyes. "Let me tell you this, however: you do not have to fear anything. You are my son, a member of the House of El, and you are more powerful than you can even imagine. When you realize this, you'll see that you don't need to be afraid of anything ever again."

Clark was so surprised by that answer that he didn't say anything back.

"Follow me, I have a gift for you," said his father, starting to walk.

Numbly, he followed him to another room, where there was a small floating robot.

"This is Kelex," Jor-El said, gesturing to the robot. "Back in Krypton, Kelex was the service robot of the House of El. I uploaded 'her' memories to the command key that I gave you but only now I thought of giving 'her' a body again."

"It is a pleasure to see you grown up, sir," Kelex said, proving the 'her' designation with a woman's voice.

"The pleasure is mine," he answered, almost by reflex.

Jor-El looked at him.
"Raise your left arm, please."

He did so, but almost jumped back when Kelex disintegrated into millions of little metal particles, only to reassemble herself around his arm, taking the form of a gray watch.

"That's... incredible!" he exclaimed, forgetting his problems for a second.

"I'm glad you think so, sir," answered Kelex, the voice vibrating his watch.

Clark gave a little laugh and looked at his father, who was smiling at him. Jor-El got close and raised his arms; if he could, Clark was sure he would've been touching his shoulders. He looked deep into his eyes.

"Son, I am proud of the man you have become. Lara would be too and my only regret is that Zod's coup robbed us the time it would take to load her memories and personality as well," he paused, still looking at Clark without blinking. "Whatever you choose to do, go to Zod or not, you will have my full support. But I want you to know, that if you choose to go, you won't be alone. Kelex, and myself, will be there with you the whole time."

He could almost feel his father's hands on his shoulders, his words filling him with warmth.

"I want you to remember, always: don't be afraid. You are now the head of the House of El and the symbol of the House of El means 'Hope'. Never forget this."

Clark sat at the church's bench, appreciating for a second the emptiness of the place. It was a beautiful church, full of statues and religious decorations, a big crucifix on the altar at the end. The morning sun didn't enter the place, so the lighting was provided by the lit candles and the weak lights on the ceiling.

He was never religious, but the possibility of some peace and quiet was too much to pass right now. Clark needed somewhere to sit down and sort out his thoughts and that little church on Hell's Kitchen seemed like a good place for that.

After talking with Jor-El, Clark went to Smallville; as much as he trusted his biological father's advice, he wanted to hear what his mother had to say. Apparently, great minds did think alike, because she told him something very close to what Jor-El said: to trust himself, and that whatever decision he made, she would support it.

It made him happy to know they would stand with him no matter what, but it didn't help him decide what to do in the least. Should he just go to Zod? Was that a good idea? Or should he try to talk with "humanity" – meaning Natasha Romanoff and SHIELD – and try something else, another plan? Was that a good idea?

"You look troubled, son."

Surprised, Clark looked up; he was deeper in his thoughts than he imagined, to let someone get so close without listening to them. It was a priest, an older man, with gray short hair, dressed in black clothes.

"I'm Father Lantom," he introduced himself with a deep voice, sitting on a bench opposite to his.

"Clark," he said, nodding.

He didn't say anything for a while, looking at the altar.
"I'm surprised the church is this empty today," he noted. "Usually it's the first place people run to when there is a problem."

Clark smiled.

"Only when there is a problem?" he asked.

"Well, you know how it is, there are no atheists on a falling plane," Father Lantom smiled.

He chuckled.

"I think the people of Hell's Kitchen are just more scared about aliens than others," Clark said. "But they are probably praying from home."

"I hope so," the priest said. "I'm afraid we are going to need all the help we can get if this turns ugly like last time."

Father Lantom closed his eyes for a moment, as if praying too, in silence. Clark didn't interrupt, he just kept pondering about what he would do.

"So..." began the priest, opening his eyes and looking at him again. "What ails you, son? Would you like to talk about it?"

Clark looked at the priest.

"I'm not religious, father."

"But I am. And my religion compels me to aid anyone who needs it. So I ask again, what ails you, son?"

Clark sighed, looking down for a moment, deciding; then he turned to the priest again.

"That ship that appeared last night?" he began. "I'm the one they are looking for."

Whatever Father Lantom was expecting, it obviously hadn't been this. His eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up. Clark smiled, sadly; he shouldn't have said anything.

"Do you know... why they want you?" asked Father Lantom after a few seconds.

He shook his head.

"No, but it's probably nothing good," he answered, looking at him. "But... But if there is a chance that I can prevent a war by turning myself in... Even if it's just a chance, shouldn't I take it?"

Father Lantom watched him without saying anything.

"What does your gut tell you?" he asked, finally.

"That Zod can't be trusted," Clark answered, fast. "That he won't keep his promise." He stopped and looked down, sighing. "But I'm not sure the people of Earth can be either."

No answer came from Father Lantom, even after a minute. Clark smiled sadly and got up, turning to the exit.

"Have you ever heard about the crucifixion of Jesus?" Father Lantom's asked, before he could get out.
Clark stopped, turning back to the priest again.

"Of course."

"Let me tell you what I think about this story," he said, getting up with a groan and approaching Clark. "Now, you may not be religious, but you most likely heard about the story of Jesus. Him being the son of God and all that?" Clark confirmed with a nod. "Good. That should save us some time."

He stopped for a moment, gathering his words.

"Most people think that Jesus was a paragon of goodness. The greatest example to follow. A man that never doubted himself and his mission and his faith," he looked at Clark. "In my opinion, they are wrong. I do think that he really is the greatest example to follow and a paragon of goodness too, but not because he never doubted; but because he did."

Father Lantom leaned over a bench.

"You see, the Bible tells that Jesus gathered apostles to spread his teachings. It was the great plan of God, written down since before he was born. And one of those apostles was named Judas. A name that you probably know too."

"The traitor," Clark said.

"Yes. But the thing is, Jesus always knew Judas would betray him. As I said, it was already bound to happen. He knew that even as they sat together to have a last meal. He knew that before he even chose Judas as a disciple; so the question is: knowing this, why did he? Why did he keep Judas as an apostle if he knew he would condemn him to unimaginable suffering and death?"

Clark didn't have an answer.

"Why?" he asked.

"The Bible doesn't say," Father Lantom answered, to Clark's incredulity. "But, I have a theory. I think – and that is my personal opinion - that Jesus did that to give him a chance. A chance to not betray him."

"But he did betray him anyway," Clark retorted after a second. "And Jesus died horribly because of it."

"Well, yes, but Jesus gave him every chance to not do that."

Clark opened his arms, confused; Father Lantom sighed.

"You are looking at it the wrong way. You are looking at it from Judas's point of view; Judas was always going to betray him. It was already written. God knew, Jesus knew. And yet, to try to save him, Jesus still gave him a chance."

He looked at Clark. "Even knowing he would be tortured, even knowing he would die, Jesus chose to give Judas a chance. It was a leap of faith, a tiny bit of hope that maybe, just maybe, he would redeem himself."

*The symbol of the House of El means 'Hope'. Embodied within that hope is the fundamental belief in the potential of every person to be a force for good. That's what you can bring them.*

"Hope…" Clark whispered, the words his father said to him crossing his thoughts.
"Yes, hope," agreed Father Lantom. "Judas, sadly, didn't prove himself to be the man Jesus knew he could be. To Judas, in the end, it made no difference; but to Jesus, it made all the difference in the world. He gave him a chance. That's the important thing."

Clark didn't say anything for a long minute, thinking about what Father Lantom said. Then, he looked at the priest and nodded.

"Thank you."

And he turned to leave, a decision already forming in his mind. When he reached the door, however, Father Lantom's voice echoed in the church.

"That said, Jesus also knew he would rise again on the third day," he mentioned, as Clark looked back. "So, if you are not able to do that and if you are sure that this general is a bad guy, might I point you to yet another story, more of a mythological one… Have you ever heard of the story of the 'Trojan Horse'?"

Natasha looked around, studying the layout of the Helicarrier. SHIELD agents were running around, moving weapons, searching for information, preparing the Quinjets and the helicopters to be launched; Stark was making last minute improvements to his suit, probably trying to shield Jarvis from another cyber-attack; Captain Rogers was looking outside, more than likely forming strategies on his very military brain; Banner was sitting down, introspective, as if controlling himself and, more importantly, the Big Guy; and Clint, as always, had located a high "nest" so he could observe everything from afar.

All in all, it reminded her very much of when Loki appeared, they all together inside a Helicarrier, getting ready to fight an alien threat; because she did think it would come to a fight. No one with peaceful intentions threatened an entire world and simply left after that.

"Romanoff," Fury's voice made itself heard; she turned to see him and Maria Hill approaching. "Where is he?"

Clark Kent. Kal-El. The man both the world and General Zod were looking for. Natasha, however, knew that looking for him was a waste of time. The only places she could find him were his mother's home and his apartment in Hell's Kitchen; and he would only be there to be found if he wanted to. There was also the small fact that they couldn't take him by force even they tried.

Luckily, she didn't think they would have to try. By what she saw of him, he would show up rather than let this man threaten the world.

"He will show up, sir," she said, simply.

Fury sighed, irritated.

"Romanoff, did you even talk to him?" he asked.

"No," and before he or Hill could interrupt, she added: "But there is no need to. He will come, don't worry."

"I am worried! I…"

But before he could finish what he was about to say, an alarm began to sound. Agents and soldiers began to run, rifles prepared; the Avengers got up, running there as well. Without waiting for Fury, she also got up, going to the outside of the Helicarrier, running through the gigantic cannons and
turrets that were aiming at something in the sky. And that's when she looked up and saw him.

Floating in the air, a long red cape swaying with the wind, Clark Kent looked down, clad on a form fitting blue suit with a red "S" on the chest. He completely ignored the soldiers and the Helicarrier weapons aiming at him, as if they weren't any threat, and then said, very calmly:

"I would like to speak to Natasha Romanoff."
Chapter 11 – Blue Eyed Herald

Zod stood watch in front of the big window on the ship's bridge, motionless, staring at the big blue world that took most of the view. There was no discernable emotion on his face; inside his mind, however, the story was another. Longing, sadness, envy… Most people never realized what they had until they had lost it, but Zod was one of the few who knew precisely what Krypton meant and he gave everything he had to save it. Only to fail.

From before he was even born, Zod was already destined to be Krypton's military leader. The sword and the shield of his world. His genes carried all the traces to make him the most capable soldier of all his people; strength, speed and power, of course, but also the intelligence and the capability to lead and inspire. And he was trained, since he could remember, to excel at his role.

And he had excelled at being Krypton's highest commander. His home was safe under his protection and the protection of the army he had trained. But how do you protect a people who actively pursue its own destruction? Krypton didn't perish because of an unstable core; that was only the last blow. Krypton perished because it was led by a Council of cowardly fools, so blind, arrogant and scared that they chose to ignore a threat rather than do something. And by doing that, doomed their people to extinction.

Well, maybe not; not if Zod had anything to say about it, at least. Because even if they didn't have a planet anymore, even if they were the last Kryptonians alive, there was still a chance; as long as the Codex survived, there was the possibility to start over. A chance to make things better than they were before, to cleanse the corrupt bloodlines who destroyed their planet. And he would see to it.

Fate had led them to Earth, Zod could see it now. The Long Search ended when a beacon was lit, illuminating the path in the dark space. How else could he explain the fact that his ship had caught the energy signature of an Infinity Stone of all things and, soon after, the distress signal of one their lost ships? How else could he explain that, not long after they started to travel in that direction, the distress signal of the ship stopped, under the authority of a command key with the House of El signature?

There was only one member left from the House of El: Kal-El. The son of the man he once called his best friend; the man whose death was on his hands and his conscience. The one to whom Jor-El had entrusted his people's salvation, the Growth Codex, the genetic register of all Kryptonian people; the one thing he needed to save his race.

Kal-El would either stand by his side or stand under his boot. There was no alternative. It pained him to kill Jor-El; and he was sure it would pain him to kill his friend's son. But as always, Krypton came first. He hoped Kal-El could see it.

"General, they are amassing their forces as we wait," said Faora-Ul, his sub-commander, from behind him.

"Are they?" Zod asked, without turning.

"Yes, sir. It won't make a difference, of course, but I found something I think it might interest you."
He turned to look at her, knowing by now that if Faora had found something she considered worth his attention, it was because it was. She guided him to the monitor of liquid geo and played a footage. It was an attack against Earth, a battle in the middle of one of their cities.

"It appears the humans repelled an attack made not too long ago by an Asgardian. The youngest son of Odin: Loki Odinson," she explained, as Zod analyzed the battle.

He smiled.

"The Asgardians have fallen low indeed if they can't even defeat a primitive race," he said.

Faora shook her head.

"Apparently, Loki betrayed Asgard; he was the only Asgardian involved in this attack. He was leading an army of Chitauri."

She touched the metal particles and they reassembled themselves on a bigger image of a Chitauri. Zod raised an eyebrow.

"What would the Chitauri be doing on Earth?" he asked, curious.

Zod was no stranger to the reptilian race. Long ago, for unknown reasons, the Chitauri had deemed prudent to invade and try to take a portion of Kryptonian space; Zod had shown them what meant to challenge Krypton. His army had dealt a swift and brutal blow against them, dealing so much damage that he thought them extinct until now.

"It seems that after being defeated by us, the Chitauri crawled to Sanctuary, asking for power in exchange of servitude."

He shook his head; dealing with Thanos never ended well to anybody but Thanos.

"I presume Thanos is responsible for this change in them?" he asked, pointing to the cybernetic enhancements that covered their bodies. "Not much of an improvement if they couldn't defeat even the humans."

"The humans were overwhelmed, however," clarified Faora. "They would be no match to the Chitauri and the Asgardian if not for a single group."

She touched the metal again, making it reshape itself in the form of six people.

"They call themselves 'The Avengers'," she continued. "They are the only reason this world was not taken." She looked at him with her cold blue eyes. "I'd like to meet them."

Zod smiled. It didn't bode well for them if Faora had taken an interest.

"Keep an eye on them," he ordered. "We'll wait 24 hours for Kal-El; that's 24 hours for the humans to move. And if these Avengers are their champions, they will probably be at the center of it all."

"Yes, sir."

Clark looked down, studying the group of people under him. The huge weapons of the Helicarrier had moved to aim at him; the rifles of the soldiers and the agents were pointed at him as well. He could see the apprehension on their faces, as if they thought he would attack at any moment.

Standing together with them, but visibly separated from the soldiers and agents, were the
Avengers. Captain America, clad in his blue suit and carrying his shield; Tony Stark, wearing his famous red armor, but without the helmet; Bruce Banner, standing close, with a normal shirt and pants, holding his glasses as if he were a complete harmless civilian; Clint Barton, with his bow on his hands, eyeing him with incredible focus; and finally, the only Avenger he had formally met, Natasha Romanoff, looking at him with a cool gaze.

For a whole minute, nobody said anything and nobody moved; the tension grew, as Clark expected someone to say something in response. That's when he saw someone approaching, a man with a long black coat and an eye patch. The group of people parted to allow passage and he stopped right under Clark.

"Alright, you have our attention," he said, finally, after staring at him for a few seconds. "You can come down. Slowly."

Following his instructions, Clark hovered down, very slowly to not startle them. The guns of the soldiers followed his every move until his feet touched the ground. Nobody approached him; it was if there was a force field around him, making impossible to anyone get closer. So he did.

As he stepped closer, everyone but Fury and the Avengers stepped back; the metallic noise of the guns was the only sound. He stopped, eyeing the people in front of him, trying to look as inoffensive as possible; it really wasn't working. Thinking of how to put them at ease, Clark looked around, until he found what he was looking for on the belt of a soldier: a handcuff.

He extended his arms, slowly, and put them together, offering his wrists.

"Go ahead, cuff me, I don't mind," he said.

The soldier with the cuffs took a second to realize he was talking to him; at which point he looked startled to the man with the eye patch. He nodded, giving permission. Very carefully, as if he was approaching an unrestrained lion, the soldier stepped closer, switching the rifle in his hands for the handcuffs. When he was almost by Clark's side, his trembling hands twitched and the handcuffs fell down.

Everybody was frozen, as if the man had just cut the wrong wire in an armed bomb; Clark almost sighed. He knew these people would be scared because of the whole situation, but he didn't think it would be this bad.

To his surprise, however, someone did sigh in his place; he looked up to see Natasha losing her patience and approaching with fast steps, taking the handcuffs from the ground and cuffing in one go.

"Follow me," she said, turning around and walking back inside.

Clark gave a look to the man who appeared to be in charge, as if asking permission, and followed her, the soldiers breaking from their paralysis to escort him. Well, at least things were progressing, he thought.

Tony Stark wouldn't say that remembering people's faces was a talent he had. Despite his fast mind and excellent memory, he met so many people during the course of one day that they all blurred together. But sometimes he met a person who stood out, someone who wasn't just an employee, a starstruck fan or a random passerby.

So when he looked up to the sky, adrenalin high on his body because of the alarm sounding and all the people running, he was surprised to notice something familiar about the floating man wearing a
red cape up in the sky; which, of course, was ludicrous, because the only person he knew that still used a red cape was Thor and that was clearly not him.

It bothered him so much that he wasn't remembering where he had saw that man's face that his brain had even managed to ignore the most pressing questions that he should be asking; like, how the hell was that man floating? What exactly was he wearing? How had he found the Helicarrier, if the cloaking device was supposed to make it invisible?

All that was thrown to the back of his mind as the man floated down and landed, offering his arms to be cuffed, and he used the situation to try to get a better look; still nothing. The rookie soldier approached him with the handcuffs and dropped them, making everybody freeze in fear; and still nothing.

But when Natasha Romanoff sighed and walked over to him, not a sign of fear on her body language, his mind suddenly clicked.

The man on the party. The one who had tricked Barton. The one who Natasha seemed to know and the one who danced with her, to the astonishment of all present. The one who started the so curious conversation about A.I's with him and Bruce. Clark Kent, if he remembered right.

Eyes widening, he looked at Natasha, only to see her shaking her head very softly at Barton; it seemed he too had remembered and was just instructed to stay silent. Looking around, he could see Bruce's and Cap's eyes glint with recognition as well.

No one said anything, not if Natasha had decided to keep her mouth shut. Tony wasn't exactly the biggest fan of keeping secrets, but even he knew when it was time to be quiet and this seemed like a perfect one. Even then, he wondered how did Natasha know Mr. Kent, or, more accurately, how exactly did she know an alien?

That's when his mind clicked for the second time: the man holding the oil rig! The one he had helped her to find. He almost slapped himself for not connecting the dots earlier. It was so obvious! She knew him because she tracked him down earlier. She hadn't shared anything about her search with him, no matter how much he begged, but it was clear that she had found him, assessed if he was a threat and apparently decided he wasn't.

Was that why she didn't say anything? Did Fury know? Probably. But somehow Tony thought that the knowledge of who this alien truly was ended there. For some reason, SHIELD as a whole wasn't aware of his identity, which, frankly, was weird, even though he supposed a spy organization wouldn't be a fan of sharing what they knew even with each other.

Of course all this brought another concern to Tony's mind. He had seen, in that footage Jarvis had found, exactly how powerful Clark Kent was; basically a mini, non-green, Hulk. That meant that the aliens on that ship on orbit were just as strong. The aliens who had a ship capable of hacking every computer in the world and who knows what more; the aliens who had threatened Earth to make sure "Kal-El", who he now knew was really Clark Kent, showed up.

It seemed the day would just get worse and worse…

Clark sat down in the little interrogation room, resting his cuffed arms on the table as Natasha looked at him, also sitting down. It was just like in the movies, with the one-way mirror, the cameras and, of course, the whole crowd watching from the outside, hidden behind the glass.

Well, not hidden from his eyes, obviously, but they didn't know that.
"I like your suit," Natasha said, suddenly, tracing her eyes slowly from his boots to his face; he controlled himself not to blush.

"Um, thank you," he said, as she gave him a little smirk. "It's a typical Kryptonian skinsuit. It's made to be very resistant."

"Easy on the eyes too."

"Well, that's the first time someone said that to me."

She smiled and looked down, her eyes stopping at his cuffed hands.

"Why did you let me handcuff you?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"Wouldn't be much of a surrender if I resisted. And if this makes them feel more secure... Then all the better for it."

Natasha leaned on the table, a serious expression on her face.

"Why are you surrendering to Zod?" she inquired.

Clark shook his head.

"I'm surrendering to mankind," he corrected her. "There is a difference."

She was in silence for a few seconds, apparently considering what he had said to her, then she looked at him again, another smirk on his face; he held a sigh.

"What does the 'S' stand for?" she questioned.

He smiled.

"It's not an 'S'," he explained. "It's the symbol of the House of El. On my world, it means 'Hope'."

Natasha gave him an impressed look that soon changed into another smirk.

"Well, here it's an 'S'," she countered. "How about Sup..."

There was screeching noise when someone talked on the intercom.

"Hi, my name is..."

"Alexander Goodwin Pierce, I know," Clark completed, looking at the one-way mirror; there was a collective surprise gasp of the people on the other side. "I can see your ID tag in your breast pocket, along with a half-charged cellphone and a pair of glasses on your hand." He stopped for a second, letting what he said sink in, then added: "I can also see the squad of soldiers in the next room, preparing that tranquilizing agent of yours. You won't need it."

He could see by the grimace on their faces that they really didn't want him knowing about that.

"You can't expect us not to take precautions," Pierce explained himself, with a guilty smile. "You could be carrying some kind of alien pathogen!"

"I've been here for all my life, Mr. Pierce. I haven't infected anyone yet," he answered, raising his
"That you know of," said the man with the eye patch, approaching the glass; Director Nicholas Joseph Fury, according to his ID. "Besides, last time I had an alien inside a Helicarrier, things didn't go that well."

Loki, of course. As if things weren't bad enough with Zod, he also had to deal with the fear inherited by the previous, and very recent, alien invasion.

"Precisely!" Pierce agreed. "Now, in the name of trust and the beginning of a peaceful relationship, I must ask that you reveal the identity you've been using on Earth to us."

Clark sighed, tired, looking at Natasha for a second.

"Okay, let's put our cards on the table."

He got up and broke the handcuffs on his wrists as if they were made of wet paper; everyone in the other room, from soldiers to Pierce and even the Avengers, stepped back, as if by instinct. He approached the one-way mirror and stopped there, gazing at them. He looked serious to Fury and Pierce, wanting to make this very clear to both of them.

"You're scared of me because you can't control me," he said, staring at them without blinking. "You don't, and you never will. But… that doesn't mean I'm your enemy."

Fury got closer from the glass.

"Then who is? Zod?" he asked.

Clark sighed and, reluctantly, nodded.

"That's what I'm worried about."

He and Fury kept their eyes on each other, until Fury said:

"Be that as it may, the World Security Council gave me orders to hand you over to him."

Clark looked down for a moment, already resigned but, even so, a little bit hurt by the expected decision.

"Do what you have to do, Director."

"Sir, that's the wrong decision," Natasha complained.

A few seconds after Fury had told Clark they would be handing him over to Zod, she left the room and went to talk to Fury. They were in another room, alone, as he checked the updates he received from SHIELD.

"Wrong or not, it's the Council's decision, Romanoff," Fury answered.

"I recognize the Council has made a decision, but given that's it's a stupid-ass decision, I would think you would've elected to ignore it," she retorted.

Fury stopped what he was doing when he heard his own words being thrown back at his face and looked at Natasha.
"Why do you think Pierce is here, Romanoff?" he asked. "Officially, he is here to help 'build relations' with the Kryptonians. Non-officially, he is here to make sure I hand Kal-El to Zod," he sighed. "The Council is afraid of another attack. And I can't really blame them."

"And do you think that this will stop it?" she questioned.

He didn't look at her for a second.

"No. No, I don't."

Natasha leaned on his table.

"This General threatened the whole world. He didn't need to do that if all he wanted was to find Kal-El," she said. "But he did and that is very telling of his personality. If we comply with this demand, he will have another and another and when he gets tired from this little game he will attack anyway. That's typical terrorist behavior."

"That's what I said," Fury answered. "But you know exactly how the Council is when they think they know best. Which is always."

"What about Pierce?" she insisted. "Can't he help?"

"I've tried," said Pierce, catching the last part of the conversation as he entered the room. "I advised for a preemptive attack. They declined." He closed the door and walked closer. "They don't want to imagine the possibility of another 'Incident' but no matter how we try to explain to them that ignoring the situation won't do any good, they keep ignoring it."

"They didn't want to fire a nuke at the ship? That's a first," Natasha added the second part almost inaudibly.

"No, and for once I agree with them," said Fury. "We don't know what that ship can do. The nukes might not even hit it or, if they do, they might not even scratch it. Or they could be stopped by some form of defense. Hell, for all we know they could turn them back at us."

That was a terrifying thought; she had enough of nuclear warheads for a lifetime, hopefully.

"Miss Romanoff," said Pierce, getting her attention "I understand you were the one who found our resident alien?"

And ate pie with his mother, she added mentally; time for the cover story she had built with Fury then.

"Not exactly," she answered. "I was, as you probably know, sent to find him. I never managed to do it, however; he found me first."

He looked at her and she felt as if he was assessing the veracity of her story.

"And what can you tell me about Kal-El?"

"He seems to be a good man," she said. "Certainly not a threat. Which is the opposite of what I can say about General Zod."

"You seem to trust him," he observed.

Natasha met his eyes.
"I trust nobody," she stated. "But I know when someone is a threat or not."

He held her stare for a moment and then smiled.

"That's good to know." He turned to Fury. "Nick, the Council won't change their minds on this. We'll have to hand them Kal-El."

Fury sighed and completed the thought:

"And prepare ourselves for what happens later."

Clark was left alone in the interrogation room when Natasha left behind Fury and Pierce. He could hear them speaking in the other room, Natasha trying to convince them not to hand him over to Zod and failing; it was a nice gesture on her part, even if she didn't manage to change the final decision.

As he sat there, focusing his senses to hear what was happening, he heard a commotion close by. He looked to the one-way mirror again, seeing the soldiers guarding him in the next room leaving to follow a woman, and then four people appeared, walking fast to the interrogation room: Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Bruce Banner and Clint Barton.

Tony opened the door and entered, not wearing his suit of armor anymore, getting his cellphone for a moment and fidgeting with it.

"Aaand, the cameras are down," he said, putting the cellphone back on his pocket.

Clark looked around for a moment, his enhanced vision confirming that the cameras really were disabled.

"Now we can talk without being bothered, Mr. Kent," Tony added, smiling as he sat down in front of him.

He sighed.

"I guess it was too much to expect you wouldn't recognize me, wasn't it?"

"Well, you are not wearing a mask," Tony answered. "If I were you I would try something like a fake mustache or, I don't know, fake glasses? Maybe a wig."

"I won't wear a wig and a fake mustache," Clark countered.

"Fake nose then?"

"Maybe we should talk about more important matters?" said Dr. Banner, standing close to the table. "Hill can keep them away only for so long."

Clint, leaning against the one-way mirror, seemed to agree.

"Yeah, let's talk about what really happened on that mutant factory," he said, apparently still very much bothered about being tricked.

"This again…" Tony whined, rolling his eyes.

Clark looked at him.

"Mr. Barton, I didn't mean to lie to you. I'm sorry," he apologized. "But you can see now why I did
it. You want to know what really happened? Everything I told you was true, except that it wasn't a
mutant escaping that did all that, it was me getting inside."

"That huge hole on the ceiling? And the steel door too. That was all you?" Clint asked.

"Yeah. All me," and Jessica too, but she didn't have anything to do with that part. "I saw what they
were doing with the people there and I stopped it." He looked serious at Clint again. "I'm sorry I
lied to you, but I did what I had to do to stop those people. And I would do it again."

Clint kept staring at him for a while longer than normal, but then nodded.

"Apology accepted."

"Good call," said Tony. "I mean, I saw how strong Mr. Kent is, I would not pick a fight with him
either."

"What do you mean? How strong is he?" asked Banner, interested.

Tony seemed extremely excited to finally be able to share everything he knew.

"I helped Romanoff find him," he explained, looking at Clint who had just opened his mouth to say
something. "Yeah, she didn't tell anyone about this, not even you, but she needed my help to find
some satellite footage. And you won't believe what I found."

He got up and very theatrically, pointed at Clark.

"This guy here held a collapsing oil rig with his bare hands," he announced. "Are you listening to
this, Bruce? You might not be the strongest guy out there anymore. Clark here held the entire thing
in place so the people could escape the fire and then survived the whole thing exploding and
falling on him." He turned to Barton. "So, yeah, Legolas, if I were you, I wouldn't waste my arrows
on this one."

Tony's announcement had the very reaction he was expecting, apparently: complete and utter
shock. Clark didn't exactly know where to look now, as everybody in the room stared at him with
mouths agape, astonished with what he did; he was beginning to feel a bit uncomfortable.

"Is every member of your race this strong?" asked Steve, talking for the first time since he got
there.

Clark nodded.

"When we are under a yellow sun, yes."

Captain America looked worried now, no doubt turning his thoughts to Zod.

"But how?" asked Banner, when he was able to speak again.

"We evolved to be able to harvest solar energy," he explained. "Our world, Krypton, was too
inhospitable. Cold, high gravity, little food… So the living organisms found a way to thrive by
absorbing sunlight and using that energy. Krypton's sun, however, was very old, very weak; this
one is not. The more energy our cells absorb, the more strength we have."

As he said this, the door opened again, and Natasha entered the room; he already knew she was
coming, but the others turned surprised.

"What are you talking about, boys?" she asked, as if they were in a party instead of an interrogation
Bruce turned to her, his enthusiastic face showing his amazement at Clark's biology.

"Clark was telling us some things about his abilities. How he gets strong when absorbing sunlight," he explained.

"Oh, yes, I know. Like a solar panel" she said, and Clark almost rolled his eyes remembering Jessica.

"No," Bruce said, to their surprise. He got up, incredibly excited about something. "That's the thing, it's not like a solar panel at all. A solar panel absorbs sunlight and converts it to electricity, that's all it does. But the things he can do? Holding an oil rig, flying, surviving an explosion... That would take a lot more energy than he could possibly absorb by sunlight alone. He isn't using the energy from the sun, he is using the sunlight to generate energy!"

Apparently, the only one there who had understood exactly what Bruce meant was Tony, because his face was in awe just as Banner's.

"Your cells are not a solar panel, they are more like a nuclear reactor," he explained. "Your body is not using the sunlight energy; it is using the sunlight to produce a vastly superior amount of energy. Something similar to the nuclear fusion that powers the sun! Your body is pretty much a star on its own. Only it requires the sunlight of another to produce energy."

Clark raised his eyebrows in amazement; it was weird, however, that he apparently knew less about his own body than Tony and Bruce.

"As amazing as this is," said Natasha, calling his attention "let's focus on the immediate threat, shall we?" She looked at him. "I talked to Fury, told him about Zod, but it was no use. The Council ordered us to hand you over."

"I know, I heard," he answered, to the surprise of the people in the room. "Thank you for trying, though, it means a lot."

"What's the deal with this Zod guy, anyway?" asked Clint, suddenly. "Is he like your Loki? Hates your guts and all that?"

Clark shrugged.

"I don't know," he answered. "I've never met him. Like I told Natasha, I was born on a planet called Krypton, but because of an unstable core, the planet was in the imminence of exploding. My parents knew that, so they put me on a ship and sent me here so I could survive. I was just a baby, I didn't even know what I was until recently."

They listened to what he said with somber faces.

"Your home...?" asked Steve.

He shook his head.

"Gone. And I thought I was the only survivor left until last night."

It wasn't surprising to see Steve's face change into a sad expression when he told them this; most people reacted like that, like everyone in the room did. But it was surprising, however, to see understanding in his face. Maybe it shouldn't be, Clark thought, because if anyone in this planet
knew what was like to lose his old world, that person was Steve Rogers.

"I am sorry for your loss," he said, mirrored by the others; Clark murmured a 'thank you'.

There was a moment of silence, when everybody reflected on what Clark had said.

"So you were raised on Earth?" asked Clint.

"Yes. Didn't know I was an alien until my father showed me the spaceship I arrived in," he smiled. "I found out more about my race after I stole that ship on Ellesmere Island."

"What ship?" asked Tony, alarmed.

"The Canadian army found it and they were trying to study it with the help of the American army. It was buried in ice for 20.000 years," Natasha answered. "That's why Fury tasked me to find him."

"Anyway, what I can tell you about Zod is what I learned from the command key my father sent with me," Clark continued. They looked at him expectantly. "Like I said, Krypton was doomed. There was no way to save it. My father, one of Krypton's brightest scientists, knew this and took steps to try to save me. On that day, General Zod, the highest military commander on Krypton, organized a coup, trying to overthrow the Council and take control of the planet."

"But why?" asked Steve.

"To try to save what he could, I suppose. But to do it on his terms," Clark said. "Which meant saving only the ones he deemed worthy to save and changing the culture to fit what he thought better." He stopped for a second, choosing his words. "It didn't work very well for him. He was stopped and sentenced to a place called Phantom Zone."

"Phantom Zone?" asked Tony, clearly interested.

"It's another dimension, in simple terms, that the Kryptonians used to hold its most dangerous criminals. But they didn't consider the chance that Krypton's explosion could damage the Phantom Zone Projector, the 'gate' to the Phantom Zone, and release him and his men."

"But even if he was released, why would he come here?" asked Steve, approaching him. "Why would he be after you? And, more importantly, how would he know you are here?"

Clark looked at him.

"I don't know what he wants with me or Earth, but I do have an idea of how he managed to find out I was here."

There was a curse in Russian by his side and everybody turned to look at Natasha; she was staring at Clark, her face serious.

"The Tesseract?" she asked.

"Wow, wow, wow… Just hold on!" exclaimed Clint. "What does that thing has to do with this?"

Natasha held her stare on Clark for a second, and then turned to Clint.

"I think I'll let Clark explain this one."

Clark gathered his words for a moment.
"Most people think that before the Big Bang, before our universe exploded into existence, there was nothing," he began, remembering what his father had told him. "They are wrong. The Big Bang may have been the start of our universe, but it wasn't the start of everything; to our universe begin, another ended."

He looked at the Avengers, some enraptured in his words, others tense.

"In the previous universe there were 6 singularities. And when that universe ended to give place to ours, the remnants of these singularities were forged into concentrated gems, each one of them holding an aspect of creation itself: the Infinity Stones."

"How?" interrupted Tony, gesturing frenetically. "How could there have been something before the Big Bang itself? And if that's true, how could things from there pass on to our universe? It doesn't make any sense!"

Clark didn't understand it either.

"I have no idea. But you would probably be shocked to know that the Infinity Stones weren't the only things that crossed over. There were living beings too. Your friend, Thor, would probably know better, but the race we call Dark Elves in the mythology really existed at some point. They made their home in one of the 9 Realms overseen by Asgard, named Svartalfheim; but before making their home there, they lived in the previous universe. The one that existed before the Big Bang."

Tony and Bruce were staring at him with wide eyes; Natasha had an interested look; Steve looked a little lost and amazed at the same time; Clint, however, looked impatient.

"Alright, but what about the Tesseract?" he asked. "What does it have to do with any of this?"

"It has to do with this because the Tesseract is the container of one of the Infinity Stones, the Space Stone," Clark explained. "You thought the Tesseract was an energy source, a way to build stronger weapons. It can be, but it is also much more than that. The Tesseract is one of the 6 most powerful relics in the entire universe. There is more power inside one of those Stones than we can possibly imagine. And SHIELD, apparently, made experiments with it without even knowing what it was."

He met the eyes of every Avenger in the room, trying to convey the gravity of what happened.

"The energy the Tesseract released when they messed with it was so powerful that it probably crossed the universe. They lit a beacon that lead to Earth. It was this energy that activated the dormant Kryptonian ship in the ice and it was probably this energy and the ship's distress signal that alerted Zod."

The effect his words had on them was visible. They were visibly tense, scared and, most of all, pissed.

"I warned Fury, didn't I?" Tony said, talking to himself. "I said a nuclear deterrent wouldn't solve anything. I know from experience. And what does SHIELD do? They find a blue rock they don't even know what it is and try to make weapons of it."

"And now we have another war on our hands..." Steve sighed. He looked at Clark. "What do you think? I know you don't know Zod, but do you think he will attack?"

Clark was thinking for almost a minute.

"I don't know what Zod wants, but no one that threatens innocent people can be harmless, no
matter their reason," he answered, finally. He looked at Steve. "I will go to him if that's what he requires for peace, I will listen to what he has to say. But no, Captain, I don't think for a second Zod intends to keep his word and leave in peace."

"Is he a risk to you?" asked Barton, from all people, looking at him with something resembling worry.

Clark's expression hardened.

"He killed my father," he said and everybody looked at him in shock; he didn't meet their eyes, controlling his anger, and looked at Clint. "So, yes, I'll probably be in danger."

"And you are going anyway?!" exclaimed Steve, approaching him.

He gave Steve a smile.

"You guys almost sacrificed yourselves when Loki invaded. You almost gave your lives to save the planet. I don't have the right to do anything less, not when I have the chance to help."

Steve kept looking at him in silence, but he could see something else in Captain America's eyes now: respect.

"So there is going to be a fight then?" Tony asked, looking as if he had aged 20 years. "Damn it."

"I'll do what I can to prevent it," Clark said "but I would be prepared for one."

There was the sound of many steps approaching the room.

"There is someone coming," Clark warned.

A few seconds later, Fury and Pierce arrived with a group of soldiers, entering the room. Fury looked at him and he could almost see the regret in his eye.

"It's time," he said. "We contacted Zod and gave him the coordinates for the pickup. We've prepared a Quinjet."

Clark nodded and got up.

"Let's go then," he said, following them out of the room.

He heard a lot of steps behind him.

"Yep, let's go," said Stark, walking to his side alongside the rest of the Avengers. "We'll escort you there."

And before anyone could complain about anything, the soldiers around him were replaced by the Avengers as they went to the Quinjet. Clark didn't know what was going to happen, but he felt a lot better now.

They stood on the edge of a military base in the middle of the desert, waiting. There was nothing around for miles and miles, a perfect place to avoid any innocents from getting caught in the middle of a crossfire, in the event things went bad.

Behind Clark, SHIELD and the American troops made a barrier, with armed soldiers, tanks, helicopters and Quinjets. In front of them, making a line of their own, the Avengers stood in all
their glory, all of them clad in their respective suits. Only Natasha stood a few meters forward, waiting by Clark's side. There was a tense silence in the air.

"Thank you," Clark said, suddenly, looking at Natasha.

She turned to him.

"For what?" she asked.

"For believing in me. For trying to stop them."

Natasha gave him a bitter smile.

"Didn't make much of a difference in the end."

Clark looked in her eyes.

"It did to me."

As he said that, there was a sound in the sky, like something big and fast had just entered the atmosphere. Everybody looked up.

"They are coming. You should go back now," Clark said, every muscle in his body tensing.

Natasha hesitated for a moment, but complied, going back to join the Avengers a few meters back. The dark gray ship came down from the sky with amazing velocity, almost touching the ground as it hovered in his direction, lifting the desert dust. It stopped suddenly, opening its flaps like four bug wings, turning in air and finally landing, its engines making his cape sway.

A ramp extended down, touching the ground, and two people got out of the ship. Both of them were women, going by the shape of their bodies, and both of them were completely covered in a black Kryptonian skinsuit and a black Kryptonian armor, complete with a skull like helmet and a breathing device; one of them, the one who stayed close to the ship, was holding some kind of weapon.

The other woman, however, was unarmed and kept walking without hesitation in Clark's direction, her black cape dancing to her moves, until she stopped in front of him; as she did it, her breathing device retracted inside her armor and her helmet lost its black color, becoming transparent and allowing him to see her face.

She was a very beautiful woman, with short dark hair, red full lips and the most piercing blue eyes he had ever seen. Her blue eyes looked at him, going all the way up from his feet, drinking every detail, until they stopped on his face. Clark felt extremely uncomfortable. Not because of what she did; Natasha had done the same thing earlier and it only embarrassed him a little.

But because her eyes, as beautiful as they were, seemed colder than ice. She had the eyes of a predator.

"Kal-El," she said, suddenly, her voice carrying almost no emotion at all. "I'm sub-commander Faora-Ul. On behalf of General Zod, I extend you his greetings."
The Prodigal Son

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Chapter 12 – The Prodigal Son

"Kal-El. I'm sub-commander Faora-Ul. On behalf of General Zod, I extend you his greetings."

Unsure of what to answer and still very bothered by the unblinking blue eyes of the Kryptonian woman in front of him, Clark just nodded in response; Faora didn't seem concerned by it.

Instead, she just moved her eyes to look behind him and, without even bothering to say anything, walked past him.

"The Avengers," she stated, with the same emotionless voice, watching the line they had made a few meters from the soldiers. "Word of your deeds has reached beyond this planet."

"That's us alright," said Stark, his helmet open to look at her. "Intergalactic heroes and all that."

"Stark," Steve said, before he could go off on a tangent, and turned to look at Faora. "On behalf of the people of Earth, we welcome you," he stared at her eyes. "As long as your intentions remain peaceful."

There was an almost imperceptible smile in Faora's lips. She didn't say anything to Steve, turning her eyes to look at Fury behind them.

"Are you the one in command here?" she asked, suddenly, her voice a little more forceful.

Fury, stepping forward until he was together with the Avengers, answered:

"I am."

"General Zod would like this woman," she declared, pointing at Natasha with all her authority "to accompany me."

There was a sudden silence on the desert, while everyone present processed what she had just said. Natasha raised a single eyebrow and stared back at the Kryptonian, but didn't say anything; the rest of the people, Avengers and soldiers, could only look in stunned silence, as if unsure of what to do.

Before Clark could even open his mouth to object, however, Clint stepped in front of her.

"You asked for Kal-El," he said, not even pretending to play nice. "You didn't say anything about one of our own."

Agreeing with Clint, the Avengers also stepped forward, not blocking Natasha from view, but making their stance very clear on this matter.

Faora, barely acknowledging them, held her stare.

"Should I tell the General you are unwilling to comply?" she asked.

"I don't care what you tell him," Clint answered, short and to the point.

For a moment there, Faora just looked at him, her piercing blue eyes fixed as if in a challenge.
Nobody moved, nobody said anything, but it was clear as day that no one would just surrender Natasha to her; at least not without a fight.

Clark was tense, just waiting to see what Faora would do now that she was denied, ready to jump between them if she did any sudden moves; what he didn't expect, and apparently no one else did as well, was Natasha making the sudden move, stepping forward.

"It's okay," she said, when Clint and Steve moved too, ready to intercept her. "I'll go."

She looked at Clark's eyes for a split second, as if trying to convey some message; Clark didn't need more than that to understand it. She thought she could help him. He didn't know how or if this was even a good idea at all, but he felt very grateful nonetheless.

With one last look to Fury, as if confirming with him if that was really okay, and one last look to the very tense Avengers, to guarantee that they wouldn't try anything stupid, Natasha started to walk, following Faora and Clark to the ship. Clark almost expected Clint to follow them, feeling, even without turning to see, how against this idea he was; and the others, Tony, Steve and Bruce, wouldn't be much behind him if they considered, even for a second, that Natasha didn't want to be exactly where she was, SHIELD and the army be damned.

But they didn't follow, choosing to trust Natasha's decision and soon they were inside the ship; without delay, they took off, rising almost vertically to the sky.

Clark used the quiet time they had to look around. Despite the position of the ship and the high velocity they were going, Clark and Natasha felt as if they were in a normal room; no turbulence, no movement at all, it was like standing on the ground. The ship was barely illuminated, not really a problem to Kryptonians, but Natasha was probably finding everything awfully dark. Even so, there wasn't much to look at, the ship being simply a big container for transport.

Faora, after checking in on them one last time, went upstairs, disappearing from view; Clark took his chance. Taking his hidden command key, he placed it in Natasha's hand as carefully as he could, never saying one word so he couldn't be heard by the other Kryptonians and their enhanced senses. Natasha looked at him questionably, probably recognizing the object he showed her on his farm; he shook his head, giving all the answer she needed, so she hid it, right at the moment Faora came back holding something.

"The atmospheric composition in our ship is not compatible with humans," she explained to Natasha, approaching. "You will need to wear a breather beyond this point."

And, saying that, she placed a metal collar around Natasha's neck, that immediately extended into a transparent helmet to cover her head, just like the one Faora was using.

The flight didn't take long at all. After a few minutes, Clark could see Zod's ship, Black Zero, orbiting Earth. A gate opened so they could enter and metal arms came to hold the ship down; soon, they were out, following Faora to the ship's bridge.

The first thing Clark saw when they arrived in the ample space was a huge window, taken in its majority by the sight of Earth and the sun. Monitors of liquid geo surrounded the place, showing all kinds of information; 11 Kryptonians were in the room, most of them wearing only a black skinsuit, some with armors on top of it, all looking at them.

And of course, standing by the window and looking down at Earth, was General Zod himself; the man who murdered his father, the man who was threatening his home. He tried very hard to keep his expression blank.
When they arrived closer, he turned, and walked to them.

"Kal-El!" he greeted. "You have no idea how long we've been searching for you."

Zod was as tall as he was, with a muscled build covered by an intimidating black armor. He had short dark hair, a goatee and a big scar on the left side of his face. His most distinctive feature, however, was his eyes: calculating, intelligent, as if they were capable of looking at someone and see everything there was to see.

His vision blurred for a second, while he was looking at Zod.

"I take it you are Zod," he said, the words hard to articulate for some reason.

The sun glare hit his face and, instead of the usual comforting heat it always brought him, it made his eyes hurt; what the hell was happening to him?

"General Zod!" corrected Faora, for the first time displaying some emotion as she glared at him. "Our commander…"

Zod was quick to placate her.

"It's alright, Faora," he said, looking at her and then back at Clark, with a smile. "We can forgive Kal any lapses in decorum. He's a stranger to our ways. This should be cause for celebration, not conflict."

Not conflict, not conflict…

Clark barely understood anything he said, the world starting to spin around him, Zod's words ringing in his ears. He felt sick, or what he imagined someone sick would be feeling at least; drained from energy, body aches, difficulty to breathe… The sun glare hit his eyes again, the brightness feeling like a dagger in his head.

"I… feel… strange," he said, beginning to cough. Natasha approached him, her eyes passing fast, trying to find out what was wrong with him. "Weak…”

Suddenly, his legs couldn't support him anymore; he stepped back, trying to regain his balance, but it was useless. He fell on his knees and then on all fours, blood spilling from his mouth and nose on the ground.

"What is happening to him?" he heard Natasha ask as he tried to clean the blood from his face.

The blood wouldn't stop coming out.

"He is rejecting our ships atmospherics," Zod explained, his voice perfectly calm.

"Clark," he heard Natasha exclaim, as she kneeled by his side.

Everything was blurred and the sounds were barely recognizable anymore.

"You've spent a lifetime adapting to Earth's ecology but you never adapted to ours," Zod completed.

"Help him!" demanded Natasha.

"I can't. Whatever's happening to him has to run its course."
His whole body was shaking now, his breath hitched. His muscles failed him and he couldn't support himself anymore, his face hitting the ground as he fell. He could hear Natasha's voice far away as he began to drift to unconsciousness.

He awoke with the feeling of grass on his face.

"Hello Kal," he heard General Zod's voice calling. "Or do you prefer Clark? That's the name they gave you, isn't it?"

Clark got up fast, his body responding to him normally, and looked around; he wasn't in the Kryptonian ship anymore. He was at his farm, surrounded by the barn, corn fields, clothes drying, the setting sun on the horizon...

Or at least what looked like his farm.

He looked at Zod in front of him, clad with his black skinsuit and cape, the symbol of his House on his chest.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Zod smiled.

"Inside your mind, of course," Zod answered. He looked around. "We were an advanced people, Kal. Technology like this existed for a long time."

"For what purpose?" Clark asked, buying time as he tried to understand his situation.

"Sharing information and memories, training, learning… We used this to learn Earth's languages when we arrived."

"That's how you're speaking English?" Clark questioned.

Zod's smile widened.

"We are not speaking English. We are speaking Kryptonian."

Whatever Clark was going to say was stuck on his own throat; he was right. But how?

"A little gift for you, Kal," Zod explained. "You still have much to learn about your culture" He approached. "Let me show you something."

And with that, the farm around them began to spin fast, the shapes and colors blurring until nothing could be seen. Then, when it stopped, it wasn't Earth around them anymore: it was Krypton.

Clark could only look around, amazed, as his eyes saw his home planet for the first time in his life. He obviously knew Krypton was a different planet, with a different atmosphere and ecology, but even then he hadn't realized how alien everything would be. Silly of him, of course, but those were his first thoughts about Krypton, as he compared it to Earth.

The sky was deeply red, because of Krypton's sun, Rao, making everything look as if the planet was under a perpetual twilight; he could see two moons on it, a little one that seemed far away, and a closer, bigger one, that was apparently broken into pieces. There were mountains everywhere he looked, covering the horizon, countless towers built on them; the very geography of the planet seemed to be artificially built, making the environment bend to their will.
The city, with too many towers to see, was built on those artificially molded mountains. Cut and shaped as if they were the waves of a sea, these mountains were the base of the whole city, the buildings coming out directly from them, going as far as Clark's eyes could see. And that seemed to be just one level of the city, because under the stone waves, visible by the spaces between them, the city went on, all the way to the ground; which meant that the place they were right now was built so high that the clouds were closer than the earth.

"This was Kandor," said Zod, as Clark watched impressed. "Krypton's greatest city. And, by the end, our only city."

He turned to Zod.

"Why?" he asked. "One city for an entire planet?"

"To spare resources," Zod explained. "And since the size of the population was carefully maintained, there was no need for more cities. Don't let it fool you, Kandor was huge: it housed approximately 1.4 billion people."

1.4 billion people in one city… That took Clark's breath away.

"That is… Incredible," he admitted.

Zod smiled.

"Krypton was a jewel in a dark universe, Kal," he said. "The pinnacle of technological advancement, the cultural center out of all intelligent life, the home of a people so great that none could ever hope to measure up to us."

He turned to Clark, raising his hand to show Kandor in all its splendor to him.

"And then, it happened," he said. "The destruction of our planet."

Clark could see far in the horizon a gigantic wall of fire erupt from the earth, reaching all the way up to the sky. The entire planet shook, as the very ground cracked and quaked, everything being devoured by the explosion that annihilated Krypton. Kandor, its countless towers, its stone sea, its people… All swallowed in a red inferno.

Before they could think of moving, it reached them and fire was all Clark could see; and even if it didn't hurt him, he almost felt compelled to scream.

And then it ended. Krypton, the fire, all of that was no longer there. They were standing on the bridge of Zod's ship, Black Zero, right in front of the big window; and everything they could see were the pieces of his planet.

"I tried to prevent this," Zod whispered, after a moment, and Clark heard for the first time emotion in his voice. "I couldn't."

He looked at Clark.

"Krypton was led by a Council so set in its ways that they repeated their actions again and again to the last mistake and called it culture," Zod said, disgust barely concealed. "I warned them of what was coming. Your father warned them. Your mother warned them. We had all the necessary technology to save our race, to begin anew, to look to the stars like our ancestors did. They thought otherwise."
"Why?" Clark asked, his voice low too.

"Fear. Stupidity. Indecision. The Council, with their endless debates of what we should do, led our people to ruin."

"So you rebelled," Clark affirmed.

Zod's expression hardened.

"Yes. I led the Sword of Rao so we could try to save what we could. I did everything in my power to save our civilization and our world and in return for my efforts I and my fellow officers were sentenced to the Phantom Zone. Only to be freed by the destruction of the very thing we were arrested for trying to protect."

The General turned, showing Clark the cryocapsules unfreezing the eleven officers of the Sword of Rao, including a duplicate Zod, just so they could see the fragments of their home flying on empty space.

"We were adrift," Zod continued, as Clark watched his memory duplicate comfort a crying Faora, "destined to float amongst the ruins of our planet until we starved."

"How did you find your way to Earth?" Clark asked, wanting to know if his and his father's theory was correct.

"We managed to retrofit the Phantom Projector into our hyper drive. Your father made a similar modification to the craft that brought your here. And ironically, the instrument of our damnation became our salvation."

He gestured in air, the memories around them changing to show what Zod described, the modification of the Phantom Zone Projector. And then, Black Zero glowing blue for a moment, before disappearing into nothing and reappearing somewhere else.

"We sought out the old colonial outposts, looking for signs of life. "Zod continued, the memories changing to show a dark world, full of Kryptonian's skeletons and abandoned ships. "But all we found was death. Cut off from Krypton, these outposts withered and died long ago. So we salvaged what we could, armor, weapons, even a world engine."

Zod looked at Clark, his eyes unblinking as he stared at Clark.

"For 21 years we prepared, until we finally detected the energy signature of an Infinity Stone," he said, confirming Clark's doubts, "followed by a distress signal of one of our old ships. A distress signal that, soon after, was stopped, under the authority of a command key of the House of El."

General Zod walked to Clark, stopping close to him, the memories around them changing again until they were back at the Kent's farm, Clark wearing an old t-shirt and Zod, very close to him, his dark skinsuit.

"Fate led us here, Kal. To you. And now it's within your power to save what remains from our race."

Natasha looked around, trying to understand what she was seeing. The dark inside of the ship wasn't there anymore, nor were the Kryptonians; she wasn't in the Black Zero, apparently. Instead, she was now in a very familiar, very dreaded place: a very recognizable ballet studio.
She could only watch as the young girls around her danced and danced, non-stop, the practiced movements completely synchronized to one another. For one moment, she felt her blood turn to ice, the memory of that room, of that dancing, taking the air of her lungs.

What was happening?

"Interesting memory," said an emotionless voice she recognized from behind her.

Natasha turned to see Faora in the back of the room, clad only in a black Kryptonian skinsuit, no helmet, no armor, no cape. Her blue eyes didn't even turn to Natasha, glued to the dancing ballerinas in the studio.

"Memory?" Natasha asked, wanting to know what was happening.

Faora turned to her.

"We are in your mind," the Kryptonian woman answered.

She didn't even ask how any of this was possible; it made no difference how, since it was already happening. Probably some kind of advanced alien tech, she supposed. No, how that was happening wasn't as important as why. And Natasha could think of only one reason for someone to look into another person's mind.

"How is Clark?" she asked, trying to gain time.

Faora, that had turned to watch the ballerinas again, looked at her, that blank face of hers conveying no emotion whatsoever.

"You care about Kal-El," she stated, after a few seconds. "Why?"

"It's called empathy," Natasha replied. "I would ask if you know what it is, but I don't think it's necessary."

Faora shrugged, not remotely bothered.

"I understand the concept, it just seems terribly inconvenient. Especially in your line of work."

She made a gesture and Natasha followed her hand to see the ballerinas stopping to dance and opening space in the studio; only two of them remained on the center and one of them was very familiar. Natasha could only watch as her younger self, still a teenager, began to fight the other equally young girl.

Faora walked to her side, but she didn't even look at her, her eyes glued to the graceful but deadly fight in front of her. Her younger self managed to toss the other girl on the floor and wrap her leg around her neck; she raised her head for a second, looking at the older, very elegant, very familiar woman conducting the training and received a nod in answer.

The sound of bones breaking echoed in the room.

"See?" Faora inquired. "Inconvenient."

Natasha tilted her head as if agreeing.

"A little. But I've always managed."

The piercing blue eyes turned to stare at her.
"But have you, really? I think not. Otherwise you wouldn't have betrayed your old employers out of guilt."

She held Faora's stare.

"I betrayed them because they were killing innocent people. Because they were bad people, interested only in self gain. Not because of guilt."

"If you say so," Faora answered. "I just wonder how long will it take until you betray your current employers using a similar excuse."

Natasha didn't like the insinuation one bit, but her face remained carefully calm.

"You mean like you betrayed Krypton and staged a coup?"

For the first time since she had met Faora, Natasha saw some emotion cross her face.

"You speak of things you don't understand. I never betrayed Krypton. My only purpose, the very reason I was created, was to protect it. General Zod and the rest of us were trying to save our civilization."

Natasha held her look without blinking for a few seconds; then she shrugged.

"If you say so."

She wondered for a second if Faora would hit her, such was the intensity of her eyes. But then, without saying anything, she turned and walked to the center of the studio, where the body of the young girl was still laying. Waving her hand, the studio and everything in it began to spin fast, losing itself in a blur of colors, until it finally stopped moving, in another place completely.

The Kent's Farm.

"If it were up to me," Faora began, "I would interrogate you the usual way. It's more fun. But, time is of the essence and you were the one who found him on Earth."

The Kryptonian looked at Natasha and she knew her game was up.

"Now, show me what you know about Kal-El."

"How is it within my power to save my race?" Clark asked, honestly surprised.

Zod got closer from him.

"On Krypton, the birth of every single person was carefully planned. Every child was conceived in a Genesis Chamber, designed to fulfill a predetermined role in our society," he explained. "The genetic template of every being yet to be born is encoded in the registry of citizens. Without it, it is impossible to conceive a child in a Genesis Chamber. Even the colonial outposts, out in space, needed the Codex's direction all the way from Krypton to work."

General Zod stopped very close to Clark.

"Your father stole the registry's codex and stored it in the capsule that brought you here."

Clark's eyes widened; why didn't his father tell him this? Was it actually possible to bring his race back?
"Why?" he managed to ask after a few seconds.

"So that Krypton can live again," Zod announced. "On Earth."

And he looked up. Following his gaze, Clark looked to the sky, seeing something big entering the atmosphere, burning bright as it came down with velocity. A few seconds later, the huge object landed on the corn field of his memories, making the ground shake, the sound thundering as the three metal legs hit the earth.

Clark looked back at Zod.

"If Krypton lives again… What happens to Earth?" he asked, deep down already knowing the answer.

Zod slowly turned to him.

"The foundation has to be built on something. Even your father recognized that."

As he said that, the huge machine, the _world engine_, started to emit a huge amount of smoke to the sky; and a shining blue beam came out of it, hitting the ground with tremendous force. Everything shook and a huge wall of dust lifted from the earth, wiping everything on its path. Clark raised his arms to cover his face, even knowing all of this was happening only on his mind, as the cloud of dust passed over him and destroyed his farm.

The clothes he was using, his humans clothes, were ripped from his body, replaced instantly by his blue Kryptonian skinsuit and red cape. It was like he was in the middle of a tornado.

"Where is the Codex, Kal?" Zod asked, completely unaffected by the destruction he had just witnessed.

Clark didn't answer immediately, looking around him, seeing the scene of complete destruction the world engine had brought.

"There has to be another way, Zod!" he exclaimed, almost begging. "We can coexist! Or you can find another planet!"

"You were lucky to survive and to thrive in this atmosphere, Kal," he answered, still looking at Clark. "Not all Kryptonians could do that. This world's sun is too strong; its energy makes us too powerful. Krypton's atmosphere can control that, it can limit the growth of our powers, make it bearable. Without it… How painful was your childhood?"

"I survived," Clark retorted.

"You did. But not all could do it or to do it with their minds intact. I can barely imagine the torture your senses must be to you."

"It can be learned! Or you can find another planet! You have a machine that can reshape environments!"

"But not out of nothing. Not every ball of rock out there can be reshaped into an inhabitable planet. Certainly not on the perfect conditions Earth offers."

Clark couldn't believe his ears. He knew Zod had killed his father, he knew he had staged a coup in Krypton and killed a lot of his own people. But to talk about killing an entire race with such calm? That was unthinkable.
"You are talking about killing billions of people!"

"I'm talking about saving our race!" Zod yelled, suddenly. "Can't you understand what that means? What is a bunch of humans when we have the possibility to build Krypton again?!" He got closer. "You are not human, Kal, and you are never going to be human no matter how you look like. You are Kryptonian! If their race didn't resemble our appearance so much, what do you think they would have done to you? If you were one of their feared 'little green aliens' they would have killed you the moment that ship landed."

Zod was almost touching Clark, his blue eyes almost mad.

"Those people you protect so much? Those primitives? Fifty, maybe a hundred years from now they will all be dead. And you will have lived but a small fraction of your life." He touched Clark's shoulders. "Is that what you want? To be the last of your kind, alone, in a planet filled with beings so fragile and that die so fast?"

No, Clark didn't want to be alone. He didn't want to be the last of his kind, to be the only Kryptonian left in the universe.

But he also would never allow Zod to kill the humans.

"I can't be a part of this," he finally said.

Zod's face twisted into contempt, almost disgust, at his answer. He let go of his shoulders and walked back.

"Then what can you be a part of?" Zod asked, looking at his feet.

Clark looked down to see not the ground, but a sea of human skulls; everywhere, piles upon piles of skulls covered the Earth. His legs began to sink in the skulls, as if he was stepping into quicksand.

"No! Stop! Zod, there has to be another way!"

Zod only watched as he sank in the skulls, disappearing into it, his arms up trying to reach for something.

"NOOO!

He awoke almost jumping up, his heart beating fast. He tried to get up, but his arms were cuffed by the metal table and he just couldn't break them. Kryptonian atmosphere, he realized, and the ship could somehow filter the sun's radiation, making it impossible for him to refill his energy.

Unable to get free, he looked to the side, seeing Zod looking at him.

"You father acquitted himself with honor, Kal," he said.

"No, you murdered him" Clark corrected, lying back at the table.

Zod raised a single eyebrow, probably surprised to see he knew that.

"I did," Zod agreed, and Clark could hear sadness in his voice. "And not a day goes by when it doesn't haunt me. "He leaned closer to Clark. "But if I had to do it again, I would. The same way I expected him to kill me if the wellbeing of Krypton was at stake. I have a duty to my people and I will not allow anyone to prevent me from carrying it out!"
And saying this, he turned around and left the room.

"What's happening, Hill?" asked Fury, back on the Helicarrier, seeing the monitors beginning to beep.

The atmosphere in the command center of the Helicarrier was frenetic.

"DSP is pinging two bogeys launching from the alien ship," Maria Hill answered; she gave a signal to the agent on the computer. "Put it up."

As she asked, the images from the screen appeared on the big monitors, showing a part of the globe and the Black Zero floating close to it, marked in red; two smaller ships were flying from it, going in the planet's direction.

Fury watched that with apprehension mixed with rage.

"Air speed?" he asked.

"Three hundred and eighty knots and entering Kansas airspace, they're not responding to our hails," answered Maria.

Fury sighed and pressed a button, his voice coming out the speakers on the entire Helicarrier.

"Avengers, assemble!"

Natasha woke up in a dark room, her head feeling like it had been scrambled after her little trip down the memory lane. As always, she didn't open her eyes or changed her breathing pattern, first trying to assess the situation without alerting possible enemies.

Not hearing anybody close by, she opened her eyes and carefully got up. Her head was still covered with that transparent helm, which meant the air wasn't breathable yet. She still was on the ship, then; not that she expected to awake out of it, but it was good to be certain. She looked around, trying to find something useful in that place, forcing her eyes to see in the dark environment; until the blue glow of some kind of mainframe called her attention.

A place that had the exact same form of Clark's pendant; as she approached the pendant, some kind of magnetic field pulled it and attached it on the entrance. She pushed the "S" shaped pendant the rest of the way, a sound coming out of the mainframe.

Nothing happened. No lights, no sounds, no alarm… Natasha sighed. Clark wouldn't have given her that thing if it weren't important, but she wasn't seeing anything new.

That is, until she turned, and there was a man standing behind her.

"You are wasting your efforts," said Jax-Ur, Zod's scientist, as Clark tried to pull himself from his restraints. "The strength you derive from your exposure to the Earth's sun has been neutralized aboard our ship. Here, in this environment, you are as weak as a human."

Saying this, he jammed a needle in Clark's arms, passing through his skinsuit as if it weren't there. Clark grunted in pain, this being the first time his skin had been pierced in all his life; the weird "blood pistol" began to drain out his blood.

A few very uncomfortable seconds later, when Clark discovered he really didn't like needles, Jax-
Ur stopped, removing it from his arm. He turned around, eyes extremely focused on the blood he had drained from him.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Clark lightly tapped his finger on the table; the bracelet around his left arm, identical to the decoration all Kryptonian skinsuits seemed to possess, began to disintegrate little by little in the air, its metal particles forming some sort of advanced lock pick and beginning to meddle with his restraints.

"Exactly how strong are we without a yellow sun?" asked Clark, his voice high enough to cover the low sounds his lock picking was making. "Are we really just as strong as humans?"

Jax-Ur snorted, still looking at his blood with a maniac concentration, which, frankly, it was disturbing him.

"Our bones and muscles are extremely denser than theirs," he answered, still not looking at him, Clark checking the progress of his escape. "Even without being powered by a young sun, we are considerably stronger than them."

"How stronger?" Clark asked.

"Please be silent," Jax-Ur demanded, beginning to drain the blood he had collected into a machine. "You are disturbing my focus."

Well, that was rude.

"Can I just say one more thing?" he requested.

Jax-Ur sighed and turned to him.

"What?"

"Kelex" he gave the order and closed his eyes.

Suddenly, hidden from behind his table, Kelex floated to Jax-Ur eye level; and before he could do anything, he emitted a powerful flash, blinding the scientist.

Clark took his chance and pulled as strong as he could, ripping the damaged restraint, while Kelex cut off the other one, having no need to be silent now and, because of that, working fast. Jax-Ur was still blind, his hands on his eyes, not knowing what to do; and then Clark was free.

The moment Jax-Ur managed to open his eyes, Clark's fist cracked his nose and tossed him to the ground.

"Not looking so weak now, am I?"

It was only because of her incredible self-control that Natasha didn't jump back when she saw the man behind her. Even so, the very thought that this man had managed to sneak up on her so easily was grating on her nerves.

"Where did you come from?" Natasha asked, pretty sure that her room was locked.

The man seemed to find this funny.

"The command key, Miss Romanoff," he answered with a nod to it. "Thanks to you, I'm uploading into the ship's mainframe."
Uploading into the ship's mainframe? Was he like Jarvis?

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I'm Kal's father, Jor-El"

His biological father, Natasha realized, her eyes taking the similarities between them almost automatically. He had told her about this, the hologram on his ship.

"Can you help us?" she asked, trying to keep her thoughts focused.

Jor-El's expression could almost be translated as "Are you really asking me this?".

"I designed this ship. I can modify its atmospheric composition to human compatibility," he answered, looking at her with his intelligent eyes. "We can stop them. We can send them back to the Phantom Zone."

"How?"

"I can teach you. And in turn you can teach Kal," he said. "Will you help me?"

It was Natasha's turn to give him the "Are you really asking me this?" look.

Clark's father smiled and told her his plan to defeat them. As soon as he did that, an alarm began to sound and her helmet retracted itself.

"The ship's crew is alerted, we need to move quickly," he warned. "Retrieve the command key."

Natasha ran to the mainframe and pulled the command key back.

"How strong are they in this environment?" Natasha asked, as he opened the door of her cell.

"Approximately as strong as your Avenger companion, Captain Rogers," he answered. "Avoid close quarters combat."

Natasha fiddled with her gloves for a moment; they started to buzz and emit a blue glow.

"And how well does electricity agrees with them?"

Jor-El smiled again.

"Door on your left, find out."

His warning was given in the nick of time. As he said that, a woman came out of the door, a pistol held in front of her. Without waiting to be noticed and shot, Natasha dashed to the front, jumping and kicking the arm that was holding the pistol so it would point to the ground; and then, before the Kryptonian had a chance to react, she brought her Widow's Bite under the woman's chin and unleashed a massive electric discharge.

The woman trashed and went down, unconscious.

"Pick up her side-arm," Jor-El said, starting to walk again.

Natasha grabbed the pistol and followed him. The alarm continued to sound non-stop as they made their way, Jor-El opening and closing doors every few seconds, probably cutting off reinforcements. He pointed to the right.
"To your right."

Without hesitating, Natasha fired the pistol in the direction he said, the blue energy hitting the running Kryptonian directly in the face. Hearing steps, she already turned shooting, without needing any advice, hitting another alien.

Three Kryptonians appeared on a door to her left, their weapons already aimed at her; before they could shoot, however, Jor-El closed it.

"Thanks," she said, running to the end of the corridor and entering the room.

He was already inside the room, being a hologram and all that, so Jor-El opened one of the escape pods for her.

"Secure yourself inside the under pod," he said, as Natasha hastily entered the pod. "Safe travels, Miss Romanoff. It's highly unlikely we'll be seeing each other again."

"It was a pleasure to meet you," she said.

He smiled.

"The pleasure was all mine, Miss Romanoff, to finally meet one of my son's friends. Now, remember, the Phantom Drives are essential in stopping them."

"I remember, don't worry."

He nodded, then stopped.

"Move your head to the left," he said, his voice perfectly calm.

Natasha found this to be a weird request, but as soon as she heard steps she did what he told her; right on time to dodge a powerful punch that passed through his fading hologram and collided by the side of her head, opening a hole in the metal.

She had one second to pull her pistol and start shooting, seeing the same woman she had just electrocuted look at her; well, it worked, but apparently not for long. The Kryptonian managed to grab her pistol from her but, as soon she did it, Natasha placed the Widow's Bite under her chin again; she took more pleasure than usual in seeing her eyes widen.

The discharge threw her back, but it didn't knock her out completely, so Natasha quickly pressed the button to launch the pod, listening to the sound of the pistol firing and hitting it. The closed pod fell down fast, being ejected from the ship in great speed, but something was wrong; the shots had damaged it, blue sparks where everywhere, and the whole thing was shaking.

That was not good.

Clark didn't know exactly why the ship's alarm was sounding, but it had something to do with Earth's atmosphere being the new breathable air in there. That meant that Natasha had used the command key and his father was messing with the ship's controls; he hoped she was okay.

Seeing Jax-Ur drag himself pathetically out of the room, his nose broken and the hands grabbing his own throat because of the new air, Clark closed the door and called Kelex back to his arm; only to turn and see his father's hologram waiting for him.

He looked at Jor-El, a stern expression on his face.
"Is it true what Zod said about the Codex?" he asked. "Can it really bring our people back?"

Jor-El looked to the wall by his side.

"Strike that panel" he said.

Clark, feeling much stronger since Krypton's air had been flushed from his body, punched the wall; the panel broke much like a piece of rock, fragments flying everywhere, instead of bending like he would expect the metal to do. The air began to be pulled out by the vacuum of the space and the unfiltered sun light entered, recharging his energies; Earth was immensely blue on the horizon.

Jor-El looked at him, his face serious.

"We wanted you to learn what it meant to be human first," his father explained, "so that, one day, when the time was right, you could be the bridge between two peoples."

His father turned to look at Earth.

"Look."

Clark followed his look to see an escape pod entering the atmosphere, seeming completed unstable and damaged. He focused his eyes, trying to see who was there.

"Natasha!" he exclaimed.

Jor-El looked at him.

"You can save her, Kal" he proclaimed, with absolute certainty. "You can save all of them."

Clark nodded and floated to space with his open arms, giving one last look to his father; and launched himself after Natasha's pod.
Clark felt the energy he had taken from the sunlight explode inside his entire body, as he flew as fast as he could towards Natasha’s pod, approaching Earth with alarming speed. He felt the heat when he collided with the atmosphere, the red glow surrounding his body, but he didn't even blink, his eyes focused on the spinning pod.

The damaged pod, also glowing hot, began to lose parts, the friction with the atmosphere proving to be too much for the broken hull. A trail of fire and smoke was made in the sky, Clark following it with everything he had.

He reached with his left arm and held the pod, his fingers barely being able to grasp the big sphere-shaped hull, but the pressure of his Kryptonian strength more than enough to stabilize it and make the spinning stop; reaching with his other hand, he pulled himself against it, knees touching the hull.

At that very moment, they breached the blanket of white clouds, the city becoming visible; he needed to hurry up. Looking down, he could see Natasha watching him, her eyes alert but with remarkable calm, given the situation. He tilted his head to the side, asking her to move a bit, and brought his fist against the pod, ripping out the door. And, just as the door went flying, he raised his arms and held Natasha.

The pod collided against the ground, exploding, its flames going up; as fast as he could, he turned around, shielding her from the fire with his back, as the explosion reached them.

Clark sighed, relieved, when the flames died out, Natasha safe with him as they floated down slowly.

"I don't know how you enjoy flying," Natasha said, her voice muffled against his chest.

"There is nothing wrong with flying; falling however, that's scary," Clark answered, as they touched the ground.

The pod made a big crater in the ground, its broken pieces lying around, the alien fuel burning with a blue flame.

"Are you alright?" Clark asked, checking her bones with his x-ray vision for injuries.

"I'm fine," she answered, looking weirdly at him for a second. "This 'focused look' you're giving me has anything to do with how you could see through walls? Well, you just saved my life, so I guess you can take a little peek. I'm flattered by the way."

Clark raised his eyes to her face quickly, a little flushed.

"I was looking at your bones!" he clarified, unnecessarily, he knew that by now, but unable to stop himself.

Natasha smirked.
"Sure."

But suddenly, she lost her smile.

"Clark, listen to me, they looked inside my mind," she said, all business now. "I couldn't stop them…"

"It's okay, they did the same thing to me," Clark interrupted, trying to reassure her.

"… They were looking for my memories about you!"

Clark was frozen in place when he finally understood what she meant; and with a last look to her, he took off to the sky, the air exploding around him.

Martha Kent heard a huge noise just outside of her house, the dog barking madly in front of the door to whatever was making it. Putting the dog behind, she opened the door, her breath hitching when she saw two ships landing.

With slow steps, she went down the stairs of the porch, as the ship opened and a ramp slid down, four Kryptonians walking out, fully armored. Uncertain, Martha walked to them, a very bad feeling in her chest.

The one who looked to be the "boss" stopped in front of her, just besides her red car; that was probably that General Zod from the TV, she thought.

"The craft he arrived in, where is it?" he demanded, without even bothering to introduce himself.

Whatever they wanted with her son's ship, she could already tell Clark wouldn't approve of; Martha looked unblinking at his face, her fear being surpassed by her motherly instincts.

"Go to hell!" she answered, forgetting her rules against swearing in the moment.

Zod just looked to the side and nodded; a woman, also fully clad in that horrible black armor, approached. And without a word, she closed her hand around her neck and lifted her from the ground.

Her breath was suddenly cut off and the woman's fingers hurt her neck; her feet were dangling in the air. Without being able to think properly, her eyes looked to the side, to her barn; that was all they needed.

"There," Zod stated, pointing at the barn.

The woman tossed her on the ground without a second look, her body smashing painfully against the grass, and jumped to the sky, in a way she only had seen Clark do before; she descended right on top of the barn, breaking the roof when she landed.

Not even 10 seconds later, she jumped back, passing through the hole in the roof, and landing at their side.

"The Codex is not here," she said.

General Zod practically growled in fury, grabbing the red pickup truck at his side with one hand and throwing it in the air; the car fell right on top of her house, destroying the rooftop and falling inside.
She yelped in fear.

"Where has he hidden it?!" the Kryptonian asked, walking fast to her.

"I don't know," she answered, not having a single clue of what he was talking about.

"WHERE IS THE CODEX?!" he screamed.

A loud supersonic sound made itself heard in the distance; Martha felt relief flood her and looked at Zod with a defying smile.

"You shouldn't have hit me."

And just as she said this, Clark appeared from nothing, just a blur in the sky, and collided against Zod, both disappearing from sight.

Clark was burning with rage, his vision almost red with wrath when he saw his mother on the ground. He flew directly against Zod, colliding against him with all his strength, screaming in anger; Zod was lifted from the ground with him, both of them flying through the corn field, and then against two silos full of grain, that exploded as they passed from side to side.

He held Zod and forced him down, crashing his back against the ground and grabbing his neck with one hand, still flying as fast as he could even when Zod was being dragged against the earth.

And then he began to punch him, all his power, all his fury, making every blow throw Zod's armored head against the ground, the sound of his fist against the helmet echoing.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN THREATEN MY MOTHER?!

Clark was so angry that he didn't even notice Smallville approaching fast; when he saw the buildings in front of him, all he could do was change their trajectory to a place without people: a gas station.

They crashed through the convenience store, breaking the walls and windows, and finally hitting the gas pump.

The explosion covered the whole place with fire, throwing a car up, destroying everything around; the ceiling on top of the pumps fell down, as a tower of black smoke rose. Clark was thrown on the ground, sliding for several meters.

The people around, luckily nobody injured, started to yell and run away. Clark got up, looking at Zod who was removing his black cape, covered with gasoline and flames, and tossing it to the side.

He firmed his steps, apparently dizzy, and took his hands to his head; more accurately, his helmet. While the thing had protected Zod's head from the brunt of Clark's punches, it hadn't come out of it unscathed; he could hear the electric discharges it was giving, the material switching between black and transparent randomly, probably making it impossible to see through it.

Zod grabbed his helmet and pulled it, stretching it like some form of gel, until the whole thing retracted itself back into his armor.

Clark smiled as he looked at Zod's stunned face; poisonous air wasn't so cool now, was it?

"What have you done to me?" he demanded, his eyes unfocused, Earth's atmosphere flushing Krypton's air from him and making the powers he gained from the sun hit him with their full
"My parents taught me to hone my senses, Zod," Clark answered, walking to him, seeing Zod fall down to his knees in pain. "Focus on just what I wanted to see. Without your helmet you're getting everything."

Zod tried to get up again, only to fall down, grunting in pain, completely incapable of doing anything besides lying on the ground in agony.

"And it hurts, doesn't it?!" Clark completed, feeling a sadistic satisfaction in seeing the man who hurt his mother twitching on the floor because of the pain.

Before he could do anything else, however, he heard the engine of a Kryptonian ship arriving, floating just in front of him; and, without giving him time to do anything, it fired on him, the blue energy hitting him right in the chest and sending him against a car.

He groaned in pain, the blue energy burning his skin, as it dissipated in his skinsuit.

And while he was on the ground, two Kryptonians got out from the ship, helping Zod up and dragging him back inside it, he fighting to stay every step of the way, while he looked at Clark with a murderous expression.

Clark only watched as they took off slowly, and then accelerated to the sky, retreating; but before he could commemorate anything, he heard scared voices on the street, people running, doors closing. Two Kryptonians were coming in his direction from the other end of the street, walking slowly, a woman and a huge man.

The woman he knew, it was Faora; and the man was Nam-Ek, if the information his father gave him was correct, a behemoth of a man even back in Krypton.

This was far from over.

General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross checked the window from the helicopter, seeing the line of helicopters flying fast side by side; he raised his head, looking at the soldiers sharing the space with him, all fully armed, all with nervous expressions on their faces.

Being a general and way passed youth, it wasn't normal to General Ross to join in a field mission like this, but those were unusual circumstances; not only he had experience in leading men in said unusual circumstances, like when they were hunting the Hulk, he was the closest officer in place when the aliens descended on that small town.

And now, it was up to him and his men to do something about it.

He pressed the button of his radio.

"All clear, this is Guardian. I am airborne mission commander. The beings we are about to engage are extremely dangerous and we've been authorized to use deadly force."

He could hear the piercing sound of the jets passing close to them, flying towards the aliens.

"Roger, Guardian, we are inbound to target," came the response from the pilots.

Ross controlled himself not to breathe deeply; his men were already tense as it is, they didn't need to see their commander afraid. He was pretty sure they were all thinking about the Battle of New
York and how close they were to being defeated.

Only to be saved by a group of rogue individuals, the Hulk amongst them.

He still couldn't believe how the world had come that. He was a soldier, it was his job to protect his country and the people in it; but how exactly do you lead men against aliens and gods? How could normal humans stand up against that?

The simple and to the point answer was that they couldn't. There were things out there that his soldiers didn't stand a chance against. Threats so big that not even the best warriors in his army could face. That was why they had tried to recreate the Super Soldier Serum; that was why he tried so badly to bring the Hulk under his command.

Because he recognized that they needed monsters to fight monsters.

Weapons like the Hulk, like Stark's suits, like Captain America. Nukes to be pointed and fired upon their enemies. But, like any good weapon, they only had a use when they could be controlled, and despite what SHIELD might think, the Avengers were anything but controlled. Something would have to be done about that, in the future.

But that would have to wait now, because since they didn't have proper weapons to use against these aliens, men would have to do. He hoped they were enough.

Clark swallowed, his mouth dry, as he walked towards the Kryptonians. The people of the town, those who still hadn't locked themselves up in their homes, were running scared, looking for shelter.

This was really happening. There was no stopping now. He tried to control his fear, remembering his father's words, but his heart was still beating fast; how could it be any different? He knew that the safety of these people was in his hands now. He was the only one there capable to stop the Kryptonians.

And he didn't have a clue if he really could do that.

They were fully trained soldiers, experienced, equipped and in greater numbers; he was raised on a farm. And right now, he was the only thing between them and the complete extinction of the human race.

No pressure.

He closed his hand on a fist, contracting his muscles, preparing himself; he could see Faora doing the same. They walked a few more steps and then stopped, staring at each other, a pair of murderous blue eyes looking at a pair of cerulean tense eyes.

That's when he heard the sound of jets crossing the sky in their direction.

He had a split second to move when the machine guns started to roar, the bullets hitting the ground behind him with extreme force. Dashing out of the way, he flew fast to the side, escaping their aim, breaking the roof of a house when his leg crashed against it. Faora was quick to do the same, becoming a black blur and disappearing.

Nam-Ek wasn't so lucky.

The bullets hit him straight in the chest, the rain of metal strong enough to throw him back against
a light post, breaking it.

"Thunder one-one, good hit! Request immediate re-attack," he could hear someone say on the radio, as the jets turned around to fire again.

"Roger, Guardian. We're commencing our run at 2-1-2 degrees."

Bad idea. Before he could even think about stopping him, Nam-Ek got up, stretching himself for a moment, and began to run in the direction of the jets, his legs breaking the street when he jumped one, two, three times; at the third he was in the air, almost as if flying against the jet.

"Thunder one-one! Eject! Eject! Thunder one-one, eject!" he heard the desperate order on the radio.

Too late. Nam-Ek hit the jet straight on, breaking the cabin with his hands and taking his hands around the pilot's head; Clark saw only a splash of red and then the jet dove down, hitting the street and exploding, the burning fuselage taking everything in its path.

Faora just stood there, seeing the burning plane coming in her direction, and then walked to it; Clark could already see what she was planning. Like Nam-Ek, she jumped, crossing the flames as she rose in the air, arms open and her black cape flapping in air.

"I have a bogey incoming!" Clark heard the pilot yell, as Faora appeared in his front. "Oh, shit!"

At the very moment she was about to make contact, Clark appeared out of nowhere and collided against her in air. They flew without direction, she fighting him every inch of the way, and he couldn't keep himself up, beginning to drop fast; he could only make the effort to avoid any people in his way.

They broke the roof of the IHOP, falling inside like a meteor, tables and the very ground breaking; but no people, he checked, relieved. He got up fast, looking around, seeing his old friend Pete hiding behind the counter; and then, before he could blink, Faora's fist hit his stomach, tossing him against the wall.

He was winded for a second, but he dashed to front, punching, only to see Faora dodge him quite easily. She retracted her breather and looked at him.

"You are weak, son of El," she taunted. "Unsure of yourself."

Clark attacked her, throwing punch after punch, seeing none of them connect; Faora just blocked him as if she was doing the easiest thing in the world, and then retaliated, hitting his jaw with a powerful blow that sent him flying against the wall, the ground breaking. He groaned, the unusual experience of feeling pain keeping him down for a moment.

"The fact that you possess a sense of morality and we do not, gives us an evolutionary advantage," Faora continued, eyeing him as he got up.

He flew fast against her, trying to take her by surprise; she just stepped to the side, grabbing his neck and tossing him on the ground with extraordinarily strength.

"And if history has proven anything…" she said, holding his cape with both hands and lifting him in air, only to throw him out of the building; Clark flew across the street, hitting a bank and only stopping when his back collided against a vault door, that bended in contact. He almost fell on his knees in pain, when Faora dropped from the ceiling in front of him, looking at him with her emotionless eyes. "… it is that evolution always wins."
Clark was pissed. Screaming in anger, he flew against her, his rage giving him more speed than she could predict, hitting Faora and throwing her through the wall, against an armored truck that also couldn't hold her, through the walls of another building and finally tossing her on the street. Flying up, he aimed at her and attacked again, his fist breaking the asphalt when she dodged him; so he attacked again, flying fast against her.

When he was about to hit her, he felt Nam-Ek holding his legs, grunting, stopping him in air; he tried to get away, but the immense Kryptonian pulled him up and smashed him against the ground. Clark lost his breath, dizzy, only to be raised in air again and slammed on the asphalt, head first, a crater opening.

And then he felt a ridiculously powerful kick on his ribs, throwing him in the air in Faora's direction, her fist hitting him directly in the face. His vision blacked out for a moment, as he fell with his face down.

"Jesus..." exclaimed Steve, as he watched Clark fall down on the street.

Tony had quite the more colorful vocabulary to describe what he was seeing. He, Steve and Banner were on a Quinjet, Clint piloting as fast as he could to the field of battle, watching the satellite footage Jarvis was playing on the monitor.

What these aliens were doing was incredibly frightening. The speed they were moving, the strength of their blows, their toughness... He had just seen one of them get up after taking a rain of bullets, only to jump to the sky against a jet and bring it down! And the thing was, Tony didn't know if he was more surprised about that or the fact that he fell down alongside the exploding jet and got up, without a scratch.

"I got word from Natasha," Clint suddenly spoke up. "She is fine, she managed to get out from the ship with him."

"That's excellent!" Banner said, as all of them breathed relieved with the first good news of the day. "Where is she?"

"She said she got a ride and it's going to meet us there," Clint answered.

With that, they looked back at the screen. That Kryptonian woman, Faora, got close from Clark and flipped him up with her foot; he tried to get up, to their relief, showing them he was not dead yet. Their relief was short lived, however, because the huge alien dashed against him, his knee hitting his chest, Clark's back breaking the ground for several meters, until they stopped.

That's when the giant fist came down like a hammer against his chest, opening a crater under him.

Stark took his hands to his face, unable to speak, as Faora ran to them ready to kick Clark's head; he managed to hold her leg and bring her down, turning at the same time to avoid the huge Kryptonian's foot from stepping on him and trying to fly away.

They could almost fell Clark's despair as the giant held his cape and pulled him down, his head breaking the ground when it hit. Faora tried to punch him again, only to be blocked and pulled down again, Clark tossing her against the big one so he could finally fly away; except Faora was still holding his leg and the other one managed to jump after them, bringing them down.

The three aliens came back to the ground with force, breaking everything in their way, rolling with their limbs tangled for several meters. When they stopped, the huge Kryptonian brought both of his arms down, trying to smash Clark; he managed to dodge at the last second, only to be held in place
by Faora. Taking his chance, the big alien tried to punch him, but Clark was able to hold his arm.

There was a tense few seconds when they couldn't see what was happening, and then two red beams came out from Clark's eyes, hitting both Kryptonians and sending them back as if burned.

"I'm seeing this, but I still can't believe it," Steve said, his eyes fixed on the screen.

Neither could Tony. They thought Loki was bad, but this? This was a completely different level of scary. They were like Asgardians on steroids; like small Hulk's, but much faster than the Big Guy, and, of course, clear minded. That made things much, much worse. The Hulk, as frightening as he was, could be outmaneuvered with intelligence; Kryptonians, even as strong as they were, were probably even more intelligent than humans.

Not for the first time since General Zod's threat, Tony felt himself shivering. What was happening in that small city was... he didn't even have the words to describe it. How the hell were they supposed to stop them?

"We have soldiers approaching," Clint said, his eyes switching between the footage and the Quinjet's controls.

"What is Ross thinking?!" Banner exclaimed, seeing the soldier approach on foot.

"They are going to die," Cap said, taking his hand to his face.

It was a fair assumption, Tony thought, gritting his teeth.

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"Rangers, I need you to engage the targets!" Ross said, looking down from his helicopter to see the three aliens on the street.

"Guardian, this is Battle 01, what about the guy in blue?"

"I said engage all targets!" the general screamed back.

His pulse was fast as the helicopters approached, the rangers down there creating a perimeter around the targets. As if one, everybody began to shoot, the machine guns of the helicopters raining down bullets on the aliens.

Ross was reminded of the Hulk when he saw the bullets hitting the targets and being deflected, as if their skin was made of steel; the continued attack, however, was keeping them in place, the force of the shots pinning them down.

That was, until that huge armored alien stepped to the side and picked up a parked van; and tossed it against his own helicopter.

His jaw dropped when he saw the white van in the air, passing by his window, and hitting the helicopter's tail rotor. It began to spin without control, coming down, except for the soldier standing at the door; he was tossed out. There was absolutely nothing he could do as the man fell to his death, yelling, and Ross felt the rage burning inside him when one more of his men was killed by a monstrosity.

He didn't die, however. Holding as best as he could while the helicopter span out of control, Ross watched as the alien in blue, with the "S" on his chest, dashed forward, managing to pick his soldier before he hit the ground. Ross was speechless, as he watched the alien pull his man up, safe and sound, and then toss him to the side as the giant one appeared out of nothing and punched his
face, throwing him to the other side of the street.

That was the last he saw, as his helicopter began to fall to the ground.

"We're going in hard! Brace for impact! Brace for impact! We're going in hard!"

"Guardian is down, I repeat, Guardian is down!"

Steve watched in silence, as Ross's helicopter crashed on the street.

"My god!" he heard Banner mutter by his side.

It didn't blow up, so there was a chance that he was alive; unfortunately, there was nothing he
could do from there, he lamented. Trying to not think about it, he turned his attention to the rangers
approaching Zod's sub-commander, rifles pointed at her.

They began to shoot, the bullets hitting her armor and being deflected; her breather extended back
up, covering her face, and she jumped, falling by the soldier's side. She just stood there for a
moment, letting the gunfire hit her without any damage, then punched the closest man, her fist
breaking his neck instantly.

She dashed to the front, becoming a blur in the air, hitting and killing another soldier and grabbing
the third by the throat; carrying the man, she dashed again, her hand closing around the neck of the
forth soldier, only to throw them with extreme force against two others, no doubt killing them all.

They could only watch, astounded, as Faora began to attack the rangers, basically disappearing in
air because of her speed, each punch killing a soldier, tossing them far away with broken bodies.
She picked up a part of the fuselage from the fallen jet and threw it against a group of men, the
heavy part flying in the air as if it weighted nothing, crushing the soldiers against a wall.

It was like watching a god stepping on ants. Those men never had a chance.

"Okay, that's enough," Stark said, suddenly, his helmet closing.

He punched the button and opened the door of the Quinjet.

"What are you doing?!" Steve yelled.

"This thing is taking too long to arrive, those people are being slaughtered," Tony answered. "I can
get there faster."

"And then what?" Steve asked, his voice loud so he could be heard in that wind. "Do you think you
can stop them alone?"

"I have a better chance than them." He looked back, at Steve. "Don't worry, I've got a plan of
attack: attack!"

And saying that, to Steve's frustration, he jumped out, his repulsors leaving a trail when he passed
the Quinjet flying fast.

Clark flew against Nam-Ek, punching the huge Kryptonian with everything he had, his fists doing
nothing. He held both of his hands, as if in a contest of strength; Clark grunted with effort, actually
feeling his hands being overpowered.
He jumped up, planning to take the fight to his field, taking Nam-Ek with him; the behemoth just tossed him back down, his body making a hole in the ground, and he had to move fast to avoid Nam-Ek's knee coming with full power against his face.

Clark couldn't believe this. He had never met anyone that was stronger than him, but Nam-Ek was. For the first time in his life he was being physically outclassed.

Except that shouldn't be possible. At all. He was under a yellow sun for all his life; his muscles had soaked in that energy since he was a baby, making themselves harder than steel; he was not breathing Krypton's atmosphere, so his powers weren't being stunted, like Nam-Ek's were. There shouldn't be any reason for him to be weaker than him.

You are my son, a member of the House of El, and you are more powerful than you can even imagine. When you realize this, you'll see that you don't need to be afraid of anything ever again.

Could it be... His father's words played in his mind, as he traded blows with Nam-Ek. There was no reason for him to be weaker than Nam-Ek; he was searching for it, for the cause of such difference when there shouldn't be any, but there was no reason.

He spent so much time around breakable people... It was time, at least for once, to stop holding back.

General Ross groaned in pain as he tried to get free from the fallen helicopter, trying to take off his seat belt. He managed to do it, sliding out, only to be met by the sight of his entire troop dead on the floor; and the alien woman looking at him.

Desperately, he reached for his submachine, pointing at her and firing; she jumped in air, landing on top of a car in front of him, his bullets doing absolutely nothing against her. When he was out of bullets, he switched to his pistol, aiming at her head, trying to find a weak point. He discharged his weapon against her face, the bullets flying to the side without leaving so much as a mark.

She retracted that breather of hers and looked at him, smiling ironically; he was out of bullets now.

At that moment, a sound called their attention, something arriving fast. She looked to the side and jumped back, just in time to avoid the red fist of Stark's suit coming down from the sky, breaking the ground.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" Stark asked.

Ross was torn between relief and annoyance.

Tony got up and looked at the sub-commander, Jarvis cataloguing everything he could about her, looking for any weakness; he wasn't having much luck.

"Has the Asgardian arrived?" Faora asked, responding to his taunt with one of her own; Stark was both impressed and offended.

Without answering, he lifted his hands and fired his repulsors against her, only to see her dodging to the side; he did it again, and again she blurred a few inches to the side, only enough to let the beams pass at her side.

Without warning, he flew against her, trying to cut the distance, maybe that way he could hit her; she just stood there, waiting for him, her blue eyes fixed on his movements. Getting in touching
distance of her, Tony fired again, aiming at her head, only to see her move it to the side; with his other hand, he fired against her chest, but before he could connect, she slapped his hand to the side, making the repulsor pass harmless at her side.

"Jarvis, analyze her patterns!" He yelled in his helmet, simply unable to hit her, as she danced within distance, dodging his beams.

"Right away, sir."

He could see the patterns being mapped in his visor, his A.I. working fast, trying to deduce from her previous moves what the next one would be; when his targeting glowed, indicating success, he allowed Jarvis to move his arm to the exact spot.

His repulsor hit her right on the face; and nothing happened.

She didn't even move an inch, it was like his repulsor wasn't anything more than a breeze to her. It did, however, call her attention; he had hit her, so she retaliated. With one blow against his chest, Tony was sent flying against a car, folding the metal when he hit it.

"Contusions detected, sir."

Really?! Getting up, he rose to the sky, trying to get distance between them. Clearly close quarters combat wasn't getting him anywhere. Confirming that Ross had taken the right approach and disappeared from there, he raised his arm and fired his tank-missile against her; she didn't even try to dodge, and the entire street was engulfed in flames.

He scanned the field for her, only to lose his breath when she appeared from the flames right in front of his face, jumping all the way up to where he was. Her armored body hit his heavily, and he felt her hands grab him; his repulsors were no match to her strength, when she sent him down to the ground again.

And then, before he could have a chance to do anything, she was on him. He took a punch on the side of the head, was sent flying, only to be stopped by another punch in an opposite direction.

"Jarvis, read her movements!" he yelled, as she hit him again.

"Sir, I-" Jarvis couldn't complete what he was about to say, because she hit him again, throwing him on the ground. "I can't predict…"

Her hands grabbed his arm and he felt the metal bending under her fingers.

"Critical damage on the right arm, sir," Jarvis stated.

He tried to pull his arm back, only to feel a blow to the leg.

"Critical damage on the left leg, sir."

Tony kneeled down with the unresponsive leg, and pointed the repulsor of his left hand to her; only to see her countering the beam with her own hand, grabbing his own.

"Critical damage on the left hand, sir!"

"Shut up, Jarvis!"

**BOOOM!** He was sent flying when she hit his head again and he got his wish, feeling his visor going black as Jarvis rebooted. He rolled on the ground, trying to stop bouncing on the asphalt,
only to be kicked again, her foot bending the metal on his chest enough for him to feel it on his own body.

"Still think you are my equal, human?" Faora asked, her foot pressing him against the ground like he had a mountain on top of it.

He would have answered with a quip if he could talk, but sadly it wasn't possible; he could just move his one functioning arm against her, trying to force her out, while she continued to smash his armor.

"Reboot complete," Jarvis announced, his voice as tranquil as if he was announcing tea time.

"Put everything you got on the Unibeam!" he forced himself to yell under her crushing foot.

"Right away, sir."

His chest began to glow under Faora's feet and she raised an eyebrow; right before the biggest Unibeam blast Tony had ever seen explode from his chest, directly under her feet. The blast tossed her up high in the sky, giving Tony a chance to breathe, hope blossoming in him.

And then she just flipped in the sky with amazing grace and landed back on the ground, completely unscathed.

Well, now he was well and truly fucked, wasn't he?

At that exact moment, as if divine providence was working with him, Tony heard the engines of the Quinjet; and its machine guns. The bullets hit Faora, pinning her on place, as the Quinjet turned. And then, Captain America jumped out from it, his body behind his shield, right on top of Faora.

The shield hit her, the vibranium properties deflecting all the strength of the blow back, sending her a few meters behind while Cap landed on the street. Without waiting for her to think, Steve ran to her, hitting with everything he had, his movements incredibly graceful and deadly.

"Jarvis, try to restore what you can," he ordered, trying to get back in the fight.

Steve was moving as fast as he could, hitting as hard as he could. He had seen what Faora did to Stark and he wasn't stupid enough to think the serum had made his body as resistant as that armor of his, so he was prepared to defend himself with his shield when she attacked; but she didn't.

No, she was just dodging, her movements graceful, his fists hitting air every time. He tried to hit her with his shield, jumping, kicking, even tried to headbutt her once; it never connected. She was just too fast.

He stopped for a moment, looking at her; she just looked back, smiling, waiting for him. She was playing with him; worse than Loki did in Germany.

"Cap, down!" he heard Tony yell and did as he asked.

A single red laser beam passed right where he was, hitting Faora right in the face; he could see her eyes following the red light, completely unconcerned, and in any moment she attempted to dodge or block it, even though he knew very well she could have.

Tony had to know this; so the only explanation is that it was a distraction.
As fast as he could, Steve threw his shield at her face, putting all his strength in the attack. She shield flew, becoming a blur; only to be caught, effortlessly by her hand.

For the first time, she looked impressed.

"Vibranium?" she asked, studying the shield. "One of the most versatile metals in the universe and you use it to make a shield? Primitives."

Steve didn't have a chance to say anything, because Clint brought the Quinjet back at that moment, shooting at her. Faora raised his shield, deflecting the bullets to the side, almost as if interested in seeing the metal in action; and then she looked at him, smiling.

He understood what she would do at the same time.

"Clint, get out of here!" he screamed.

Faora twisted her entire body, as graceful as a gymnast, and threw his vibranium shield at the Quinjet; she did it with such strength that the shield almost teleported itself to its target, the familiar sound of the metal echoing in the air.

The Quinjet's wing was simply cut off from the jet, as the vibranium shield turned into a spinning saw and slashed it; fire and sparks rose when the shield hit it, black smoke going up to the sky, as the Quinjet began to fall down.

Steve and Tony could only look as the jet crashed on the street, luckily not blowing up, but hard enough to hurt whoever was inside. Faora looked at him.

"I think I can see the appeal now," she said.

And at the moment she said that, there was a huge roar coming out from the fallen Quinjet; the Hulk had awakened.

Clark clashed against Nam-Ek with all his power, the blow creating shockwaves in the air. Hovering over the ground, faster than Nam-Ek could move, he punched the giant's face, letting all his power connect with the blow, for once not holding himself back. Nam-Ek grunted in pain, turning his head to the side, so Clark hit him again with his other hand, and a third and a fourth time. He was moving so fast that Nam-Ek couldn't even predict his attacks anymore.

The soldiers were firing upon them non-stop, the bullets ricocheting away, as Clark dashed to Nam-Ek, grabbing him from behind, and flying up, carrying the big Kryptonian with him all the way to the sky; and them he released him, hitting him with a powerful punch.

Nam-Ek was sent flying in the distance, colliding against a stopped train; a huge explosion followed it.

Faora, ignoring the battered man that was escaping the crash, looked at the big green monster that had emerged from the fallen jet, studying it. She had seen footage of it fighting, already knowing it had a great deal of physical strength; not much more intelligence than an animal, though.

As if to prove this, the beast roared to her, trying to intimidate her; foolish thing. She just watched as it ripped the other wing from the fallen jet and tossed it against her. Faora didn't even move, letting the wing break itself against her.
Seeing this, the green beast started to run in her direction, always roaring, its huge muscular arms ready to attack her. She just waited. When it was right in front of her, it tried to punch her. She was right, it had a great deal of strength, more than she would think possible on a human, enhanced or not; but it wasn't nearly fast enough to touch her.

Turning her body, she allowed the big fist pass close to her and, jumping to reach its head, Faora kicked with her Kryptonian strength; the beast was sent flying against a vehicle, its huge body smashing it to bits. Would it get up?

She had her answer when the vehicle was sent flying in her direction; she almost sighed. Lifting her arms, she held the vehicle in air and tossed it back, hitting the monster's face head on. It roared in pain but it didn't stop running towards her. She would have to teach it a lesson.

Dodging its blows again, Faora unleashed a flurry of attacks against its head, hitting as strongly as she could, tossing the green beast to one side to the other. The animal simply didn't have a chance to react, too dumb and slow to try anything else than punching, Faora's limbs becoming blurs in the air as she attacked.

Dumb as it may be, the beast was resistant. No matter how much Faora hit, it just wouldn't go down. With a powerful roar, it brought his arms against the ground, the incredibly powerful blow opening a huge hole in the street that continued all the way to the buildings; the whole place seemed to shake.

Faora almost lost her balance, dodging the punch at the last second.

It was dumb and slow, but it was apparently getting stronger by the minute. What were its limits? She would like to know, but in the end, it was irrelevant. Dodging again, she jumped and kicked its head one more time, throwing the beast against its companions. Before it could get up, she reached for her black knife.

It might heal indefinitely and get stronger as it became enraged, but Faora doubted it could survive without a head.

She looked at the pitiful bunch of warriors in front of her: an armored man, broken and useless out of its shell; a soldier who didn't have the strength necessary to protect his people; an… archer, as difficult as it was to believe; and a mindless beast, no more than a big animal. Were these the Avengers that had defeated Loki? Maybe Asgardians were just as pathetic then.

Faora pointed the knife at them.

"A good death is its own reward," she announced, willing to at least let them die as warriors.

She held their stare, waiting for them to position themselves, the three of them getting up and preparing to attack; she contracted her muscles, ready to dash against them and end this.

And at that instant, she heard a supersonic noise and felt the strongest hit she had ever taken.

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Clark's fist connected against the side of Faora's head, the hit so brutal that she was almost buried in the asphalt; it had to be, if he wanted to break her helmet like he did with Zod. Turning in air, he landed, his feet breaking the ground as he stopped.

He looked around, seeing the scene of destruction everywhere. Dead soldiers, broken cars, houses destroyed; the Avengers, thankfully alive, were looking at him, eyes wide. He turned to Faora, his expression severe.
She was getting up, groaning in pain, her helmet broken like Zod's. She looked at him defiantly.

"You will not win. For every human you save, we will kill a million more."

And then the sensory overload became too much to her, as the engine of a jet approached.

"If you can listen to me, take cover!" Clark heard Natasha saying at the radio.

The Avengers, minus the Hulk, ran from there, taking as much distance as they could, right in the moment Natasha fired a missile. Before he could see it hit, however, Clark heard something else and looked to the side.

There was a train in the sky.

He was so surprised that instead of moving, he tried to stop it. It didn't work so well. The train fell hard on top of him, throwing him inside a building. Even under it, however, Clark could hear the missile hitting its target.

"Do we have an all clear? Do we have an all clear? Alpha Team, do you copy?"

The soldiers approached the building carefully, weapons raised, looking without blinking at the broken train inside of it. With slow steps, sweat running down their faces, they got closer.

The train moved; they stopped, immediately, ready to retreat.

Clark got out from under the train, tired, looking at the soldiers; all the weapons were pointed at him, but nobody was firing. He looked at them for a moment, studying their faces; they were scared. They were apprehensive. But they weren't looking at him as if he were the enemy.

Tentatively, he began to walk, very slowly; still no one shot him. They were just looking at him, watching Clark approach. And then they began to lower their weapons, opening space so he could pass in the middle of them.

There was awe in their eyes. Fear too, yes, but they weren't seeing him as a threat; they were gazing at him with respect.

He got out to the street, all eyes on him, to see the Avengers arriving, Captain America in front. He looked at him and nodded, then looked at the soldier around them.

"This man is not our enemy," he announced, the Avengers behind him agreeing.

Clark returned the nod.

"Thank you, Captain."

"See you back at the Helicarrier," he said.

Clark nodded again and flew to the sky.

Zod and his soldiers walked to the Black Zero's bridge, their faces showing exactly how frustrated with the situation they were. Jax-Ur looked at them, surprised.

"What happened down there?" he asked.
"He exposed a temporary weakness," Zod summarized, not in the mood to talk.

"It is of little consequence," Jax-Ur retorted, "because I have located the Codex!"

Every eye in the room turned to him, the good news filling them with energy.

"It was never in the capsule," he continued. "Jor-El took the Codex, the DNA of a billion people, then he bonded it within his son's individual cells. All of Krypton's heirs, living hidden in one refuge's body."

Zod stared at Jax-Ur for a moment, then turned, looking at Earth from the big window.

"Does Kal-El need to be alive for us to extract the Codex from his cells?" he asked, the sun shining in his face.

Jax-Ur was thinking for a second.

"No."

General Zod kept staring at the big world in front of him, all his desire to have it burning within him.

"Release the World Engine!" he ordered.
Join You in the Sun

Chapter 14 – Join You in the Sun

The red pickup fell heavily to the ground when Clark released it, the entire thing bent in weird angles. He hoped the engine was still working. Lifting his eyes, he looked back at his mom's house and sighed; the house wasn't in much better shape, not after having that same red pickup falling through its roof. He wanted to punch Zod again.

Without saying anything, he went in, crossing the destroyed living room, where his mother was kneeling to pick something up: the family photo album.

"Got it!" she said, laughing, as she got up with a groan. "It's still in one piece."

Clark didn't really understand how she could be laughing because of a photo album when the house was like that; it must've showed in his face.

"It's only stuff, Clark," Martha said, tracing her finger down his chest, feeling the fabric of his skinsuit. "It can always be replaced."

"Yeah, but you can't be," he retorted. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She nodded, smiling.

"Please, I've had worse running this farm. A cow tossed me over the fence once, remember?" she said, taking her hand to her neck, where Faora had grabbed her. "Now that I think about, this was the second cow to hit me, wasn't it?"

Clark's eyes widened at what his mom had said; she only laughed.

"Oh, Clark, stop worrying. You saved me." She looked at Smallville's center direction. "You saved everybody. Just like I knew you would."

"A few million dollars in damages, though."

"Like I said, it's only stuff."

"I'll fix the house once I finish this, ma, I promise," he said.

She just waved and sat down.

"What happened there, anyway?" Martha asked.

Clark sighed again.

"My biological father took something from Krypton before it was destroyed. Something called the Codex. It's the collective DNA from all Kryptonians, that they used to… birth people artificially, I guess," Clark answered. "Zod says it can actually bring our people back."

Martha looked at him, not understanding.

"Isn't that a good thing?" she asked.
He looked down for a second and shook his head.
"They are not interested in sharing this world."

"Oh!" Martha summarized the situation pretty well.

They were in silence for a few seconds, until that silence was broken by a weird beeping noise; he looked at his arm.

"Kelex?"

"Sir, you have a call" she answered, disassembling herself into millions of metal particles and reassembling again in her "drone form".

"A call… You work as a phone too?" he asked, surprised.

"I have redirected the phone calls from your cellphone to myself, as you aren't currently carrying it," Kelex answered, vibrating slightly every time the phone rang, he supposed. "It' from Miss Romanoff."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Accept the call, please."

"Clark, it's Natasha," Natasha's voice came from Kelex.

"Hey, Natasha, is everybody okay?"

"We're fine. We're back at the Helicarrier." She hesitated a second. "How is your mother? Is she okay?"

"I'm just fine, dear," answered Martha, smiling. "Thanks for asking."

"Oh! That's good to hear, ma'am," Natasha said, clearly not expecting his mother to be hearing the conversation. "Clark, it's a good thing you haven't left yet. I talked with your father on the ship, he told me how to defeat them. We are going to need the ship that you arrived in."

That got his attention.

Tony splashed his face with cold water and looked in the mirror; a tired, bruised and dirty man looked back. And he actually thought his reflection looked better than he was feeling, if he was honest with himself.

They had their asses kicked. There was no two ways about it. Nothing they had done, absolutely nothing, had worked. They simply weren't powerful enough; and wasn't that a blow to his ego? That Kryptonian woman, Faora, didn't fight them; she batted them around, like a cat did with a mouse.

And that scared the hell out of Tony.

To know that there were beings out there, in the universe, that were capable of doing something like this wasn't something he was dealing well with. He could understand now, clearly, how exactly beings like Odin, Thor and Loki came to be worshiped on Earth; when entities came down here, capable of doing what they did, it was really no wonder.
Kryptonians were even worse.

They could've really used Thor's might right now. Whatever he was doing, it should damn well be very important, because things were not looking good in the least. Luck was the entire reason none of them had been killed; luck and Clark.

At least they had one super powered being at their side; well, two, counting the Hulk, but even he was defeated. If Clark hadn't been there with them, he had no doubt in his mind everybody would already be dead. Good thing he was; and that he really was on their side. Because if he wasn't, well… Needless to say things would be over before they even started.

Giving up in trying to fix his horrible appearance, Tony turned and left the bathroom. He walked through the halls of the Helicarrier until he finally got to the room where the rest of the Avengers were; and they did not look better than he.

Clint was even more bruised than he was, probably hitting his face when the Quinjet went down; Bruce, even without any visible marks, was shaking, the aftereffects of his transformation hurting him from deep inside his body; Steve was better, with just a single cut in his cheek from some debris that flew around when Natasha fired that missile, and Tony would actually say he was good if it weren't for his haunted eyes; Natasha, at least, looked damn near perfect as she always did, even have fallen down from orbit.

"So…" he started, and everybody turned to him. "That was embarrassing."

"That's one word for it," Clint grunted, holding a pack of ice against his face.

"At least we won," said Natasha; everyone looked at her. "What? They retreated, didn't they?"

Steve sighed.

"Maybe we won the battle, but how many people died on our side?" he asked.

Natasha tilted her head as if agreeing; she looked at Bruce.

"You're okay there, Bruce?" she asked, seeing him shaking non-stop.

"Oh, I-I'm fine," he answered, his teeth clacking a bit. "I-It's the transformation… It feels like a…" "Exposed nerve, right?" Tony completed.

"Like an exposed nerve," Bruce agreed with a grimace. "Every single muscle tears apart when I transform, my bones grow, my whole body changes… It's not comfortable. And it's even worse when it happens involuntarily."

"And when you don't win," Tony guessed.

Bruce laughed without humor.

"That… that actually never happened before. Can't say the Big Guy is happy about it."

Everyone was in silence for a bit, trying to chew down the monumental fact that the Incredible Hulk had lost a fist fight; and thinking, of course, how exactly were they supposed to fight them when even the Big Guy couldn't.

"We need to prepare ourselves better for the second round," Steve announced.
Tony actually laughed.

"How? How exactly do you want us to prepare for this?" he asked, waving his hand around.

"Everybody has a weakness," Steve said, looking at him. "Even them. Natasha managed to knockout one of them, didn't she?"

"Actually, it had little to do with me," Natasha admitted, having thought about it. "The missile I hit her with didn't even scratch her. What did bring her down was the sensory overload."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked.

"Clark broke her helmet. Earth's atmosphere doesn't agree with them very well."

"Is it poisonous to them? Clark seemed okay" asked Tony, curious.

"Quite the contrary, it makes them stronger," Natasha answered. "Much, much, stronger, too fast for them to get used to it. The atmosphere from their planet keeps their gifts controlled, weaker; when our atmosphere flushes that out, they can reach their full potential. Their senses get so much better that hearing anything, seeing anything, hurts them. That's why Faora passed out, because the sound of the missile exploding on her was too much for her to take. Not because it was strong enough to hurt her."

They were all in silence, considering this new information.

"That's it then," Steve said. "Their helmets. If we can break them, we can bring them down."

"Again, how?" Tony asked, exasperated. "Nothing in my suit could scratch the paint from Faora's armor. My repulsors, my tank-missile, my lasers… It took everything I threw at her as if I was attacking her with paper balls."

Steve sighed, looking at Tony.

"Tony, you are the most intelligent person I have ever met…"

Well, that was a surprising, but much deserved, compliment.

"Thank you!"

"But you are being stupid."

"Wait, what?"

Steve got up and stared at Tony; no, not Steve Rogers anymore: Captain America.

"Back in WWII, I lost count the number of times we faced an enemy that was better equipped, in greater numbers and better positioned; and yet, we managed to win every time. Why?"

"Because you were fighting Nazis and not god-like aliens?" Tony asked, sarcastically.

"No, because we knew how to fight smart. When gun against gun wouldn't take us anywhere. When to use our heads instead of bigger bombs." He looked around, and every person in the table actually sat straighter. "We don't have to defeat them, the plan Natasha explained to us will do that; we just have to slow them down. So maybe we can't break their armors, but we can make them as… uncomfortable to use as possible."
A light suddenly lit in Tony's mind.

"I think I have a few ideas," he said, considering his equipment. "And a few extra hands to help us."

Before he could explain what he meant, however, the intercom in the room buzzed.

"Our package has arrived," said Maria Hill. "Go greet Superman on the flight deck."

All of them got up to leave the room, only to turn back when they heard what Maria had called Clark.

"Superman?!" exclaimed Tony.

They could almost see Maria's cheeks turn pink.

"That's what the soldiers are calling him... Because of the 'S' and, well... Mainly because of the 'S'," she answered, turning the intercom off.

Everyone turned then, to Natasha.

"What?" she asked, raising a single eyebrow. "I had nothing to do with that."

Clark released his ship on the flight deck of the Helicarrier very carefully, just when Director Fury, Maria Hill and the Avengers appeared.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Fury, looking at the ship. "The ship you arrived in?"

"Yes," Clark answered, turning to him. "I don't know what Natasha told you, but this ship is powered by something called a "Phantom Drive"; it basically bends space. Zod's ship uses the same technology. So if we can make the two drives collide to one another..."

"A singularity will be created," completed Tony, eyes fixed on the ship; Steve looked a little lost, so he added: "A black hole."

"Yes," Clark agreed. "So if we open up this doorway then, theoretically, they should be pulled back into the Phantom Zone."

"So you want to use this thing as a bomb?" asked Maria Hill.

Clark nodded.

"Basically, yeah."

"We just have to figure it out how to take it all the way to space," said Clint, getting closer, eyeing the ship. "Speaking of it, why didn't you do this already? You were there."

Fair question; Clark looked at him.

"First, because I didn't know if Zod was really here to start a fight," he answered. "I couldn't very well just attack them."

Everybody there seemed to disagree with that statement, but nobody said anything.

"Second," Clark continued, "while I believed their ship was powered by a Phantom Drive, I wasn't
sure of it yet. I just managed to confirm it after we went aboard Black Zero and Natasha used my command key so my A.I could enter their systems. If they hadn't one, this plan wouldn't work at all."

Tony raised his hand.

"You have an A.I?" he interrupted.

Clark, stopping to talk abruptly, turned to him.

"Remember what I asked to you on the party? That's not theoretical at all. But we can talk about it later." Tony's eyes seemed to glow with curiosity, but Clark looked back at Clint and continued. "Third, the Phantom Drive isn't online every time and it has to be for this to work. It's only on when they are using it and they are only using it on two occasions: when they need to travel somewhere far away and when they are using it to power something else, like a World Engine, in our case."

Fury looked at him.

"World Engine?" he asked.

Well, how to explain that one now? Clark considered his words.

"Zod plans to take over Earth," he said, deciding to be as direct as possible; everybody was looking at him, frozen. "Not only that, he plans to terraform it, to turn Earth into Krypton."

"How is he going to do that?" asked Bruce, eyes wide.

"Kryptonians had advanced technology," Clark explained. "One of these technologies is called a World Engine. It's essentially a big terraforming machine, that can change the topography and atmosphere from a planet. It was used to colonize other worlds," he said, looking at them almost ashamed for a second. "And in some cases, as a weapon of war. I think he intends to use it here."

His declaration left all of them speechless, capable of only looking at him.

"How does that thing works?" asked Fury after a few seconds.

"It works together with their ship," Clark described. "One in each extremity of the world, like two battering rams, increasing Earth's gravity and eventually taking over its atmosphere. When it reaches a certain point it will kill everything not from Krypton."

"Holy fuck…" said Clint, under his breath.

What Clint said seemed to be everybody's reaction to this news.

"And it's going to be our only chance at stopping them," Clark completed. "When he gives the order and the World Engine lands, that means the Phantom Drive will be online in the Black Zero."

There was a long silence as everybody digested this information. As they tried to come to terms with the fact that, if they failed, Earth wouldn't be conquered; it would be erased from the universe, alongside humanity.

"I don't know exactly where Zod will send the World Engine," Clark continued, "but I have a feeling that he will send Black Zero directly to New York."

"Why?" asked Steve, raising his head fast; he was from there, Clark remembered.
"Because it's where I live," Clark answered with a bitter smile. "And I'm sure Zod will find it fitting to build his new home on top of what used to be mine."

Tony gave a little mirthless laugh.

"Now, where did we see that one before?" he asked, looking at his Avengers companions.

"If you have any evacuation protocols in the city," Clark continued, "now is the time to enforce them."

He looked at Maria Hill, as if asking; it was a fair assumption, he thought, since Loki's invasion.

"We do," she said, already picking up her communicator.

Suddenly, however, Fury walked to him, stopping very close, his one eye staring at Clark's face.

"How do we know you are on our side?" he asked. Clark looked at him, shocked. "Why exactly should I believe that you don't want Zod's plan to succeed? You don't have a home anymore. Don't have a people. Are you telling me that you are going to throw all that away just so you can help us? Betray your own people to save Earth?"

Clark stared a long time at Fury, his eyes hard. In any other day he would've accepted this suspicion as natural; they were afraid, after all. But not on that day. On that day he had just found out he could've had his people back if he wanted to; he had turned that down because he couldn't be a part of the genocide of the human race. He had fought for his life against the Kryptonians in Smallville; and he had almost lost his mother.

"You want a simple way to know that I'm on your side?" he asked, towering over Fury in his anger, not Clark Kent anymore, but Kal-El, the head of the House of El. "You are all still alive. And I haven't crashed this flying bathtub on the ground yet."

Fury held his ground, still staring at him; he saw Maria's hand slide slowly to her gun, but she didn't take it.

"Earth is my home. It's where my family and friends are. And I will fight to my last breath to save it, and them, if I have to. Don't ever question my loyalty again."

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Excusing himself to cool off from the discussions a little bit, Clark went to a room back in, alone. Kelex disintegrated itself from Clark's arm and reassembled in the form of a person; the metal particles started to emit light and, suddenly, a hologram of his father was in the room with him.

"Kal, you wanted to talk?" Jor-El asked.

Clark looked at his father, his expression serious.

"Why didn't you tell me about the Codex?" he asked.

"We wanted you to learn what meant to be human first…"

"No. Not this again," Clark interrupted, his patience at its limit. "You made me believe I was alone. That I was the only Kryptonian left. And now I learned, from a psychopath no less, that this wasn't true at all. That I could have brought my people back anytime I wanted. That you could have." He looked at his father without blinking. "Why haven't you? Why… Why did you send me here by myself?"
Jor-El held his stare.

"And what kind of people would I have created?" he inquired. "Like I told you before, I am product of Krypton's failures. So was your mother. We were doomed to repeat its mistakes. You aren't."

"Any kind of people would be better than no people at all."

"But would it?" Jor-El asked. "Take Zod, for example. A product of Krypton's failures just as we were. A man made, to the very last strand of his DNA, to be a soldier. And now, when he finally has the chance to bring his people back, what does he do? He could've already achieved that if he were willing to share this world. He could've searched for another viable planet. He could have negotiated asylum on this one."

Jor-El approached, his steps making no sounds.

"Instead of doing any of those things, Zod arrived as a conqueror. Not because this is the best alternative, not because this will maximize his chances of saving the kryptonian race, but because it's all he knows. He isn't a diplomat, an explorer or even a politician; he is a warrior. So he will act as one, no matter what happens, no matter what damage it may bring, not only to Kryptonians, but to all around." He looked in Clark's eyes. "Maybe I wouldn't cause so much damage, but the result would be the same. I would doom Krypton's sons and daughters to a path limited by what they made me. You won't do that."

Clark looked at his father's projection for a long time, then said:

"And yet, you told me that when you faced Zod, to protect me and mom, you defeated him. You, a scientist to the very last strand of your DNA, against the man created to be Krypton's best general: and you won. You fought against your very nature and managed to best him. Why couldn't you do it again?"

Now was Jor-El's turn to be in silence, his eyes far away.

"I had not considered this," he finally said, his voice low. "Maybe there was hope for some of us after all, even if it took a threat against my loved ones to release me." He turned to Clark. "But that is irrelevant now, Kal. I died. And no amount of regret will bring me back."

Clark laughed even if there wasn't anything funny to laugh at.

"No, it won't. It won't bring anyone back, will it? Aside from a few crazy murderers, I really am alone."

"But you are not alone, are you?" asked Jor-El. "You might not have our people with you, but you have people who you love. Your family. Your friends. Clark, "and he looked at his father when he used his human name" you are as much a son of Earth as you are from Krypton. Never forget that."

Clark looked at him for a long time, and then he nodded.

"I won't."

Jor-El smiled.

"Good, now, let's talk about more pressing matters, shall we?" Jor-El said. "Soon enough, if he already didn't, Zod will release the World Engine. As I told you, protocol dictates that at war, when faced with a planet suitable for terraforming and defended by its original inhabitants, the World Engine can be used as a weapon of combat. In those circumstances, the ship leading the attack will
release the World Engine on one side of the planet and then slave itself to it on the opposite side, until the planet is completely terraformed."

His father looked at him with a serious expression.

"Son, you are the only one who can stop a World Engine," he said. "Earth's weapons won't work on it, or on Black Zero, while they connected; they will be too well defended and, of course, protected by the gravity field they'll be generating. So the future of Earth rests upon your shoulders."

Clark could only look at his father, not knowing what to say; Jor-El approached.

"I have no doubt in my mind that you can accomplish this, Kal," he said, stopping very close from him and smiling. "And whatever path you choose to follow after this, know that your mother and I will be alongside you every step of the way."

No, it couldn't be…

"Why does this feel like a goodbye?" he asked, his voice low.

"Because it is one, son. Zod will try to secure the Genesis Chamber in the ship I'm on. He will override the controls."

"Why didn't you tell me, I could've…"

"You can't stop him and the World Engine, son. It's one or the other."

Clark was frozen in place, without being able to say anything, his heart clenching in his chest.

"You don't need my 'ghost', son. You have my spirit. Goodbye."

And before he could answer, his father disappeared.

Zod looked around the Black Zero's bridge, seeing the preparations for the release of the World Engine. His men moved with certainty, knowing exactly what to do; they had been born for this, and trained by him to achieve their full potential, so there wasn't any doubt in his mind as to their effectiveness.

"Preparations complete, sir," said Faora.

He just nodded; the whole ship trembled when the World Engine separated itself from the Black Zero, like a smaller ship, beginning to fly away. He watched from the big window as the World Engine passed in front of the sun, beginning its descent to Earth.

"What just happened?" asked Fury, looking at the huge screen.

"The ship just split in two," answered Maria Hill. "Track One is heading East, Track Two is deploying towards the southern hemisphere."

"How fast is that bogey moving?"

"Approaching Mach 24 and accelerating," she said. "It looks like it's going to impact somewhere in the South Indian Ocean."
Nobody in the room spoke as they saw the images from the satellite.

"The rest of the ship is descending," Maria added, suddenly turning white.

"Put on the board, now!" Fury barked the order.

The monitor switched, showing the ship descending over New York.

"Clark, are you okay?" Natasha asked, getting in the room without him realizing it.

He turned, eyes still wide with shock; Natasha took one look at his expression to know something was wrong.

"Is Martha…?"

"Ma is fine," he answered, before she could complete the question. He looked down. "My father, however, isn't."

She raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Jor-El? What happened?"

They had met, Clark remembered now.

"Zod… Zod is going to try to take my ship; the ship I stole from you guys," he said. "He is most likely going to erase my father's A.I when he does that."

Natasha approached a bit.

"Is he already there? Can't you reach him in time?" she asked.

"I probably can," Clark admitted. "But if I do this, I won't be able to reach the World Engine in time."

She didn't say anything. Natasha only looked at him and placed a hand on his shoulder. If he knew anyone who could probably understand the nature of the choice he made, it would be a hardened agent; he was sure she had made some pretty difficult choices in her life.

"I am sorry, Clark," Natasha said, and he believed her.

He touched her hand and nodded in thanks; there wasn't much to say.

"We are discussing plans," she said, after a while. "We could use your input."

Clark nodded again.

"I'll be there in a second," he said, still a little dazed. "I just have to make a phone call first."

Natasha nodded in response and turned, leaving him alone again. As he asked, Kelex made the call; he stood there in the middle of the room, waiting for someone to pick up, until someone finally did.

"Look, asshole, for the 100th time, I don't want to buy any of your shit!"

"Jessica?" he asked, as her scream echoed in the room.
She was in silence for a second.

"Clark! You little fucker, I told you to keep me updated!"

"Actually, I was the one who said I would keep you updated, which is why I'm calling."

"Whatever… Look, what the hell is happening? I just saw the news, there was a huge fighting in some small city, was that you?"

"Yeah, that was me. And the Avengers."

"Holy shit, then it's happening…"

"That's why I called, listen… Zod is not interested in peace. He will release a weapon called World Engine. It essentially terraforms the planet, it turns into something close to Krypton."

He could hear her breathing, but for once she didn't say anything.

"The machine works alongside the ship, so each half will go to a side of the planet. I don't know exactly where the World Engine will go, but I can bet that the ship will be just over…"

"Here… Jesus Christ, I can see it."

He was too late.

"Jessica, take your sister and run as far as you can away from that ship. Do you hear me? Do not get close from that thing!"

"I'm not a moron, Clark. And Trish is already here. I'm on her studio."

"Oh… Well, that's good. Look, I gotta go, but remember what I said. I'm going to try to fix this mess."

"Wait! Don't hang up. I want to know the plan."

Against his good sense, he did as she asked.

"Bring the Phantom Drive online," Zod ordered.

As he did it, the Phantom Drive began to glow blue; a blue beam left the ship, linking it to the World Engine on the opposite side of the globe.

Jax-Ur looked at him.

"We are now slaved to the World Engine," he announced.

Zod looked back, without blinking.

"Initiate it."

He could see the World Engine powering up on the monitors, the cloud of black smoke rising from it; and then it blasted the ground, the blue beam opening the ocean waters to hit the Earth.

In New York, humans and vehicles rose in the air as the World Engine pushed the beam to them; and then were slammed back as Black Zero pushed it back. Earth trembled.
"It began," Fury affirmed, seeing the images in New York with an impassive expression.

On the inside, however, Fury was anything but impassive, as people were being raised in the air and then slammed back, cars were being flattened as the blue beam slammed the ground with force; and each time it hit, the area affected was bigger.

Every agent in the control room stopped what they were doing, incapable of not looking at what was happening, eyes glued to the screen.

Tony Stark approached, looking at the big monitor.

"It's like he said," Stark mentioned. "It's some kind of gravity weapon. It's working in tandem with their ship. Somehow they're increasing the Earth's mass, clouding the atmosphere with particulates…Yep, we're being terraformed alright," he declared, taking his hands to his face.

It was a good thing they had already taken Pepper out of New York, Fury thought, otherwise he was sure Stark would fly there right now.

"What's that?" asked one of the agents, her face pale, her fear probably so great right now that she had stopped what she was doing to ask that; Fury wondered if she hadn't family in the city.

"Planetary engineering modifying the Earth's atmosphere and topography..." explained Banner, eyes also glued to the screen.

"They are turning Earth into Krypton," a voice announced from the back of the room.

Everyone turned to look at Clark, getting in the room with his red cape swaying; every eye there full of fear, looking at him as if expecting some kind of comfort.

"And what happen to us?" asked the agent, looking even younger than she was.

"Based on these readings… There won't be an 'us'," said Banner, eyes still on the screen.

Tony finally turned to them, walking through the control room, passing in the middle of the agents.

"What I don't get is 'why'," he said, suddenly, looking at Clark. "What are they planning to win with this thing, except to kill us all? I mean, they don't have enough Kryptonians to have a viable population. You are, by all accounts, already an extinct species."

It was a good question; did they plan simply to destroy them all?

"That won't be a problem," said Clark, as everyone looked at him waiting for an answer. "Kryptonians use artificial population control. They have these chambers, called Genesis Chambers, where babies are birthed to fulfill a destined role in the society. Once they have a planet, all they gotta do is populate it back again."

There was silence.

"Did you…?" Natasha began to ask.

"I was the first natural birth in centuries," he answered, before she could finish her question.

"Good, your parents had fun making you, can we go back to what matters?" asked Clint, impatient. "How do we stop them from killing us all and making 'New Krypton'?"
Zod watched the liquid geo monitor as it finally indicated the location of the old scout ship, the one that had the Genesis Chamber.

"Faora," he called, seeing her turning to him, "take command."

"Yes, sir."

"I need to secure the Genesis Chamber, "he continued, "and pay my respects to an old friend."

Jessica and Trish were glued to the big window of the studio's building, watching with mouths agape the enormous ship floating on top of the buildings, a big blue beam smashing the ground so strongly that everything shook.

They couldn't move; their eyes went up and down, accompanying the people, cars and everything else being raised to the air and then tossed back down, the violence of the hits flattening the cars like pancakes.

None of them wanted to even imagine what was happening to the people being hit by that thing.

Every time the blue beam hit the ground, the area it impacted seemed to grow bigger. Soon, the first buildings around it began to topple down, disintegrating due to the force; their eyes simply followed as the buildings fell, hitting others building on the way down, to finally crash down against the streets.

What the fuck would Clark do to "fix this mess", as he said it?

Zod looked around at the frozen wasteland he had landed on, the wind howling. The scout ship was there, but he didn't look at it; no, first, he had to do something.

Gazing at the yellow sun, as if challenging it, Zod, raised his hand and retracted his helmet, taking a long breath of Earth's atmosphere, feeling the air getting inside him, purging Krypton's atmosphere from his body.

It was a weakness from his part that had cost them a battle; he needed to rectify that.

Almost immediately, he felt his senses grow to impossible levels, the wind growing so loud that his head hurt; his eyes seeing new colors and actually passing through his armor and skin, until he could see his hand's bones; his nose could suddenly smell everything and an overabundance of aromas burned his nose, even in that frozen place, where nothing was supposed to smell; his skin felt the cold air so clearly that he could actually feel the small ice crystals on the wind.

Closing his eyes, Zod forced every last of his warrior discipline to focus on just the essentials, making his mind ignore the extra. To a normal Kryptonian, that would be impossible, but he was raised to be the best soldier of Krypton.

And the best soldier in Krypton couldn't afford weaknesses.

When he opened his eyes again, there was only serenity; his senses were mastered.

Turning around, Zod walked to the scout ship, the doors opening to greet him. He walked the empty halls until he was at the Genesis Chamber; grabbing his command key, he inserted it into the ship.
"Command key accepted," the computer said. "Genesis Chamber coming online, sir."

He smiled, until there was a voice behind him; a voice he knew very well.

"Stop this, Zod," said Jor-El. "While there is still time."

Zod turned, seeing the ghost from his old friend; and against his own will, he felt happy at the sight.

"Haven't given up lecturing me, have you?" he answered. "Even in death."

Jor-El's hologram approached.

"I will not let you use the Codex like this."

"You don't have the power to stop me," Zod retorted. "The command key I have entered is revoking your authority. This ship is now under my control."

"Our people can coexist!" Jor-El claimed.

Zod shook his head; how very like his son.

"So we can suffer through years of pain trying to adapt, like your son has?" he asked, walking to Jor-El.

"You are talking about genocide!"

"Yes, and I'm arguing its merits with a ghost," Zod said, turning his back at his old friend's hologram. "Ship, have you managed to quarantine this invasive intelligence?"

"I have."

"Then prepare to terminate it, I'm tired of this debate."

Jor-El followed him.

"We are both ghosts, Zod. Can't you see that? The Krypton you are clinging onto is gone!"

"Then I'll bring it back," he said. "Earth should be honored to be the place chosen for a New Krypton."

"I can see that appealing to your sense of honor is useless," Jor-El said, and Zod bristled, "so I'll give you a practical reason then: Earth is one of the Nine Realms overseen by the Asgardians. They will not forgive this."

"THEN THEY'LL KNEEL BEFORE ZOD!" Zod screamed, his fury rising to the limit.

Jor-El was not bothered by it.

"You don't have an army yet," he continued. "Fight them and you'll lose"

Zod stared a long time at his old friend, his eyes burning in rage; then he smiled.

"Tell me, you have Jor-El's memories, his conscience. Can you experience his pain?" Zod asked. "After I terraform this planet, I will harvest the Codex from your son's corpse. And then… How do the Asgardians call it? Ragnarok?"
Zod looked deeply into Jor-El's eyes.  
"Your son will be their Doomsday!"

This brought a reaction to his face.  
"This is madness, Zod!" he yelled, eyes wide. "The Council forbade this for a reason!"

"Because they are cowards. Because they are weak. And this weakness brought us to ruin. "Zod shook his head. "No more. After Earth, I will conquer Asgard. And then the rest of the Nine Realms. And then I will rebuild Krypton's Empire with a Second Era of Expansion!"

Jor-El could only look, shocked, his eyes conveying his horror at Zod's plans.

"Your sensors felt it too, didn't they?" Zod asked, suddenly. "What lies on Earth? We found our way here because of an Infinity Stone... That one isn't here anymore, but it wasn't the only one, was it?"

Jor-El didn't answer; instead, he approached, almost touching Zod.

"My son is ten times the man you once were. And he will stop you. I can promise you that."

Zod gave one last look at his old friend; and terminated his A.I.

Clark, the Avengers, Fury and Maria Hill were on the flight deck, making preparations for the attack, the Helicarrier already on course to New York.

"Do not approach Black Zero while it's linked to the World Engine," Clark said, watching them preparing themselves, picking up weapons and armor. "The gravitational field will put you in the ground."

"That means no distance attacks either, right?" asked Natasha.

"Kelex?" asked Clark.

His disintegrated and reformed in drone shape.

"Holy shit! What's that?" asked Tony, stopping what he was doing to look at Kelex. "What's it made from?"

"That's Kelex and she is made from liquid geo," Clark answered, trying to continue to speak but being interrupted again.

"Liquid geo?" Tony asked.

"It's not actually liquid, it's a bunch of metal particles that can be assembled in any form with a magnetic field."

"But…"

"Jesus Christ, if your dick gets any harder you'll break your armor! Forget the robot, focus on the plan!"

There was a sudden silence as everyone turned to look at Kelex.
"Who was that?" asked Tony, looking at Clark and pointing at Kelex.

"No one! A friend! Forget about it, let's focus on the plan," Clark answered, quickly. "So, Kelex, what about distance attacks?"

"The gravitational field will make a hit impossible" the robot answered.

"And nukes?" asked Fury and everybody turned to him. "I have to know!"

"Nuclear warheads will face the same problem. And it's unlikely Black Zero or the World Engine will be destroyed by one. They have too many defenses."

"So no nukes!" said Tony, pointing at Fury. "Tell your buddies at the Council that."


Clark turned to the Avengers.

"I'll have to stop the World Engine over the Indian Ocean before you can approach. Once I do that, hit the ship with the Phantom Drive."

They all nodded; except Natasha, that approached him.

"If that thing is turning Earth's atmosphere into Krypton's, you'll be weaker around it," she said, her voice low, looking seriously at him.

Clark nodded.

"I know. But I'm not about to let that stop me from trying."

And he turned to get some distance so he could fly; before he could, however, the Avengers approached.

"What you're doing, "began Captain America," is very brave. Thank you."

He touched his shoulder and then everyone there did the same, looking at him with respect, with something close to admiration; Natasha, Tony, Steve, Bruce, Clint, even Fury nodded to him, as Maria wished him good luck. Clark thanked them and wished good luck to them too, knowing very well anyone could die in this mission.

Clark walked a few meters and looked back at them, the words his father had told him playing in his mind.

You will give the people of Earth an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun, Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.

Closing his eyes, Clark kneeled on the ground, his fist touching the Helicarrier; and then he exploded to the sky, passing through the clouds, going all the way up to the sun.
Black Zero Event

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Chapter 15 – Black Zero Event

Clark looked down at the big blue world floating on space; his Kryptonian eyes pierced the clouds surrounding it, until he could get a clear look of the World Engine on the Indian Ocean, standing over it with 3 massive metal claws. The sky over it was filled with black clouds, the smoke being generated from the terraforming machine beginning to take over Earth's atmosphere. A ring of ocean water surrounded the machine, the gravitational field keeping it in air, and red thunderbolts slashed the black sky, while the blue beam kept hammering the ground.

It looked like a storm from Hell itself.

Without hesitating, Clark began his descent, entering atmosphere with speed, flying directly against the World Engine; it was a mistake. The black clouds forming over it were composed of Krypton's atmosphere. The instant his lungs filled themselves with that, he felt his energy being drained, as a powerful coughing fit took him; he couldn't keep himself flying and began to fall down fast.

Luckily, there still was Earth's air around. The minute he got out from the black clouds, Earth's atmosphere cleaned his body from Krypton's air and he felt his body recover its energy; he stopped in air and looked at the World Engine, before flying closer.

As his father warned, gravity was going haywire around it; he could feel the force pushing him down and then up, making it hard to fly with precision, and he doubted any jet would stay in air for long in these conditions. And, as his father had also warned, the moment the World Engine identified him as a threat, its defenses activated. Opening a huge container on its main body, the World Engine revealed a massive storage of liquid geo; which shaped itself into a strange metal tentacle, reaching fast in his direction.

Flying to the side, Clark evaded the liquid geo tentacle, seeing its tip morph into some kind of claw; and at the same moment, 3 other identical tentacles formed from the World Engine, flying against him, trying to grab his body. Clark began to fly fast, dodging the metal claws, going up and down, maneuvering faster than he ever had, trying to think fast in a way to trick the 3 tentacles and keep himself in the air with the gravitational pull doing its best to knock him down.

That was when dozens other tentacles took shape from the World Engine and attacked him; that was not going to be easy.

"Jarvis, can you get a visual on him?" asked Natasha, eyes on the monitors.

"One moment, please," answered Stark's A.I; the monitors in the command center of the Helicarrier began to transmit the images from Jarvis's satellites; and everybody could only stare at what was happening on the screens.

When Clark took off, flying so fast that SHIELD's satellites lost him in a matter of seconds, they all returned inside to finish preparing. The Helicarrier was almost in New York, Clark's ship was already loaded on the Avenger's Quinjet and the jets were prepared to attack just as soon the World Engine was down.

But, by the look of things, that last part wasn't going so well.
It was difficult to see because of the black clouds interfering with the satellite's vision, but the little they could see was unbelievable. Natasha had thought Clark was exaggerating when he said he was the only one who could deal with the World Engine; she thought, maybe, it was only a matter of being able to get there in time.

She was wrong.

Not only the gravitational field around the World Engine would make it impossible for any weapon they use to hit, there was no way to get close to it. If that wasn't bad enough, there were the metal tentacles the thing just sprouted.

"Holy Hell, is that liquid geo?" asked Stark, eyes glued to the screens. "I don't remember him saying it could do that!"

"He did say it could take any form, didn't he?" said Steve, looking worried.

Every eye in the room was glued to the monitors, from Fury and the Avengers, to every single agent there. The tension was enormous. If Clark failed… Well, they didn't exactly have a "Plan B". The Council would probably unleash a nuclear attack against both targets, which would devastate the world if it hit; which it wouldn't, because besides the gravitational field, the ship and the World Engine were equipped to deal with things like that. Clark had warned them.

No, right now, their only hope was Clark.

"We are approaching New York," announced Maria.

Jessica saw the window beginning to crack; alongside the wall.

"Okay, Trish, time to go," she said, nudging her sister to make her stop looking at the ship from the window. "The 'pancake area' is spreading and it's getting here. We need to get away."

Each time the ship hit the ground with that huge blue laser, Jessica could feel the building trembling; the sound was horrible, with cars, buildings and people being smashed against the ground. Everywhere they looked, there were people running away, screaming, completely desperate to get away from yet another alien attack.

She looked back at her sister; Trish was still frozen by the window.

"Trish!" she yelled, making her and several other people around jump. "Now!"

Trish finally turned to her, a scared expression on her face, and nodded. Without waiting for Jessica, swallowing her fear for the time being, she clapped her hands getting everyone's attention.

"Alright, people, we are leaving!" she screamed. "Leave everything behind and try to keep yourselves calm! Do you see the policemen down there? Follow their instructions. Go, go!"

The people around the radio station seemed to wake up and began to do what Trish asked, leaving the room fast. Jessica picked her sister's hand and pulled her to the exit, following them out.

Even though Jessica knew what to expect when she got out, since they were watching those very same streets from inside the studio, actually being there was like being in a completely different world. There were people running in the middle of the streets, through the abandoned cars, always looking behind to look at the menacing ship floating in the sky; buildings, not far from where they were, were beginning to crack, some already loosing huge chunks, the screaming was nonstop.
It was then, a few seconds after they left, while they were still looking around shocked, that one of
the buildings across the street finally gave out. The sound it made was horrible, as if a thousand
bones broke at the same time, and it began to topple to the side; right where they were.

"Shit!" exclaimed Jessica, taking her sister's hand and pulling her.

Trish was frozen on the spot, but that didn't stop Jessica from dragging her along, running to get
away from under the falling building. The sun was blocked for a moment, the huge shadow
growing by the second, as the whole thing came in their direction, pieces of the building smashing
the ground and the cars on its way.

"Oh my god!" yelled Trish, as Jessica pulled her, everybody on the street running around them,
screaming, some falling and staying behind.

Realizing there was no way to outrun the building, Jessica stopped for a second, grabbed Trish and
started to run sideways, hoping to be able to evade the falling building's width rather than its
height; she didn't even realize she was also screaming, when she picked up Trish and jumped.

The building fell right at the moment Jessica landed on the ground, Trish with her, swallowing the
entire street; a cloud of fallen debris covered the air. They were both breathing fast, both covered in
dust and both bleeding from falling on the ground; but they were alive.

"Trish, are you okay?" Jessica asked, getting up and looking at her sister. "Trish!"

Her sister snapped back to reality and nodded fast.

"I'm fine, I'm fine! But those people…"

"Those people are dead, Trish, there is nothing we can do now," Jessica interrupted, not nearly as
cool with the idea as she sounded; but they couldn't stop now. "We have to leave, otherwise we're
dying too."

Trish nodded again and Jessica pulled her up. They began to run on the street, trying to gain
distance from the blast area before another building fell down; which it wouldn't take long, by the
way things were going.

"Help!" a voice called from nearby. "Please, help!"

It was a kid's voice; against every shred of self-preservation inside her, Jessica stopped.

God damn Clark Kent and his heroics for rubbing off on her.

"AAAHHH!" Clark yelled, blasting his heat vision against the liquid geo tentacles.

The tentacles began to melt, fusing together; Clark punched them, hitting the still working parts,
the melted pieces falling on the ocean. But it didn't stop the World Engine, as more tentacles were
generated by it, beginning to follow him.

Clark flew fast, evading them, his punches hitting so hard that the air around his fists created a
blast, disrupting the magnetic field that kept the metal particles together. The blue beam continued
to smash the ground, opening the ocean waters when it attacked; every time that happened, Clark
had to hold himself strongly in air, because the gravity was increased; and then, when Black Zero
on the other side of the world responded, sending the blast back, Clark had to keep himself from
going up.
It was useless to keep fighting like this. Evading the tentacles again, Clark dashed in the World Engine's direction, passing in the middle of the liquid geo, flying fast to avoid the claws forming to grab him; around him, the hellish storm seemed to grow worse, thunderbolts falling endlessly.

He had to destroy the source of the liquid geo, not keep fighting the tentacles.

When he was about to make contact, the World Engine liberated what seemed to be an entire ocean of liquid geo; the massive wave hit right in the face, surrounding him completely, molding itself around his body with incredible strength. And then it shot up, taking Clark with it, until he was in the middle of the black clouds.

In the middle of Krypton's atmosphere.

The air from his home planet began to fill his lungs; he began to cough uncontrollably, the air draining the powers he gained from the yellow sun, making it impossible for him to fight against the grip of the liquid geo. The strength of the tentacles began to crush him. And then it pulled Clark back down again, the speed of the tentacle making him dizzy.

And it threw him right in the middle of the gravity beam.

Clark was swallowed by the blue light as he stood in air for an instant; then the beam blasted him down, the force smashing him to the ground as if he were an insect.

"Shit!" exclaimed Tony, seeing Clark disappearing in the middle of the blue beam; that was a statement Natasha could agree upon.

Around them, every single person in the room was frozen, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to think. How could someone survive that? Was this really the end?

Natasha clenched her hands hard, refusing to believe it would end like that.

"Jarvis, can you see anything? Can you improve the quality of the video?" asked Natasha.

"My apologies, Miss Romanoff, but this is the best I can do," Jarvis answered.

"We need to… We need to do something," Steve said, his hands also clenched, while his eyes went from the monitors showing Clark to the monitors showing New York.

Honestly, Natasha couldn't tell which of them was worse.

"Should I order an attack?" Maria asked, turning to Fury.

Fury was as lost as they were, Natasha could tell, even if he didn't show it.

"The gravitational beam is still on," warned Bruce. "If we attack, all we are going to do is hit the city."

"And if he is dead?" asked Clint, looking at Bruce; to her surprise, Natasha felt a painful thud when he said that. "We can't bet all our chips on him. If he can't deliver, then we have to do something."

It was a pragmatic thought, almost callous, but it was true. If Clark… If Clark really was dead, then the Avengers had to try something. The world depended on that.

"Wait a minute, I see something!" yelled Stark, eyes almost touching the monitor. "Holy mother of… He is getting up!"
Natasha zoomed in the image, trying to get a sense of what was happening; and there, in the middle of the blue beam, she could see a human form trying to stand up. People all around the room cheered for a second; and Natasha felt relief overflow her.

"We are waiting," Fury ordered, holding the attack.

Jessica and Trish followed the sound of the voice, turning on a back street; they saw a boy, covered head to toe in dust, congealed blood on his face and hands, trying to lift what seemed to be a piece of the building that had just fallen off against another building.

The kid couldn't be more than 11 years old.

"Please, you have to help me!" he yelled, as he saw them, his face covered in tears. "It's my aunt, she is stuck!"

They ran to him, the sound of the blue beam battering the ground loud in their ears; and louder at each time it struck.

"Oh my god, thank you," the kid said, his voice muffled with tears. "I-I didn't know what to do! I-I…"

"Shut up, kid!" Jessica interrupted. "We don't have time. Just tell me where she is."

The boy nodded fast and pointed up, to the building on which the fallen one had toppled upon.

"There! We-we were visiting the gallery when the whole thing started. We thought it would be better to stay here, but then…"

"Then the blue beam of death spread and another building fell on top of it, right?" Jessica interrupted again. "Like I said, don't care. Just tell me which floor."

"Third! I managed to squeeze through the windows and get down using the fire escape, but my aunt was hurt! A piece of the building fell on her leg and then the fire escape fell down… I'm trying to open the door but it's blocked! I'm sure if we try to pull together, maybe we could…"

Jessica wasn't listening anymore. She looked up, finding the window from which the kid had escaped.

"Trish, stay with him, I'll be right back."

Saying that, Jessica aimed; and jumped, all the way to the third floor, her arms covering her face when she crashed against the glass with strength.

"Holy cow!" she heard the boy yell from the outside.

Looking around, Jessica assessed the situation, trying to move fast. The whole place was in ruins, parts of the ceiling collapsed, walls broken, electricity wires clacking. It was some sort of small gallery, filled with shops and broken figurines; her foot cracked what seemed to be the remains of an Iron Man toy.

The sound she made getting in, however, alerted someone inside.

"Is anybody there?!" yelled a woman and Jessica began to go in her direction. "Oh, thank god!"

The woman was on the ground, her leg stuck under a huge part of the building that had collapsed.
The entire hallway that led to the exit stairs was blocked by rubbles; no wonder they were trapped inside.

"Please, you have to call for help!" the woman continued, looking at her. "My nephew is…"

"Your nephew is fine, he is with my sister," Jessica answered, looking at the concrete pillar over the woman. "Are you okay? Anything broken?"

"I-I don't think so, I'm just stuck," said the woman. "But I can't get out! It's too heavy. You need to get someone to help!"

Jessica didn't answer; instead, she grabbed the huge pillar with her hands and pushed. It was heavy as fuck and she groaned with the effort, dust clouds rising in air, but the thing began to move.

"Go, get out!" she yelled, her voice strained with the effort.

The woman, who was too shocked by what she was seeing, seemed to snap into motion; once her leg was free, she dragged herself from under it, getting up fast and taking distance. Jessica released the pillar, that fell heavily, lifting dust.

"How… How the hell did you…?" the woman tried to ask, looking in awe at Jessica.

"CrossFit, a little yoga… Lots of proteins. You know, the whole 'you are what you eat' kind of shit… Look, we gotta go," Jessica said, pulling the woman with her, going back to the window from which she had entered.

The woman, still staring nonstop at her, followed, only to look in dismay at the fallen fire escape.

"Oh no! How are we going to…?"

She bit her words back when Jessica lifted her; and yelled like a madwoman when Jessica jumped down. The fall took seconds until they landed safely, but Jessica felt like the woman had screamed for ours.

"Aunt May!" the kid yelled, running to them, hugging not only his aunt but her as well; Jessica was frozen in place. "Thank you, thank you, thank you so much!"

Jessica looked at the face of the kid, caked with dust, blood, tears and… snot.

"Right… Okay kid, get off," she said, untangling herself from the family hug; only to be pulled into another one when Trish hugged her. "God damn it!"

"Shut up, Jes!" Trish said, hugging her even stronger. "I'm proud of you, but don't ever do this again!"

This time, Jessica didn't untangle herself; she just patted her sister's back, embarrassed.

"Okay, okay, that's enough. We have to get out of here," she said. "We have to…"

Whatever she was going to say was interrupted when the blue beam smashed the ground again; the buildings on the sides of the street they were, including the one she had just got off, seemed to crack in unison. That whole part of the city seemed to implode, when the buildings began to sink in the ground.

Jessica grabbed Trish, the kid and his aunt and brought them closer, trying to shield them with her body; she felt the debris falling to top of her and opened her arms, using her back and shoulders to
deflect the pieces of the building falling down.

When the debris rain stopped, Jessica looked up; they were surrounded by fallen buildings; trapped. And the blue beam kept coming down, flattening cars and what was left standing from the buildings, closer at each time.

"God!" screamed Trish, once she noticed what was happening.

The kid and his aunt looked to the front, seeing the sky falling, incapable of saying anything.

And Jessica… She held her sister's hand and urged that Clark would hurry the fuck up and save them.

Clark raised his hand, every fiber of his muscles hurting as he tried to beat the gravity beam. He closed his fingers into a fist, his legs trying to firm themselves on the ground, his face contorted in effort. The noise was unbelievable, the blue light glowing more than the sun itself, while the World Engine dropped the weight of the world on his shoulders.

He looked up, muscles trembling, feeling the strain on his body in a way he never felt before in his entire life. It was so heavy, the pain was so terrible… He wanted to just… let go.

Clark closed his eyes and stopped seeing everything around him.

Suddenly he was with his father, Jonathan Kent, in front of the ship that had brought him here.

"You are not just anyone, Clark… And I have to believe that you were sent here for a reason. All these changes that you are going through… One day… One day you are going to think of them as a blessing and when that day comes you're going to have to make a choice: a choice of whether to stand proud in front of the human race or not."

His eyes opened, bringing the real world back; he looked up again, his face changing into determination. He was here for a reason. And he finally saw his gifts as the blessing they were, because right now, they were the only thing that could save the world.

It was time to stand proud in front of the human race.

Clark gathered all the power inside himself and exploded up, flying against the gravity beam. The pressure against him was tremendous, but he never hesitated, ignoring the pain, ignoring the weight of the entire sky over his shoulders; he would not let Zod destroy his home.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHGGS!"

He collided head on against the World Engine, passing through the metal, feeling his body destroy the entire thing, until he came out on top of it, an explosion following. The blue beam died immediately and the whole World Engine seemed to paralyze; until it ripped itself into three pieces, falling on the ocean with a groan of metal being torn apart.

The main part began to glow as it fell, the energy core overloading; and then the entire landscape was swallowed in a huge explosion.

Clark saw none of that, falling into unconsciousness.

"He did it!" exclaimed Natasha, smiling, as everybody in the room erupted into cheers.
"Son of a gun!" said Steve, unable to hold a big smile as well.

"I knew he could do it!" said Stark, cheering with the others.

"No you didn't," argued Clint, looking to the screen with a happy face.

"Okay, maybe I didn't, but I cheered very hard!" Stark retorted.

"Moral support is everything," agreed Banner and Clint rolled his eyes.

For one second, everybody seemed to forget the entire bad situation, the good mood lifting their spirits; but, of course, someone had to ruin it.

"We've arrived," said Fury, looking at them. "It's our turn now."

Yep, the good mood faded fast.

"Do not fight them head on," said Steve, walking in front, leading the Avengers on the flight deck, the wind blowing hard at the speed they were going; it would be impossible to even stand outside if the Helicarrier didn't protect the flight deck with some sort of inertia damper that Steve didn't understand, or so Tony explained. "It's useless, we don't have the strength to hurt them, remember that. Evade, distract, use the environment, use their arrogance. Remember the plan."

Around them, SHIELD pilots were preparing their Quinjets, smaller than the one they used, but just as heavily armed. Tony was fully clad in his suit, making last minute adjustments; Clint was checking his arrows and bow; Natasha was loading her grenade launcher; Bruce was… Bruce was fidgeting with his sleeves, concentrated, probably trying to keep himself in the verge of transformation but without losing control too early.

New York passed fast under them, Black Zero enormous on the horizon.

Steve looked at his team and at the SHIELD agents around; he pointed at the pilots.

"You are going to cover us," he ordered. "We don't know what to expect, but don't count on your weapons making any damage. Your job is to distract them, only that. We will be carrying the package."

The men saluted him; he looked at all of them, pilots and the Avengers.

"We can do this," he stated, fully confident in his team's abilities. "We need to do this! Earth is depending on us. If we lose, we won't be conquered, we will be exterminated. There isn't a middle ground here. Either we win or humanity is lost."

Captain America, the legendary soldier in all his glory, gazed at them.

"I SAY WE WIN!"

Everybody yelled in response, cheering, agreeing with their captain. They knew they could die, they knew it was a very likely possibility to fail; but while Captain America was leading them, they would fight.

And Steve would lead them to victory.

"Holy shit, he did it!" yelled Jessica when the blue beam died, hugging her sister, the kid and his
aunt in her happiness. "I knew he would!"

Trish laughed with her, relief filling her; she had never seen Jessica this happy. Maybe for the first time in her life, someone had actually kept a promise to her.

"Who did what?" asked the kid.

"Cla…"

"Our friend!" interrupted Trish, hastily, before Jessica could spill the beans; again.

"Yeah, our friend," Jes agreed. "He just destroyed the weapon doing this whole shitstorm."

"Is he a superhero like you?" he asked, his dirty face showing amazement.

Trish smiled at Jessica's expression; and before she could say anything, she did:

"Yes, yes he is. Just like her."

The mix of annoyance, embarrassment and a little bit of pride on her face made even all the fear they passed worth it.

Faora-Ul showed no emotion whatsoever when the World Engine was destroyed, the backlash of the impact paralyzing Black Zero's systems temporarily; inside, however she was filled with a cold fury. Kal-El would pay dearly for this, that she promised.

"The humans are approaching," warned Jax-Ur, pointing at the liquid geo monitor; a replica of their craft was there.

She looked at Nam-Ek.

"Bring that thing down," she ordered.

The gigantic Kryptonian nodded and left to the under pods chamber.

Bruce followed his companions to the Quinjet, wondering, not for the first time, if it was a good idea for him to be there with them; in the end, he decided it was. In case the Kryptonians showed up, he was the only one who could do something against their strength. And in this case, the "something" he would do would be pick them up and toss them from the Quinjet, preferably alongside him.

The fall wouldn't be pleasant, but he would survive; he knew that for a fact, after all. And it would guarantee that the Quinjet remained flying, even if the Hulk himself became a threat.

Before he could enter, however, he saw Tony stiffening.

"We have incoming!" he yelled, no doubt alerted by Jarvis.

Everybody looked up to see one of those Kryptonian pods approaching, opening itself still in air, and that big Kryptonian dropping right on the top of a Quinjet, turning it into scrap. The Avengers turned, all of them raising their weapons.

Only to be stopped by Bruce.
"Go, I've got this," he said, beginning to walk towards the immense Kryptonian; Nam-Ek, if he remembered right.

"Are you sure?" asked Steve, shield on hand, ready to fight with him.

Bruce looked at him, his eyes glowing green; a bestial smile ripped his face.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure."

And he didn't know if it was him or the Hulk who answered.

Turning to Nam-Ek, Bruce continued to walk; the Kryptonian, clad in his black armor, jumped from the Quinjet to the ground, also walking in his direction. All around them, the Quinjets began to take off, flying vertically and then dashing to the front, in the direction of the alien ship.

Bruce cared nothing about that. His rational thoughts weren't there anymore, being replaced by pure anger. He felt his muscles becoming rigid, his bones beginning to grow; the Hulk had been defeated by a Kryptonian before and all he wanted now was payback.

He began to run, his movements being mimicked by Nam-Ek; both of them increased their speed, eyes fixed on each other. Bruce didn't even notice when he began to roar, his skin turning green, his shirt exploding when his muscles grew gigantic, his height suddenly changing and then he was looking down at his enemy.

Bruce saw none of that; the Hulk was in control now.

With an animalistic growling, Hulk and Nam-Ek clashed against each other, the sound of the impact thundering in air; the Kryptonian roared too, grabbing him and actually managing to push back. Lost in his fury, the Hulk used his powerful muscles to stand his ground, his feet breaking the concrete.

Nam-Ek used his sudden momentum to grab his arms and turn, tossing the Hulk against one of the empty Quinjets, his big body folding the metal like it was paper. Not waiting for him to get up, Nam-Ek jumped against him, punching with all his strength.

A big explosion took the flight deck.

Clark opened his eyes very slowly. He felt more tired than ever, his energy completely spent; not once in his entire life that had happened. Turning his head, a movement that made all his body hurt, he looked at the ocean: the World Engine was destroyed.

Smiling, his eyes almost closing again, Clark lifted his arm, trying to reach the beam of sunlight that began to pass through the black clouds that were almost disappearing.

He felt warm again the moment he touched the light.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" asked Tony, still looking back at the direction of the Helicarrier. "I mean, do you think the Big Guy can handle that other… Big Guy?"

Steve sighed.

"If anyone can, it's him."

Reluctantly, Tony agreed. He put Jarvis on control and got up, going to Natasha's side, who was, at
the moment, analyzing Clark's ship.

"Managed to make it work?" he asked.

Natasha only nodded, lifting a black prism for him to see.

"We just have to put this thing in when we are ready to drop," she answered, showing where the key went. "It will activate the Phantom Drive then."

"That seems too easy, doesn't it?" asked Tony, looking around.

"Don't jinx it!" yelled Clint. "God damn…"

"Sir, a second pod is leaving the Kryptonian ship," warned Jarvis.

"...It," Clint finished, a murderous look taking his expression when he turned to Tony.

"Oh hell!" he said; he should've known better.

"Jarvis, put it on the screen, please," asked Steve and Jarvis did as commanded.

They could see a pod flying against the Quinjet's formation, similar to the one that had just landed on the Helicarrier. Steve grabbed his communicator.

"This is Captain America, you are clear to engage!" he ordered.

As if they were one, the Quinjets began to fire their missiles; the missiles travelled fast, flying against the pod from different angles, hitting all at the same time. A huge explosion covered the sky and they began to hear cheers from the pilots.

That's when the flames vanished, the pod still there, flying intact; right in collision course with one of the Quinjets. The pilot began to fire his machine gun against it, the bullets hitting and being deflected by the pod's armor; it wasn't stopping.

"Eject!" yelled Steve and the man obeyed.

At the instant he ejected, the pod hit the Quinjet straight on, passing through it as if it weren't there, leaving only an explosion behind. Tony sighed relieved for a second, before talking in the communicator too:

"Rhodey, it's time for the Iron Legion!"

Fury was watching the fight on the monitors, trying to ignore the huge noises in his own Helicarrier, as the Hulk and that Kryptonian battled. He saw one of the Quinjets exploding when an alien pod passed through the middle of it, the pilot managing to eject at least.

And then the sky was basically taken by suits of armor, when the Iron Legion appeared.

"Engaging the enemy, Tony," Colonel Rhodes said, leading the brunt of the attack with his War Machine.

Stark's army of suits split its formation, flying in the middle of the Quinjets, beginning to pursue the Kryptonian pod. The pilot of the pod turned, realizing the iron suits were behind it, apparently getting even faster; the Iron Legion began to fire against it, everything they had, from mere bullets to missiles, even using their repulsors.
Nothing seemed to even dent the thing, as the pod suddenly went up, hitting two suits and completely destroying them. Stopping in air, abruptly, the pod opened, revealing its pilot: and unless Fury was very mistaken, it was Zod's sub-commander, Faora.

Everybody in the command center was slack-jawed as the Kryptonian simply jumped out from the pod, flying in air like if she were a missile, colliding against one of the Quinjets; the pilot tried to eject, only to be grabbed by Faora and torn apart. And before the jet could fall, she jumped again, this time against one of Stark's armors.

"Jesus, are you seeing that?!" yelled Rhodes, firing his machine gun nonstop against Faora.

Nobody answered him, as the Kryptonian ripped the suit apart, jumping back at her pod and flying closer to the Avenger's Quinjet; War Machine's bullets weren't doing anything against it.

"Do not let her approach!" yelled Captain Rogers, obviously seeing Faora's pod flying to them.

Following his orders, the Quinjets turned in air, flying against the pod, firing again. The rain of bullets did nothing against its hull, but the pilots already knew it wouldn't; no, they planned to hit it with something far heavier.

Synchronized, the pilots aimed their jets in the pods direction, firing all their missiles; and then, when the flames covered everything, they ejected.

As the pod came out from the flames, it was met with tons of metal, every single Quinjet hitting it straight on, an even bigger explosion filling the air. Fury could only watch as the flames took everything.

That's when the ceiling on top of them gave out and the Hulk and Nam-Ek fell in the command center.

The Hulk growled when he hit the ground, the Kryptonian on top of him. He could hear people yelling and running around, the sound making him even more furious; standing up, he grabbed the Kryptonian and threw him to the wall.

"You have to take him back up!" yelled someone… Maria… the Hulk didn't care.

Ignoring her, he ran against Nam-Ek and hit him with all his strength, making a hole in the wall and tossing him far away, his body breaking everything on its path; roaring, he followed.

"Did we drop her?" Tony asked, frantic. "Rhodey, do you have a visual?!"

Steve grabbed his shield and moved close to the rear door, opening it to be able to see; he knew that if it wasn't over, the doors wouldn't stop her anyway.

"We didn't, prepare yourselves."

Tony went by his side and pointed his repulsors to the now opened doors, the red flames of the explosion still burning; Natasha aimed her grenade launcher; Clint prepared an arrow.

And just like he expected, he saw Faora rising from the explosion, almost flying as she jumped, her Kryptonian strength giving her enough of a boost to pass through the hulls of the Quinjets and catch up with them; he braced himself.
She landed inside the Helicarrier, her feet denting the metal floor, too fast to actually stop; not that she wanted to stop. Using the momentum, Faora punched, a hit so strong that would definitely pass through a human body with ease.

But not vibranium.

Her fist hit Captain America's shield making it ring like a church bell; Steve's legs hurt with the strain, even when the vibranium absorbed the impact of her punch. Taking his chance, Tony unleashed his repulsors on her; the energy beams didn't do anything against her and Faora grabbed Steve's shield, tossing him against the ceiling when he refused to let go.

Moving in a dash, the Kryptonian hit Tony right in the chest, throwing him against the walls with force. She turned to Natasha and Clint; Natasha began to fire the grenade launcher, the bombs exploding against Faora's armor without leaving a mark. And then Clint shot his arrow.

Faora simply raised her hand and picked the arrow in air with two fingers, her expression becoming sarcastic when she looked at Clint.

And that's when the arrow exploded.

Not with a timed bomb, but with something Tony had made on that very day just to Faora. Their weakness was the dependency they had on their helmets; they couldn't take it off, not without suffering the pain from Earth's atmosphere. Breaking them would be the ideal solution, but they lacked the fire power for that.

But, like Steve suggested, they didn't need to break it; only to make it very uncomfortable to wear.

So when the arrow exploded, it didn't explode to try to damage Faora's helmet, but to cover it with a black, viscous and very thick paint that Tony developed, using a formula that resembled more of a superglue than anything else. The black paint hit Faora straight in the face, covering her entire helmet, making it impossible for her to see.

And since she couldn't remove it or use x-ray vision while breathing Krypton's air, she was effectively blind.

Time to strike back.

The Hulk was sent flying, his body destroying everything on its path, when Nam-Ek punched his jaw. Without stopping, he grabbed the Hulk's legs, spinning in place and releasing; he flew up, passing through the Helicarriers floors as if they didn't exist, finally coming out on the flight deck once again.

He got up, shaking his head, and growled; Nam-Ek appeared in his front again, jumping up, using his body to dig another tunnel up. They collided against one another, their bodies smashing with extraordinary power, the very air distorting itself around them.

The Helicarrier continued to fly fast, accompanying the Quinjets as best as it could, working as a flying landing base for them; not that the two titans on top of it seemed to care. To them, there was only the fight now. Bringing his arms around the Hulk's waist, Nam-Ek began to push, managing to lift the Hulk as he ran, both of them turning into a locomotive as they smashed every single jet in their way, explosions following.

The Hulk roared in pain as his ribs were squeezed, so he started to punch Nam-Ek's back with everything he had; his fists dented his armor, but he apparently wasn't feeling them. He was,
however, being tossed down, his feet sinking on the ground every time he was punched. Until he released him, suddenly, sending the Hulk flying against a cannon.

The destruction of one of the Helicarrier weapons seemed to bring the attention to the fact that the Helicarrier had weapons; and, as if they were one, they all turned to Nam-Ek and began to fire, the bullets covering the air.

Ignoring the fact that he was getting in the middle of the crossfire, the Hulk yelled and ran against Nam-Ek again, his body also getting shot, the bullets hitting his muscles and hard skin and being deflected. He didn't even notice, his fury growing even more as the fight went on.

Nam-Ek met him in the middle, both of them colliding again, their huge bodies crashing like tanks; the bullets continued to rain upon them, neither of them caring. And then they started to punch each other.

There was no strategy, no defense, no tactic; it was pure brutality, as if nothing else mattered other them killing each other. Both of them only punched each other's faces, each hit sounding like a cannon blast, growling and roars cutting the air.

Their fists crashed against one another, their fingers intertwining, each trying to make the other submit with pure brute force. The strength they were making was unbelievable, their eyes staring at each other.

Neither of them could beat the other, their equal strength making it impossible for the contest to proceed; the Hulk, however, didn't care for a contest of strength. All he cared about was smashing his opponent. And without his arms, there was only one way to do that.

He opened his big mouth and bit Nam-Ek's head.

Tony grabbed Steve's shield when he tossed it to him, using it to defend himself from a blind punch from Faora; the vibranium rang in the confined space. Using this chance, his suit released another load of ink on Faora's helmet, as he jumped to the side, giving Steve his shield back.

At that moment, two suits of the Iron Legion landed on the Quinjet, flying against Faora; she no doubt heard one of them approaching, because she turned punching, her fist ripping the metal apart. The second one, however, wasn't going to attack her; instead, it disassembled itself, the parts flying individually and reassembling around Faora's body.

The sub-commander managed to punch the chest, but without seeing what was happening, she couldn't defend herself in time; the pieces closed around her and activated the repulsors on maximum capacity, flying outside, taking Faora to the sky.

Or trying to, because at the last moment her hand managed to hold on the Quinjet, her fingers digging themselves in the metal.

Yelling in frustration, Faora grabbed the gauntlets of the armor with her free hand and destroyed them, before taking her hand to her face and ripping the paint with all her strength; one of her blue eyes looked back at them.

"Oh, no..." said Tony, as Faora proceeded to rip the rest of the armor around her apart and jump back inside.

Clint, seeing her approaching, tried to fire another arrow; big mistake.
Faora, knowing now with what they were loaded, just dodged, becoming a blur, and then she was on him. She pushed him against the controls, his back hitting the auto pilot and damaging it; they could still keep moving forward, but Jarvis wouldn't be able to pilot the Quinjet anymore.

Pulling him back, Faora kicked his leg; Tony could hear the bone breaking from where he was. Clint yelled loudly, only to be backhanded against the face and tossed out from the Quinjet.

"CLINT! " yelled Natasha.

"Rhodey, grab Legolas!" Tony yelled, hoping his friend heard him and could get Clint on time.

Steve threw his shield against Faora, hitting her helmet, but aside from a slightly tilt to the side, his shield didn't do anything other than call her attention. She turned to him, pushing Cap against the wall, lifting him by his throat; and then, with her other hand, she began to sink her fingers on his abdomen.

"ARRHHGG!" yelled Steve.

Thinking fast, Tony used his laser; not against Faora, that would be useless, but to cut the very walls of the Quinjet around Cap. When the steel piece got loose and everything began being pulled to the outside, Tony flew against Faora with all his suit's power, crashing against her.

Faora wasn't harmed in the least, but at least it distracted her, making her release Steve for a second, who was promptly dragged out from the Quinjet.

"Jarvis, grab Cap!" he ordered. "And bring all the remaining suits here!"

"As you say, sir," responded Jarvis, ordering one of the suits of armor to pick Steve up, hopefully before he fell to the ground.

"This is the second time you get between me and my prey," Faora said, turning to him with her entire blacked helmet, a single piercing blue eye watching him. "There won't be a third."

At that moment, three of his armors landed on the Quinjet, promptly attacking Faora; that should buy him a couple of seconds.

"Natasha, activate the ship and get out!" he yelled.

God bless her soul, she didn't argue back; pushing the key all the way in, the ship beginning to glow blue, Natasha jumped to one of the seats and ejected. He could see Black Zero getting closer.

Suddenly, a huge Kryptonian ship appeared out of nothing right behind them, ready to fire.

Hulk's teeth sank on Nam-Ek's helmet, biting with every single bit of strength he possessed; his teeth began to crack against the metal, but he didn't care, the pain making him bite even stronger. Nam-Ek doubled his efforts to bring the Hulk's arms down, but it was useless.

Little by little, the Kryptonian's helmet began to bent, Nam-Ek screaming in rage, the cracks of the Hulk's teeth ringing loud; and then it ripped, puncturing a whole in it.

The first breath of Earth's atmosphere that Nam-Ek took began to flush the Kryptonian air from his body; and then his senses overloaded. The noise of the Hulk's teeth against the metal was unbearable. He lost all strength to fight, his arms being overpowered as he fell to the ground.

The Hulk then, proceeded to smash his opponent, mercy not being a word he understood.
"Doctor Banner!" yelled someone, as Hulk punched Nam-Ek nonstop. "Doctor Banner!"

He turned, roaring, pissed as hell that someone was calling him "Banner"; it was a woman. He vaguely recognized her.

"You already won," said Maria, slowly. "Doctor, you…"

The Hulk roared even louder.

"Hulk," she corrected herself, "you already won. But you have to toss him back to their ship. Can you do that?"

He just looked at her and then turned to kick Nam-Ek again.

"Banner could do it," she said, suddenly, and he stopped. "Is Puny Hulk weaker than Banner?"

Hulk felt fire inside him, as he grabbed Nam-Ek by the leg and ran to Maria, stopping close, looking her from up high; she didn't back down.

"Is that what you are telling me? That you can't do it? Puny…"

"HULK NOT PUNY!" he yelled, smashing Nam-Ek against the ground as he did it.

"Then prove it," she challenged.

And he did, grabbing Nam-Ek, spinning and tossing him all the way back to the Black Zero, his gigantic body putting a hole in the hull of the Kryptonian ship; right at the moment another huge Kryptonian ship appeared over them.

They couldn't do anything as it fired upon the Helicarrier, the blue energy destroying the turbines with a single shot; they began to drop over the city.

Clark had never flown so fast in his entire life, giving everything he had as he crossed the sky. The sunlight had restored his energy to the maximum again and he was using every bit he had of it to arrive in New York in time to help.

He looked down, seeing the ship Zod stole from him fire against the Helicarrier, the whole thing beginning to drop on top of the buildings; he hoped the buildings were empty by now and that the people inside the Helicarrier could survive, but he couldn't help now. Not when Zod was preparing to fire upon the Quinjet carrying his own ship, the only chance they had against the Black Zero.

One of the smaller Quinjets got in the way of the ship, drawing its attention; Zod fired on it, completely destroying it. And then there was nothing between it and the Avenger Quinjet.

Except for him.

Beginning to drop fast, Clark flew directly against the ship's hull, right when it fired; the blue energy passed at the side of the Quinjet. The hull, however, wasn't strong enough to protect the ship against him.

Clark passed through it as if it weren't there, getting inside the ship, falling right in front of Zod, in the cockpit. He got up fast, his eyes glowing red.

"STOP!" yelled Zod. "If you destroy this ship, you destroy Krypton!"
And the surprising thing is that he seemed truly afraid of it; Clark hesitated.

Ultimately, though, Clark had no option; if his choice was destroying Earth to have Krypton back… It wasn't much of a choice at all.

"Krypton is already gone, Zod!" he yelled, unleashing his heat vision in the cockpit, cutting the command chair.

The ship began to drop from the sky.

Faora began to punch with fury, her fists ripping the metal from the red suits of armor around her as if they were made of silk. They weren't fighting, however, they were holding her, attacking all at the same time not to cause her damage, but to delay her. She grabbed one of them, her fingers sinking in the metal, and pulled it apart.

Only to be rewarded by what seemed to be an explosion of that accursed black ink.

Her helmet was once more painted and she was once more blinded; Faora screamed in rage, spinning so fast that she became a blur, her limbs destroying everything around her without her even needing to see it. Panting with fury, she took her hands to her face and scratched the paint from her helmet.

Her eyes finally found the one who had done all that, sitting at the pilot's seat, fully armored, looking at her.

"A good death is its own reward," he said, repeating her words, as he plunged the jet against Black Zero.

Dashing forward, Faora's hand slashed the air like a sword, ripping his head off; except there was no head to decapitate, but a hollow suit of armor.

The Quinjet hit Black Zero; blue lightening began to form around both of them.

And then the Phantom Zone opened again.

Faora had only time to feel terrified before being pulled back in.

Tony had used the distraction his Iron Legion gave him to leave his armor behind to pilot - since Faora had damaged the auto pilot when she tossed Clint over it - and eject the Quinjet.

The moment he was out from the Quinjet, he began to look around, searching for the only remaining suit he had; the one he used to save Cap from falling to his death. Because right now, unless he wanted to be pulled into the Phantom Zone alongside the Kryptonians, he would need it to fly away.

He heard it before he saw it; and, cutting himself free from the ejection chair, he jumped. The suit disassembled itself, each part flying to him on its own, fitting together again around him.

"Jarvis, put everything we have on the repulsors!" he yelled, seeing the Quinjet hit Black Zero.

His feet basically turned into a rocket as Jarvis used all the energy they had to take him out of there. He began to fly faster than he ever had before; and then he stopped in air, the singularity pulling him.
"Jarvis!" he screamed, terrified, as he suddenly began to move backwards.

"Any more than that and it won't be safe for..."

"DO IT!"

The repulsors on his feet doubled in size. He began to gain some distance, but too slow, and the singularity was growing; he didn't even notice he was screaming, when finally the ship disappeared.

And the force pulling him back alongside it; Tony basically exploded forward, spinning to the ground in great velocity.

"Jarvis, try to stabilize me!" he yelled, New York rotating around him.

He felt Jarvis moving his armor, using the repulsors on his hand to slow his fall; that's when he hit the top of a skyscraper.

Clark got up, after being tossed out from his ship. The city around him was apocalyptic; destroyed buildings everywhere, ruins and fire. The ground was covered in dust and ashes and towers of black smoke rose to the twilight sky.

And in the middle of all that, Zod was kneeled.

Eyes fixed on him, Clark floated in his direction, landing in front of him; Zod raised a hand full of ashes to him.

"Look at this," he said as the ashes fell back to the ground. "We could've built a New Krypton in this squalor, but you chose the humans over us."

Clark only watched, as Zod eyed him with eyes filled with fury.

"I exist only to protect Krypton," he continued, shaking with rage. "That is the sole purpose for which I was born. And every action I take, no matter how violent and how cruel, is for the greater good of my people. And now... I have no people. My soul... That is what YOU HAVE TAKEN FROM ME!"

Zod got up and dashed to the front, hitting Clark in the chest with all his power; Clark was sent bouncing on the ground, flying for dozens of meters.

"I'm going to make them suffer, Kal," Zod promised, walking towards him. "These humans you've adopted, I will take them all from you, one by one!"

Clark got up and began floating; he looked Zod in the eyes.

"You are a monster, Zod," he said. "And I'm going to stop you!"
Chapter 16 – Superman

For a moment, both Kryptonians just stared at each other; Clark floating a few inches from the ground and Zod standing still. And then, as if an unseen signal was given, they attacked, Clark flying fast and Zod running, each step breaking the asphalt.

They clashed head on against each other, the impact so incredibly strong that the ground broke and the dust and ashes exploded outwards, making a grey sandstorm. Clark felt his entire body shake when he hit Zod, his muscles and bones straining with effort, but instead of stopping he flew even faster, lifting Zod from the street.

He had to take Zod away from the city, that was the only thing on his mind as he carried the general, away from all the people that were still there. SHIELD had evacuated those they could, but a lot of them were still there and Clark knew, from the fight he had in Smallville, that New York was going to suffer a lot of damage if they kept this up.

They smashed against one of the buildings in ruins, the walls crumbling, and before Clark could even think about continuing to fly Zod twisted himself like only a trained fighter could, escaping his grasp, and using his momentum he kicked him with both legs; Clark was sent flying in the same direction he was on, but this time without control, passing through the walls of the building he was in and crashing against another on the other side of the street.

The windows broke when his back collided against them, the ground cracking when he fell; Zod jumped through the same hole his body had made and landed in his front. Clark got up fast, preparing himself to fight, only to stop when Zod groaned, closing his eyes.

There was a red glow coming from them; Clark knew very well what that meant.

Still unaccustomed to his new powers, Zod couldn't keep his heat vision under control; the energy inside him built up to impossible levels and then it wanted to come out.

"AAAHHH!" Zod yelled, two red beams coming from his eyes.

Clark dodged to the side, the beams hitting the floor, walls and columns, as Zod turned his head desperately, his eyes burning with the amount of energy he was letting out. The building around them was no match for the heat and the concrete was simply cut, the beams effectively parting the building in two.

It all began to collapse.

With one last look, parts of the ceiling already falling down, Zod jumped out from the building; Clark, however, didn't follow. As fast as he could, he looked around, his x-ray vision activated, looking if there was anybody still inside. Luckily, SHIELD had taken his warnings seriously and that building was already empty; down on the street, however, just under where the whole thing was falling, there were a lot of people standing.

So instead of flying after Zod, Clark flew up, as fast as he could, his head and fists breaking all the floors as he went to the top. He destroyed the roof as he came out to the sky, looking down, seeing the building beginning to topple over the street; so he gathered all the energy he could muster and
exploded down again, colliding against the collapsing building.

Clark hit the building like a missile, so fast and so strongly that the impact created shockwaves powerful enough to destroy concrete. He flew all the way down and then exploded upwards again, just as strongly, breaking everything still left standing.

The damage he made to the center of the building was so severe that the whole thing imploded, crashing down like a sand castle, losing its form as it disintegrated; and keeping the whole thing from falling down on top of all those people.

He rose from the falling building as if emerging from the depths of the sea, the crumbled concrete exploding like a wave as he passed through it, going to the sky; going after Zod.

Natasha had trouble believing her eyes.

Just as she landed after ejecting from the Quinjet, she released herself from the parachute of the ejected seat, looking around the destroyed city, witnessing the amount of devastation done by Black Zero and the World Engine.

The sight, however, held her interest for less than a second. She looked up almost immediately, seeing a huge Kryptonian ship arriving, firing upon the Helicarrier and making it fall over the city, continuing until it was just behind the Quinjet ready to shoot; only to be brought down by a flying Clark. She smiled, seeing him here, apparently unharmed, surprised at how fast he had flew to get there from the other side of the world.

The ship fell down with force, crushing every single building in its way, much like the Helicarrier did, the noise terrible even from where she was standing; but Natasha also wasn't looking at that anymore. No, her eyes were now fixed on the Quinjet, seeing Tony ejecting from it and, a few seconds later, the jet crashing against Black Zero.

It was unlike anything she had ever seen. There was blue lightning for a moment, and then the singularity opened just as Clark's father said, pulling everything, making Black Zero fold from the inside, bending the entire thing until there was nothing left. She saw Tony falling fast, trying to control his speed, when the singularity closed, crashing on top of a building; she hoped he was okay.

And for a moment since the whole thing began there was silence.

That was when Clark and Zod crashed against a building.

She could only watch as they went through it, passing from one side to the other, and finally hitting another one; and then there was a pair of red beams, cutting the whole thing, hitting other buildings around. Natasha ran towards a collapsed building, using the fallen debris to climb, trying to get a better view of what was happening.

Clark flew towards the top of the building and then down again, making it collapse under its own weight; probably to try to keep it from falling on top of people, she imagined. Jumping, Natasha finally got to a point where she could have a clear look of the street where they were fighting, just in time to see Clark emerging again from under the debris, flying towards the direction she imagined Zod was.

It was like nothing could keep them down. There wasn't anything she or anyone could do. Bullets didn't harm them; bombs didn't harm them; falling skyscrapers didn't harm them. And the only weapon they had that could do anything had already been used, at least ensuring that Zod was the
only Kryptonian enemy left.

The only thing Natasha could do now was trust Clark; and hope that Superman could save the world.

Zod kicked a fuel truck in his direction, the vehicle dragging the wheels on the street as it moved sideways. Clark jumped forward, holding the truck before it could topple, trying to keep it from exploding.

Only to be rewarded with a fist to the face, as Zod punched through the truck, making the whole thing blow up.

Clark and Zod were launched away, each to one side of the street, as the explosion swallowed everything. The building behind Clark took the brunt of it, the walls breaking, and the cars parked on the upper levels began to rain down on top of them.

Using the distraction, Zod dashed against him, punching his face and throwing him against the ground with unbelievably strength. Getting up quickly, Clark dodged another punch and tried to attack, only to be completely outmatched when Zod defended himself with a strange fighting style and counter-attacked with a fist in his gut.

His feet broke the asphalt as he slid back, trying to stop, his fingers digging the ground; and when he finally did, Zod's fist became a blur. Clark ducked at the last moment, the punch passing loudly over his head; and then he punched back, right at Zod's side.

Zod was thrown far away, hitting one of the many cars that were still falling, his body turning it into scrap. Not waiting for him to shake off the hit, Clark dashed and punched him again, bringing his fist all the way down on Zod's face, the hit so powerful that his head broke the street. Clark prepared himself to hit him again.

And then a car fell right on top of him.

The vehicle didn't hurt him, the metal bending on contact, but it was enough to stop his momentum; and enough for Zod to have time to get up and kick him in the chest. Clark was thrown back on the ground, losing his breath, and the instant he tried to get up he felt another punch in the face and then an uppercut so strong that it sent him flying up.

Clark saw the building passing fast as he flew, spinning, the wind howling on his ears; he reached and tried to hold himself on the walls, his hands breaking the concrete as he touched it, but it slowed him enough so he could stop in air, right on top of the building. He looked down, seeing Zod on the street.

"There is only one way this ends, Kal!" Zod yelled. "Either you die or I do!"

Would it really come to that? Was Zod so lost in fury that he would kill him and then destroy an entire world, just for the sake of revenge? Clark knew the answer to that, but he didn't want to believe in it. Because if he did, then there really was only one way to stop Zod.

He didn't think he was capable of doing such a thing.

Unaware of Clark's thoughts, Zod jumped on the building, using his hands and feet to boost himself up, the walls breaking under his strength as he climbed fast. Clark looked down, frowning; and flew against him with all his speed.
They met on the middle of the building, clashing against each other with such power that the shockwaves from the collision disintegrated the walls from the building, every single window exploding. Zod, incapable of flying, took the worse part of the impact, being tossed up, spinning, until he crashed against a building under construction on the other side of the street.

Clark, dizzy from the hit, managed to stop his fall and follow, as the pieces of the destroyed building rained down on the street.

Steve Rogers raised his shield over his head, protecting two civilians from the falling debris, while he guided them away from the destroyed buildings.

After falling down from the Quinjet, being saved from certain death by one of Tony's suits, Steve tried to follow what was happening from the ground. It was hard to see clearly, since the buildings were in the way, but some things were impossible to miss.

Things like a Kryptonian ship appearing and dropping the Helicarrier from the sky, making the entire thing fall on top of New York; that same ship also being taken down, this time by Clark, who had apparently flown back from the other side of the world already; and the Quinjet crashing against Black Zero and opening the black hole, finally completing what they set out to do.

It was over. They did it. They had saved Earth from an invading alien force, again. At least that was what he had thought back then.

Until buildings began to drop again, until a pair of red beams split another building in half, until Clark collapsed that building, saving who knows how many lives in doing so, until an explosion made cars began to rain at the very street he was in... Until Clark and Zod clashed in together one more time, the impact devastating the walls of the skyscraper and tossing both Kryptonians to a building under construction.

Steve's eyes were wide open as he saw that fight, the pain of his wounded abdomen forgotten. It was so absurd, so extraordinary, that he was having issues believing it was real. If what humans did was called fighting, what Kryptonians did had to be renamed. Steve believed there was only one God, but the comparison wasn't any less valid because of it: what Clark and Zod were doing was as far from mortality as it could possibly be.

And when Gods battled, humans were the ones who died.

"It is a signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war."

Fury finally understood what Thor meant when he said that. Without giving any attention to the blood on his face, he kept staring at the monitors that were still working, watching as the Kryptonians battled.

The Helicarrier was grounded, incapable of doing anything since the Kryptonian ship shot them down. There was absolutely nothing they could do as they began to lose altitude, the immense aircraft breaking every building it hit in its way down. They had enough time to brace for impact, the crew trained to move fast, but even so the fall dealt them a tremendous hit and Fury was sure that if the Helicarrier didn't have top of the line technology they would have died.

Maria was only saved because of the Hulk; some part of the green giant recognized her as an ally and shielded her the best he could. She was hurt, they all were, but they were alive, even if out of commission now. Fury didn't know where the Hulk had ran off to, but right now he didn't really
No one there cared, he realized, as the satellites showed them the battle between Clark Kent and General Zod.

And seeing that Fury finally comprehended Thor's words. Earth was not ready for that kind of war. To fight battles that destroyed planets, to face warriors who had enough strength to level entire cities as consequence of their battle. But it was a moot point now; they had brought them here by playing with things they didn't understand and that was the consequence.

Humanity depended on Superman now; Fury could only pray, and he didn't really care to which god, that he could do it.

Clark broke the concrete floor with his head as he emerged on the building under construction. Immediately, he saw Zod jumping in his direction, a gigantic steel beam on his hands. Thinking fast, he unleashed his heat vision right where Zod was holding it; the steel melted between his fingers, the beam falling to the ground.

Adapting quickly to the loss of his weapon, Zod discarded it and, before Clark could react, punched him in the chin, tossing him back.

Clark fell down, dazed, his face hurting like never before.

"I was bred to be a warrior, Kal," Zod said, just watching him getting up. "Trained my entire life to master my senses. Where did you train?! On a farm?!"

Saying this, Zod took his hand close to ground; the little pieces of broken concrete began to vibrate. Roaring, the General ripped away his armor, piece by piece, the Kryptonian metal breaking under his fingers until he was left only with his black skinsuit and a glove.

And when he dropped his glove, it hovered; Zod had mastered his ability to fly.

Zod rose to the sky, his fists closed as he concentrated, his eyes filled with fury, as he floated a few meters from the floor. Clark felt himself fill with dread; Zod was becoming more powerful at every second. He hadn't lied about what he had just said; he was a warrior. He was the warrior from Krypton, made to be unbeatable. Clark stared at Zod's eyes and saw nothing but rage. The promise that he would kill every single human being was written on his face.

Trained on a farm or not, Clark would not allow him to do that; that was the promise written on his face.

Gathering all his power, Clark yelled and flew against Zod, hitting him with such strength that that they became a blur. They collided against the steel beams from the building, every one of them bending on contact as if made of paper, until they were in the sky again. Before Zod could react, Clark punched him with all his might, sending him back.

Zod reacted, hitting him too, and soon they were flying too fast to see. The Kryptonian general dashed in his direction, ready to attack, and Clark did the same thing Zod had done earlier; he turned his body and used Zod's momentum, kicking him with both legs and sending him flying. And before Zod could control his flight again, Clark was already on him.

He punched, the air vibrating, a thunder like sound in the sky; Zod groaned in pain and was sent back, but Clark was already punching him again and then a third time, the city becoming just a blur.
Realizing he was being overwhelmed, Zod flied away, so fast that Clark lost him. He followed, flying between the buildings, the cars filling the street down there. There was no sign of Zod, so he accelerated, everything passing fast, moving with such speed that he almost disappeared in the air.

The building's windows exploded when Zod appeared from them abruptly, grabbing Clark and throwing him against them. He tried to attack again, but Clark moved faster and got hold of him, flying against the windows and forcing Zod's face to hit them. The entire side of the building began to break, falling down, when Zod managed to turn; still holding him, Clark punched, as strongly as he could.

Zod held his fist, the shockwave from the impact destroying every single window still intact; and retaliated with another uppercut, sending Clark up.

Clark saw stars when the fist collided against him and before he could even understand what was happening, Zod grabbed his cape; and began spinning.

He couldn't even see what was happening anymore. The city became a blur of colors as Zod spun; and then he released his cape.

Clark went flying without control, faster than ever before. And being powerless to stop, he clashed against a building. And then against another. And another, and another, and another. He was bouncing nonstop, unable to stop, his body breaking everything on its path and he could only hope that those buildings were already empty.

A window crashed when he hit it and suddenly he was in the sky again; and Zod appeared from nowhere, exploding up, taking Clark with him.

Clint tried to move as best as he could with his broken leg, while following the two missiles colliding in the sky, the thunderous sound echoing in his skull.

He groaned in pain when he touched his face, a huge bruise taking most of it from being backhanded by Faora, but he didn't stop looking up. Colonel Rhodes, still wearing his War Machine suit, was by his side, also looking up.

"I can't believe this shit," he said, as Clark dragged Zod's face on the side of a building. "That's… I don't even have the words."

"You're telling me," he answered.

There was not a force in this world able to do anything against those aliens. That little fight they had against Faora? All they did was piss her off and delay her for a while. But nothing they used, anything, had any effect.

That Zod guy seemed worse. Way worse.

Unless Clint's eyes were mistaken, and he knew they weren't, he wasn't wearing a helmet anymore. Which meant he was breathing Earth's air now and not falling down in pain; somehow he had adapted to it and the only weakness they could identify was gone.

So right now, there was only one person in this planet that could do anything and Clint was watching that very person crashing against building after building, entering on one side and leaving through the other, without being able to stop.

Clint wasn't afraid of dying, but he was afraid for his family; and the only thing between Zod and
"Jarvis, I need eyes on them!" yelled Tony Stark to his artificial intelligence, while he tried to make a few critical repairs on the suit. "Link every satellite, every camera in this city, everything capable of recording that you can find."

The fall he took while trying to escape the singularity almost made him pass out; he was lucky his armor had protected him so effectively. But he had done it. He destroyed Black Zero, he even escaped alive! He closed his eyes a little, allowing himself to rest for a bit.

The sound of a building being smashed woke him up.

Zod wasn't on Black Zero. There was still one enemy to face and they were all unable to fight anymore. All of them, except Clark. And the fight he was witnessing was simply unbelievable.

The battle Clark had in Smallville was nothing compared to this; and they were already shocked about what had happened there. Without his helmet, Zod was now as strong as Clark and he had no more weak points. There wasn't an easy solution anymore. Now Clark had to fight with all he had.

Tony couldn't believe this was happening again. Earth was on the verge of being destroyed one more time. But last time, at least, they could fight. What could they do now, but hope Clark really was the Superman they needed?

Clark and Zod left the planet, fighting against each other's hold, spinning in space. He managed to get away from Zod and throw him; reaching his arms, Zod held on a nearby satellite, his hands destroying the metal.

And then he kicked the entire thing on Clark's direction.

He couldn't move out of the way in time, so he braced himself and held the satellite; right at the moment Zod flew to it, passing through the metal and colliding against him. The general grabbed Clark and pushed him down, to Earth.

Clark could feel the heat as they came into contact with the atmosphere, the pieces of the broken satellite around them, burning. Zod kept punching his face while they fell like a meteor back on the planet.

Twisting, Clark freed himself from his grasp, managing to grab Zod's neck and face; Zod yelled as Clark accelerated, the city appearing once again under them.

Jessica looked up, seeing what seemed to be a meteor shower in the sky; she was aware, of course, that it wasn't a meteor shower, but her friend. Her neighbor, that apparently was strong enough to fly out of the planet and come back, burning against the atmosphere, and still be alive.

The things she saw on that day would stay with her forever. Jessica couldn't comprehend how a guy as nice as Clark could do the things he did; how someone so powerful could exist and still be so normal.

She was strong, but what they were doing was on a completely different level. Jessica could lift a car; Clark and Zod were toppling buildings as if they were toys, flying faster than jets, cutting
skyscrapers in half with laser eyes. Trish would say it was humbling; Jessica just thought it was scary as fuck.

But Clark was her friend, regardless.

So when she saw him entering atmosphere again, both aliens surrounded by fire, while they passed fast over the buildings, she looked at Trish.

"Go to the subway and stay there," she said, looking quickly at her sister, while trying to calculate where Clark would fall.

"But…"

"No 'but'!" she snapped. "Go and stay there, Trish."

And saying that, Jessica started to run towards the falling fire, running way faster than any normal human could.

They crashed through the glass ceiling, knocking down a statue when the base made of stone broke down. Fast as lightning, Clark tossed Zod down and flew against him, hitting him on the floor and beating his head against the ground until the marble broke.

Zod fought and groaned as Clark grabbed him in a chokehold, holding him down with all the strength he could muster. The Kryptonian general tried to get away, to free himself, using all his force to try to counter Clark's hold.

Clark didn't budge for a second.

But for how long? How long could Clark keep Zod immobilized? For how long his strength would last? How long until Zod managed to get away and fulfill his promise of genocide?

No help would come, he knew that. Not because there weren't people willing to help, but because they couldn't. They didn't have the strength to help. There wasn't a prison in this world capable of holding Zod, no cop to cuff him and take him away, no SHIELD agent to arrest him.

Zod stopped struggling for a second and looked at the people still there; Clark's breath hitched when he noticed what the general was thinking. With mad eyes, Zod tried to look at Clark as best as he could while being held down.

"If you love this people so much, you can mourn for them!" And fire came out of his eyes against a scared family.

Clark used all his strength to hold Zod's head, to prevent the red beams from hitting the family. The heat from his eyes began to crumble the wall behind them, breaking it little by little, as the family held each other, crying, trying to escape, to make themselves as small as possible.

Zod fought with everything he had as well, the beams moving slowly in their direction.

"Don't do this!" Clark yelled, desperate. "Stop!"

The family was crying, falling on the ground as they moved away from the energy beams, the father pushing his wife and children away while they begged for mercy.

"STOOOP!"
Zod didn't even hesitate.

"Never!"

The beams were inches away from the family, sparks flying away, the screaming more panicked than ever. Zod wouldn't stop. Not until every last one of them was dead, Clark finally accepted. Not until Earth was as devoid of life as Krypton.

So he closed his eyes, the tears falling down his face, and made his choice.

Twisting Zod's neck with all his power, he broke it; Zod's body fell lifelessly on the ground, the red glow in his eyes fading.

Breathing hard, his heart beating so strongly that it hurt, Clark fell down on his knees, his eyes staring at nothing. For a moment, he couldn't do anything.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

He screamed from the depths of his soul, trying to make the pain go away, the sound echoing in the room. Why? Why did Zod force him to do this? To kill the last member of his race?

Clark felt so numb that he only noticed he wasn't alone in the room anymore when a hand touched his shoulder; he looked up to see Jessica by his side. Without even realizing what he was doing, he hugged her closer.

Neither of them said anything. There was no need.

"Is it really surprising that the most powerful man in the world should be a figure of controversy?"

Click.

"We as a population on this planet have been looking for a savior…"

Click.

"… we are talking about a being whose very existence challenges our own sense of priority in the universe."

Click.

"The Avengers are not telling us the truth!"

Click.

"This is our planet!"

Click.

"Human beings have a horrible track record of following people with great power…"

Click.

"Tragedy…"

Click.
"Terror…"

Click.

"… the fire department estimates Superman already saved 89 people buried under the collapsed buildings…"

Click.

"… he saved my boy!"

Click.

"… power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolute…"

Click.

"Chaos!"

Click.

"… Superman lifted the ambulance to the sky so my mother could get treatment on time!"

Click.

"… maybe he is just a guy trying to do the right thing!"

Click.

"He’s out of control!"

Click.

"… the Avengers are helping the victims…"

Click.

"The number of casualties is staggering…"

Click.

"… worse than The Incident…"

Click.

"Superman saved us!"

Click.

"… they brought their warriors…"

Click.

"The world has been so caught up with what he can do that no one has asked what he should do."

Click.
"KAL-EL, KAL-EL, KAL-EL, KAL-EL, KAL-EL..."

Click.

Jessica tossed the remote far away, sighing. Three days of this shit on the TV. Every single channel talking about “Superman”. Now, Jessica could understand that; she didn't like it, but she could understand the need to talk about it.

But the theories those people were creating? It was all a big pile of steaming shit. She had seen people asking for Clark to be brought in, she had seen people saying he was part of the invasion, she had seen people praying to him!

There were talks of making a church! People actually praying to her neighbor! She heard something about that when Thor appeared during The Incident, about some people going back to worship pagan gods, but this? What kind of fucked up world they were living in?

Without meaning to, Jessica looked at her door. She hadn't seen Clark since he killed Zod, three days ago. She tried to convince him to come home, but he just got up, still shocked as hell, and said he needed to help the people in the town. And that was what he was doing, all this time, without stopping a second to rest.

Cameras from all TV stations were pointed to the sky to catch any image of him, as Clark flew all around, lifting fallen debris, getting people to the hospital, opening blocked paths, safely breaking buildings about to fall... One of the channels had actually made a small panel where each life he saved was shown; last time she saw it, it already was on triple digits.

Jessica sighed again. Those people needed help, that was true. But so did Clark and right now, people around the world were only interested in what Clark could do for them, not the other way around.

In their eyes, he was Superman. Kal-El, the alien that had saved the world. The Man of Steel, unbeatable, a God in the flesh.

But he wasn't any of that. He was… Clark. Just a guy, trying to be a journalist, slightly stronger than the average person maybe, but still just a guy. Someone who was anything but invulnerable, even if he could survive getting shot.

And right now, to her absolute shame, Jessica was worried sick for him.

That was when she heard something passing through the thin walls of her apartment. Running, she was out of her apartment in a second. She picked the lock of Clark's apartment as fast as she could and got in, closing the door.

There, standing in the middle of the room, wearing that blue suit of his, was Clark. He looked tired as hell, dirty, full of dust on him... But he was smiling.

Jessica smiled too; her friend was back.

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Natasha looked around the Avengers Tower's kitchen; one of many. Usually, she didn't stay there, she had her own apartments in New York, but the last few days were anything but usual and the team wanted to stay close to help.

A great portion of New York was in ruins. The damage made by Black Zero and then the battle was horrifying. There wasn't an exact number yet, but thousands of people had died, much more
were injured and a lot of people were missing. She didn't know the true dimension of the damage yet. The city would need billions of dollars to be reconstructed. There were people without homes, some completely destroyed, some still not safe to return to. Families broken forever.

Zod might not have destroyed Earth, as he intended, but he had harmed it very seriously.

Without Clark… Well, Without Clark none of them would be there. But supposing they did manage to defeat Zod without him; the number of dead people would be 10 times worse, she had no doubt. Not only because of what Clark did to avoid casualties during his fight against Zod, but because of what he did later.

Three days. Three entire days without stopping once, all that after fighting two battles against Kryptonians and destroying the World Engine. Clark had effectively stayed on New York since then, helping, finding people buried, lifting buildings, flying with the injured to the hospitals…

The things he did, well… Superman was a very fitting name indeed.

"Is he still at it?" asked Tony, entering the room, Steve and Bruce with him, looking at the TV. Natasha didn't need to look at him to know about who he was asking.

"He was flying over the city carrying an ambulance a few minutes ago," she answered. "I don't know now."

"The guy needs a rest," Tony said, filling his mug with coffee. He sighed. "We all do."

That was true. All of them, even Clint with his broken leg, were helping in any way they could during all those days. But none of them had the stamina Clark had; he didn't even sleep or eat during all this time.

And of course they couldn't help in the way he did. Tony used the backup suits he had to help and Steve was a super-soldier, but none of them could lift entire toppled buildings, see through the rubble to find buried people, fly to the hospitals carrying vehicles and medicine…

Still, being there already helped. They were the famous Avengers. People saw them and gained hope; something they needed very badly right now.

"He is doing what he can," said Steve, eating a sandwich fast, no doubt so he could return and help more.

Tony sniggered.

"Well, we can't all be 'Supermen', can we?" he said. "But seriously, three days? That's amazing."

Pepper entered the kitchen.

"Tony, I organized the fundraiser," she said, walking to him and placing her hand on his shoulder. "A lot of people want to help."

"That's wonderful!" Steve exclaimed.

"It's not going to be nearly close enough," Tony replied, cutting his happiness short. "Parts of the city simply… don't exist anymore. The money to fix all that… We are going to need a lot of help."

Tony suddenly looked older; older and very tired. The battle, the losses, had taken its toll. No one said anything, they just stayed in silence.
"We'll fix it, somehow," said Bruce and Natasha was surprised to see optimism coming from him; she wondered if Hulk helping so much and even saving Maria's life had anything to do with that.

Before they continue the conversation, however, there was a loud noise outside the tower, followed by a bright light. All of them got up fast, ready to fight, only to stop when they actually saw what was happening through the window. They relaxed, seeing the rainbow colors.

It was the Bifrost; Thor was finally here.

Martha stood on Clark's side, looking at Jonathan's tombstone. Jonathan Kent was buried in a very beautiful place, with emerald green grass and trees everywhere. It was peaceful.

"He always believed you were meant for greater things," she said, holding Clark's hand," and that when the day came, your shoulders would be able to bear the weight."

Clark looked at his father's name written on the rock; he sighed.

"Yeah, I just wish he could've been here to see it finally happen."

Martha smiled, remembering the days when Clark was still a little boy, running around with a red cloth on his back as a cape, the dog running by his side. Remembering how Jonathan would watch him as he fixed the car's engine, seeing Clark pretending to be a superhero; as if he wasn't just seeing a kid playing, but something more.

"He saw it, Clark," she said after a minute. "Believe me."

And now the whole world was seeing it as well.
Chapter 17 – The World Doesn't Stop

General Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross gazed at the ruined city in front of him. He couldn't believe in the amount of destruction around. The Incident couldn't even compare to that. Hell's Kitchen had a lot of destroyed buildings, fire, rubble on the streets; Black Zero had wiped out a portion of New York.

There weren't any destroyed buildings because there were no buildings left. The place where the gravitational beam had hit, and the parts around it as the beam expanded, was simply gone. The buildings, skyscrapers, vehicles, people, nothing was left standing. It was just dust and ashes.

And, of course, there were the aliens fighting. Had they restricted their duel to the already ruined area, maybe the damage would have been smaller, but obviously they didn't. No, they went around fighting in the city, each punch toppling a building, energy beams cutting everything in their path, and then both of them began to fly, their bodies hitting everything like missiles.

Death, destruction, panic. But maybe there was something to gain from all this; and Ross was looking at it right now.

An alien ship. The same one, he knew now, that was trapped below the ice in Canada. The same one that had been stolen from them by the Kryptonian - Superman. The same one that had flew over New York and destroyed the Helicarrier, only to fall on top of the city, brought down by Kal-El.

Ross didn't know how many people had died yet. He couldn't even imagine the money needed to rebuild that part of New York. But maybe, just maybe, it would all be worth it, if they could get their hands on that Kryptonian technology. The technological advancement that the ship could bring to the human race was incalculable.

New weapons, capable of fighting any external threat, faster than light travel, computers so advanced that they made the ones built by the humans look like fancy rocks, powerful, maybe unlimited, energy sources, and all that without mentioning the amount of knowledge stored inside of it.

It could change everything. It would change the human race forever. And it was his.

General Ross couldn't keep the smile off his face as he walked in the ship's direction, stepping on the rubble, his men and scientists following him. What was the Super-Soldier Serum compared to that? What were Stark's fancy suits? What was the Hulk? In front of him was the future of the human kind, the key to greatness. He was almost running to it, his feet walking fast in anticipation.

That was when everything began to tremble.

He almost fell down like most of his men, but with a great deal of effort he managed to keep standing. His eyes looked around, looking for the source of what was happening. Was the street collapsing? Did the ruins of some building near them fall? It was only when one of his men yelled that Ross looked back at the ship and noticed that all of that quaking was coming from it.

"No, no!" he yelled, getting up with difficult and running towards it. "Don't you dare!"
The ship rose to the sky but not alone. Under it, lifting the whole thing on his back was Superman.

"GET BACK HERE! NOOOOO!"

General Ross screamed until his throat was hurting, but in the end it didn't matter, as Superman flew away, taking the ship with him.

Clark walked around the ship, now hidden back in Arctic, seeing all the destruction inside it.

"So, Kelex, what's the damage?" he finally asked, looking at his robot.

Kelex, in her drone form, turned to him.

"Structural damage is negligible. Aside from the entry hole you made in the cockpit, the hull was not damaged," she answered. "The command chair in the cockpit was destroyed, but the controls are still functioning normally. The greater damage, however, happened in the Genesis Chamber."

"What happened there?" asked Clark.

"Your attack inside the ship damaged the systems temporarily," Kelex explained. "The ship's artificial intelligence rebooted itself fast enough, but not in time to raise defenses in the Genesis Chamber to protect it from the fall. Because of it, structural damage in the Genesis Chamber was considerable."

"Is it lost?"

"No. The glass container broke and the fluids drained, but they can be repaired and restored."

"What about the, um, embryos?"

"Most were destroyed, but with the Codex stored inside you they can be regrown, once the Genesis Chamber is rebuilt and sterilized," answered Kelex. "The reconstruction will take time, however."

"That's okay," Clark said fast.

And it really was. Clark wasn't even sure if he even should try to "make" new Kryptonians, but even if he wanted to, it certainly wouldn't be now. The world was not ready for more Kryptonians and Clark least of all; he didn't have the will or the wisdom yet to try to bring his people back. And doing it without being there to guide them… Well, Zod may end up looking like a small threat close to what could happen.

Nevertheless, ready to use the Genesis Chamber or not, Clark had to take the ship back; all this technology, all this knowledge, leaving that unsupervised in the hands of power hungry humans was a monumentally stupid thing to do. What they did with the Tesseract proved it. It had brought not only Zod to Earth, but Loki and the Chitauri as well. Who knows what they would do with this ship?

That was why Clark tried to get back all the Kryptonian technology left around after the battle. It wasn't easy, but he was sure he got most of it. The ship was, of course, secured; most of the World Engine's pieces were also secure, except for some parts washed away by the ocean; Black Zero left nothing behind, being absorbed back into the Phantom Zone.

There were, however, some pieces of tech he couldn't find in time. Parts of the escape pods from Black Zero, Zod's armor, a great quantity of the liquid geo from the World Engine, probably taken
deep into the ocean. He had no idea what had happened to all that and he could only hope it was lost, but he couldn't help but fear the worse. The worst part, however, wasn't that.

The worst part was Zod's missing body.

Clark was still kicking himself for not taking the body right when he… right when he killed him. But he couldn't. He just… couldn't do it. He couldn't take it, couldn't touch it, couldn't even look at it. Too much sadness, too much shock, too much guilt. So instead of taking Zod's corpse and leaving, he turned his back and went to help the people caught in the middle of the battle.

And when he finally came back the body was gone.

He looked for it nonstop without success, he asked Natasha if she knew anything about it, he asked Tony if Jarvis hadn't seen anything. Nothing came up. Someone had taken Zod's body and Clark could only imagine what they wanted with it. To study, probably, to find out what made a Kryptonian tick.

That was bad enough, but for Clark this failure cut even deeper, because he was deprived of giving his respects to the last member of his race other than him.

Maybe Zod deserved none of it, but it wasn't about Zod. It was about Clark and his need to at least grieve for the life he had taken. And someone had taken that from him, along with his need for closure.

"We can make some improvements in the ship, sir," Kelex said, snapping him out from his thoughts, and Clark turned to her.

"Improvements?"

"Yes. This ship was not fitted with a Phantom Drive. With your permission, I could use the data stored by Jor-El to fabricate one and install it in the ship. It can take some time, but it is possible."

Clark smiled. That was good news.

"Do it."

"As you wish, sir."

Maintenance drones began to fly everywhere as Kelex said this, starting on the necessary repairs. The previously silent ship was full of noise as the drones went everywhere, repairing everything in sight. It was then that something occurred to Clark.

"Kelex, what about my father's A.I?" he asked.

The robot turned to him.

"General Zod ordered the ship's A.I to terminate it."

Clark was in silence for a second.

"Can it be restored?" he said finally.

"Unknown," Kelex answered. "There are remaining strands of code from his A.I, but to restore it all of it would need to be found and pieced together once again. The complexity of such thing is tremendous, so it would take a long time… If it is possible at all."
Kelex approached him and, to his surprise, touched his shoulder with a thread of liquid geo.

"I am sorry for your loss, sir. Jor-El was a great man."

Clark nodded, thanking Kelex.

"Thanks, and do what you can."

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Thor's eyes were glued to the big screen in the Avengers Tower, as the recordings of the battle pieced together by Jarvis played. The rest of the Avengers were sitting behind him, in silence, as he watched everything that had happened.

He didn't have the words necessary to describe how useless he felt right now.

All that destruction and all that death. Midgard was almost lost, taking with it the lives of all his friends, Jane, the entire human race. He had sworn to protect Midgard, to be there together with the Avengers to fight any threat. And when the biggest of them all happened, one worse than even Loki's invasion, Thor wasn't there.

"Where were you, Point Break?" asked Tony, after several minutes of silence. "I mean, we dealt with it, but we could've used your help, buddy."

Thor was in silence for a few seconds, watching the Kryptonians going through a building, and then he turned to face his companions.

"I... I am truly sorry, my friends," he apologized, looking at their faces. "I told you during my brother's invasion that I was forced to destroy the Bifrost."

"But didn't your father managed to send you here anyway?" asked Captain Rogers before he could go on. "Couldn't he have done that again?"

"He could," Thor answered, nodding. "But that wasn't the problem. Asgard is the keeper of all Nine Realms. We oversee them, defend them and prevent wars from breaking out. But, with the Bifrost destroyed, we were without means to do that, at least until it was rebuilt. So when news that the Bifrost was broken spread—"

"War," summarized Natasha, sighing.

He nodded.

"Every enemy from Asgard took that moment as a chance to solve old disputes, pillage, destroy and conquer. Without our army to help, the other Realms were invaded. So when the Bifrost was repaired, I was sent by my father to put an end to this." Thor looked back at the screen where the footage of the battle was still playing. "When this was happening I was in the middle of a battle in Vanaheim. Heimdall alerted me as soon as the battle was over and opened the Bifrost so I could come here, but by that time..."

"It was already over," Dr. Banner finished for him.

All of them seemed troubled by his absence in the Kryptonian invasion, but apparently they understood why he couldn't be there to help. That was something, at least. It wouldn't bring all those dead people back to life and it wouldn't fix all the destruction, but they understood he hadn't simply abandoned them when they needed his help the most.
"Well, like I said, we managed," Stark said again. "We found help elsewhere."

Thor looked back at the screen, seeing the Kryptonian clad in blue flying.

"Yes, I saw it. A member of the House of El," he said.

Everyone looked at him surprised.

"You know much about Kryptonians?" asked Natasha.

"Not as much as I'd like," Thor answered, approaching them. "Much of the interaction between Asgard and Krypton happened before my time. What I know come from my history teachings."

"What do you know about them?" asked Tony, quickly, apparently very curious.

Thor organized his thoughts for a moment, trying to remember everything.

"The first time an Asgardian met a Kryptonian was during the years they called Era of Expansion," he began. "They were involved in a conflict with the Kree. Apparently, the Kree thought attacking a ship they'd never seen before was a good idea."

"It wasn't?" asked Clint, his broken leg on the couch.

"Oh no, it was not," Thor answered, remembering the stories. "The Kryptonians were passing over a Kree colony and the ship was shot down, exploding when it hit the ground. Little did the Kree know that doing such a thing against a Kryptonian under a yellow sun wouldn't bring them anything good. As a result, while the Kree were celebrating and checking the wreckage, the Kryptonian crew exited the ship and proceeded to annihilate the entire colony."

The eyes of his companions were fixed on him as he told the story, probably comparing what they knew about Kryptonians with what he was telling.

"The Asgardians arrived some time later, when the colony was already in ruins. Usually, since what happened was outside the Nine Realms, we wouldn't have bothered, but what happened was simply too remarkable."

"A colony being wiped out was remarkable?" asked Natasha, raising a single eyebrow.

"No, the way it was wiped out was remarkable," Thor answered. "It was a kind of power not easily found in the universe."

"So what happened when the Asgardians arrived?" asked Steve. "They attacked you?"

Thor shook his head.

"They gathered around the Bifrost and prepared themselves, but they didn't attack, which at least showed that they weren't bloodthirsty savages. The Asgardians introduced themselves, told them who they were, asked what had happened… The Kryptonians showed them their ship and clarified that they were only defending themselves."

"By destroying an entire colony?!" exclaimed Steve.

Thor laughed.

"You have not met the Kree, my friend. While I won't commit the same mistake I did with the Jotuns, labeling all of them as monsters, this description wouldn't be far from the truth. And they
didn't wipe out every single person there. The ones that surrendered, the civilians, they were spared. That was more merciful than many Asgardians incursions, I'll say that much."

"So no Blue Beam of Doom?" asked Clint.

He frowned.

"I do not understand."

"No World Engine?" explained Bruce.

"Oh! No, the Kryptonians weren't there to colonize anything, it was a scout ship. Apparently, thousands of them were sent everywhere, to gather data about the universe."

"Even here," Natasha said, to Thor's surprise. "One of them was buried in ice for 20.000 years."

"I did not know that," Thor said. "The same that fell over New York during the battle?"

"The very same," she said.

Well, they did send those ships everywhere, it shouldn't be a surprise that one of them got here.

"That was the first meeting between Asgardians and Kryptonians, but far from being the only one," he continued. "During the Era of Expansion our kinds fought together and against each other many times."

"Really, you went to war against them?" asked Tony.

"I wouldn't call it war, more like isolated battles here and there. Nothing so severe to actually spark a war between our peoples. Despite our differences, there was a lot of respect between our races."

Thor tilted his head.

"Of course, that went on until the end of the Era of Expansion," he continued. "For some reason, the Kryptonians were called back to their planet. They abandoned their colonies and outposts and pretty much quarantined Krypton, ceasing all external contact with anyone. That was the last time an Asgardian met a Kryptonian, at least that I know of."

"Clark told me about this," Natasha mentioned. "He said their resources ended, so they abandoned everything outside of Krypton to spare them."

"Clark? That doesn't sound like a Kryptonian name," Thor said, frowning.

Natasha shook her head.

"Clark is the name he was given here. His birth name is Kal-El," she explained.

That was interesting. As far as Thor knew, no Kryptonian would ever willingly choose an outsider name; they might not all be monsters, but they were unusually proud of their culture.

"Well, anyway... The last time Krypton came up in our talks was a few years ago, when it imploded," Thor said. "And to the best of our knowledge, they were extinct. "He looked back at the screen, seeing two Kryptonians entering the atmosphere while fighting. "We were wrong."

"Tell me about it," sighed Tony, also looking at the screen.
All of them were in silence for a few moments, lost in their own thoughts.

"You said, 'Clark' told you their history," Thor began, looking at Natasha. "So Clark is the one in blue? The Kryptonian that helped you?"

They all nodded.

"Clark was sent here by his father, Jor-El, when their planet exploded," Natasha said. "He arrived as a baby and was adopted by human parents. He lived his entire life here, didn't even know what he was until a few months ago."

"So that is why this Kryptonian is so comfortable about using a human name," he mentioned, more to himself than to them.

"What do you mean?" asked Natasha.

"Well, Kryptonians, as a whole, were very… proud. Immensely so, really. To the point that they considered everything non-Kryptonian to be inferior. Wrong. Uncivilized."

None of them looked truly surprised about that. Seeing the disbelief in his face, Tony explained:

"We've met the bastards that did all this. They fit pretty well in your description. I mean, they were going to terraform the planet and kill us all simply because it was a little more convenient than look for another, uninhabited planet. That is pretty telling of how they saw us, isn't it?"

"I suppose. Though not all of them were like that. And the ones that shared that vision weren't usually so… explicit about it."

"Well, the ones that came here were," Clint said.

"Yes. General Zod. I'm not surprised," Thor mused. "Asgard may not have met anymore Kryptonians after they were recalled to their planet, but this name would come up often over the years."

"How so?" asked Steve.

"He was Krypton's military leader, the last one," he explained. "And while there weren't many, there were those who would try to test Krypton's strength. The stories of those battles spread across the universe as tales of caution: do not approach Krypton. Even the real big powers out there, like the Kree Empire, were wise enough to stay far away from Kryptonian space."

"Exactly how powerful is a Kryptonian?" asked Tony, suddenly. "I mean, we got our asses kicked pretty badly, but how does a Kryptonian compare to an Asgardian?"

Thor laughed.

"In my youth, I've always asked that same question to my father. Kryptonians were hailed as some of the most powerful beings in the universe and I've always wanted to face one in battle."

"You're joking," Bruce said, looking at him with eyes wide.

That made him laugh even more.

"Oh, no, my friend, I wasn't a very wise child, but I was a brave one!"

"And do you think you could win?" asked Steve.
"I have no idea," he answered truthfully. "There are too many scenarios that could play out. Are we under a yellow sun? What kind of weapons are we using? How well trained are they?" Thor looked at his friends. "Here? Physically, I'm outclassed. There are few beings more powerful than a Kryptonian under a yellow sun. Their strength and speed would be greater than mine, most likely. How much would depend on the individual I'm fighting."

His friends were looking at him very interested.

"That said, Asgardians have superior weapons of combat. Well, it would be more accurate to say that we can have superior weapons, not that every single individual has them. Mjölnir, for example, and Gungnir. Our melee weapons are stronger by far and under a yellow sun that would play a huge role."

"What about under a different kind of sun?" asked Tony.

"Under a different kind of sun, a red one, the Kryptonian wouldn't have the same physical attributes. So he would fight differently, using all the considerable technology they had. One versus one they would most likely lose, but their ships, armors and weapons of mass destruction were said to be very powerful."

"Well, you've lost your chance," said Clint.

Thor looked down, losing his excitement.

"You are right about that," he said.

Before the silence could extend too much, Natasha looked at him.

"You mentioned the House of El before," she said. "How did you know that Clark belonged to it?"

"The symbol on his chest, of course," he answered. "The House of El was very ancient and very famous, even outside of Krypton. They had extraordinary individuals during its existence. I see that this fact hasn't changed."

Natasha smiled a little bit but Thor couldn't guess why.

"You should tell him that," she said, suddenly. "Tell him what you know about his race, about his House. He is the last one. He fought against his own people to protect us. The least we can do is... To give him some good memories about his people."

Thor nodded in agreement.

"I would like very much to meet Kal-El," he said.

"He saved Jane's life," Natasha added and Thor's eyes widened. "Not only because he defeated Zod, before. Cauterized her wound before she could bleed out."

He could only look at Natasha, as if he had lost his ability to speak.

"It seems I owe him more than I thought," he finally said.

There was a long silence after that, when everybody just seemed to consider all the new information they learned.

"Speaking of Jane," Natasha began, again. "Have you seen her already? She misses you very much."
"I," Thor paused and then answered, "I haven't. I came here directly, as fast as I could."

"Well, she is in England right now," Natasha continued. "You should go there. I'll call Clark later and invite him here, so you two can meet."

"That sounds perfect," he agreed.

Thor couldn't help but smile as he went outside and yelled Heimdall; he had good friends.

"Get the fuck outta here!" exclaimed Jessica, staring at Clark.

Both of them were walking on the packed streets of New York, going through the crowd, moving as usual without a single person turning to look at the now very famous alien in their midst.

The same alien that had fought a huge battle in the middle of the city a few days ago, without wearing a mask.

"This is fucking nuts!" Jessica said again, amazed with the fact that not a single person was recognizing Clark. "How is it possible that they are being fooled by a pair of glasses?!"

Clark smiled at her, adjusting his newly bought glasses on his face, as they crossed the streets and sat on a bench.

"It's not that surprising, really," he tried to explain, his voice low. "Nobody is expecting to meet Superman walking in the middle of the streets. To them, Superman is a, a symbol. The Man of Steel, always flying in the sky to do something important, a perfect superhero. Not just some guy, who lives in a terrible apartment and has difficulty finding money to pay rent. They simply can't believe that I'm down here with them."

Jessica just stared at his face for a long minute.

"It's something about the glasses, isn't it?" she asked, as if she hadn't heard a word he said. "It's some kind of alien tech, it has to be. It's hypnotizing people, isn't it?"

Clark sighed.

"Do you know how stupid that sounds?"

"Do you know how stupid it sounds that people don't recognize you because of a fucking pair of glasses?!"

Instead of arguing with her, he just took the glasses off and got up, going to a hotdog stand nearby. Jessica got up fast after him.

"Two, please," he asked, pointing at the picture of the one he wanted.

The man looked at him for a second and nodded, not even glancing back a second time; he saw Jessica's jaw drop.

"Fucking moron," she whispered; Clark just smiled and paid the man. "I can't believe this."

He took the glasses back, not that he really needed them.

"Even if someone thinks I'm similar to him, "he said, biting the hotdog, "all they'll see is a guy that look like Superman."
"Okay, alright, people are stupid. But what about those facial recognition systems? You can't fool that. One picture they take from your face and you're screwed. They'll just compare with the pictures in the system and find a match: Clark Kent."

Clark nodded while biting his hotdog again.

"That's true. But then I remembered something. I'm sure you recall the night when Zod just hacked every single thing in the world, don't you?" Jessica rolled her eyes. "Well, that got me thinking, so I asked Kelex about it. Apparently, Kryptonian tech is so beyond anything we have on Earth that doing that was a simple thing, as long as you had a computer powerful enough, like the one I have on my ship. So I asked Kelex to make a harmless virus and release it, well, everywhere."

"A virus?!"

"Yep. One that would make any linking of Superman's appearance with Clark's appearance impossible. It spread to every computer, every cell phone, everything capable of being infected, really. It doesn't do anything other than that and it is pretty much invisible if you don't know what you are looking for, but it protects me from being matched in the system with Superman's face."

"That's, pretty awesome, actually," she said, looking at him. "So, if your tech is that much better than ours, you could, in theory, I don't know, hack into a bank and transfer a million bucks to your account?"

He just stared at her.

"Sure, why not?"

"Really?!!"

"Yeah. I could. I won't, but I could."

She huffed.

"You are such a boy scout."

Clark just laughed, as they kept walking.

"So, how is Trish?" he asked.

"She is fine. Looking for a new studio, since her old one turned to dust, but that's basically a vacation to her."

He didn't answer, just thinking about all the destruction that Zod brought to the city.

"And what about you?" she asked, suddenly, deliberately not looking at him. "Are you… better?"

That was a complex question. Was he feeling guilty for killing Zod still? Yes, very much. Taking a life was worse than anything he had ever done, no matter how much Zod may have deserved to die. And he was also feeling guilty about all the destruction in New York and all the deaths. If he wasn't here, if he had never came to Earth, maybe Zod wouldn't have either.

But that was useless to think about. He was here. He had killed Zod. And now he had to find a way to deal with that. It wasn't easy, but he had no other choice.

"I'm better," he answered, finally. "I'm not, I mean, I'll never feel happy about this, but I understand it was something I had to do. I don't have to like it, but I know I had no choice."
"You didn't," Jessica said, fast. "That son of a bitch would have destroyed the entire world just for shits and giggles. I'm really sorry you were the one who had to kill him, but I'm not sorry he is dead. And nor should you be."

Clark was in silence, thinking about her words. They were… colorful, as usual, but they were true, in a way.

"Well, if I learned one thing with all this is that I'm never killing someone again," he promised, his eyes hard.

Jessica just looked down.

"Yeah, let's hope so."

Neither of them said anything anymore, as they entered their apartment building together.

"He stole the ship. Again," said councilwoman Hawley.

Fury had to make an effort not to close his eye and sigh. Instead, he remained impassive, looking with the same expression. He was at the Triskelion, Alexander Pierce by his side, while the screens projected the images of the World Security Council in the room.

And right now, he was there to explain the theft of the Kryptonian ship by the alien Kal-El. Again.

"We had plans for that ship, Director," added councilman Singh. "With all the destruction brought upon us by General Zod, that was the one good thing to come out of this. And now it's gone."

"And we want it back," declared councilman Yen.

This time Fury did sigh. He looked at them and opened his arms.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

No answer came from them.

"We are the World Security Council and we will not have our authority challenged by no one, not even Superman!" stated Hawley.

Fury clenched his hands into fists.

"Again, what do you want me to do?" he asked. "Fight him? Send agents after him? Against Superman?! What is that going to accomplish?"

"Nick is right," agreed Pierce. "Kal-El is much too powerful. We can't bully him into submission."

"So you are admitting you have no control over the alien?" asked Yen.

"Yes," answered Fury, fast, to the surprise of the Council. "What? You were expecting me to say I had him on a leash? You saw what he can do! How powerful he is! There isn't a single force in this world capable of going against him and I'm not different in that aspect!"

That wasn't exactly true. Fury did know who he was and that was a weakness he could explore. However, Fury did believe Clark was on their side and he wouldn't share what he knew with anyone, least of all the Council.
And he wouldn't try to take that ship back even if he could, he thought, without saying anything. He had learned his lesson with the Tesseract; messing with that ship could bring something even worse.

"What's to be done about this, then?" asked Singh.

"Nothing," Fury answered, surprising them once again. "Superman is on our side. He fought his own kind to protect us. He killed the last member of his own race! He is an ally and I won't, in any circumstance, put that alliance into question by attacking him because he took a ship that already belonged to him back!"

"I agree with Nick," added Pierce, cleaning his glasses. "This is a fight we cannot win. So why start one?"

"And if he proves himself a threat?" said Singh. "What do we do then?"

"What we are already doing: finish Project Insight," answered Pierce.

"Which will be useless against him!" said Yen, slapping his chair.

"Not necessarily," said Pierce and Fury turned to look at him. "There may be some weapons capable of hurting him."

What?! Why didn't Fury hear about this before?

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

Pierce looked at him.

"Nick, what if Superman decides to fly down, rip off the roof of the White House and grab the president right out of the Oval Office? Who would stop him?" He turned back at the Council. "Superman may be an ally now, but we know how fickle friendships can be. Now, I'm not saying for us to go to war against him. What's the sense in that? But we do need contingency plans. A deterrent. A silver bullet, if you will. We don't have to shoot it, but if we forge one…"

Fury walked closer to Pierce.

"What are saying?" he asked, serious.

Pierce smiled.

"Ladies and gentlemen, have you ever heard of adamantium?"

"The cleaning and repairs of the areas affected by the Black Zero Event are progressing fast. President Ellis promised all the help he can possibly give to the people who lost their homes and families…"

Natasha turned off the TV.

"I was watching that!" complained Tony.

"No you weren't," Pepper answered for her.

She almost smiled; she liked Pepper. She could always put Tony in his place quite effortlessly. She got up and stretched, walking to the kitchen again. The Avengers were all together in the Tower,
passing the time as best as they could, while Clark didn't arrive; she had called him earlier, asked him if he could show up.

To introduce him to Thor, yes, but also so that they could know him better. Whatever they knew about him was what they learned quickly during the battle. But, since they would be seeing each other often, it was a good idea to know more.

And, of course, she wanted to know him better.

Clark was… interesting. Intelligent, but not arrogant, easy to talk to, nice. And, of course, the most powerful man in the world; but not one who abused his powers. Not a bully. Not someone who entered in fights easily, not because he was afraid to lose, but because he knew he would win.

That made him different; Natasha liked different.

"Mr. Kent is almost here," announced Jarvis.

They all looked at the elevator and a few seconds later the doors opened and Clark walked out. Only to stop when he realized everybody was looking at him.

"Um, hello," he said, waving his hand.

To her surprise, the first person to answer him was none other than Pepper.

"Mr. Superman! It's so good to see you again," she said, walking to him and shaking his hand; her face was amazed. Looking behind her, she saw Tony's jaw agape. "I mean, what you did for us…" 

"Miss, I mean, Pepper, please call me Clark," he said, incredibly embarrassed. "It's nice to see you again."

"Clark, of course!" she said. "I never imagined you were Superman when we met. Not that there was a Superman yet, but you know what I mean. How is Trish?"

"She is looking for a new place for her studio. It fell apart during the battle."

"Oh, that's awful! Tell her to call me, I can suggest some good places. Her show is too good to stop."

Clark smiled.

"I'll tell her, don't worry."

Seeing that Pepper had finished talking, Natasha approached and greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

"I like the glasses," she complimented, smiling at his blush; he took them off.

"I forgot I had them. I was using it as a disguise."

"How?!" asked Clint. "How exactly are you using a pair of glasses as a disguise?"

"Did you try the fake nose?" asked Tony. "It would probably work better."

"No, the glasses are quite alright, Tony."

He looked around the room for a moment and went to shake hands with Steve.
"Nice to see you again, Captain."

"You too," Steve answered, smiling.

"Bruce, Clint," he waved, answering their nods; until he saw someone he still wasn't introduced to: Thor.

The Asgardian didn't wait for him to go to him, however, getting up and walking to Clark; and, to everyone's surprise, crushing him with a bear hug.

"Wow!" Clark exclaimed as Thor lifted him.

"Thank you, my Kryptonian friend!" Thor said in that loud way of his. "For being here when I wasn't to help Midgard. And for saving Jane's life!"

He let go of Clark and shook his hand, looking into his eyes with a smile; well, Natasha could already see the beginning of a friendship there.

"You don't have to thank me, Thor. And it's very nice to meet you too."

Thor smiled, slapped his shoulder and sat down again.

"We have a lot to talk about, Kal," he said, looking at Natasha. "Natasha told me that you grew up here, without knowing much about your heritage. I can tell you some stories, about the Kryptonians and about the House of El."

"You know about my House?" Clark asked, surprised.

"Some stories, yes. Your House was famous, even in Asgard."

Probably without noticing, Clark smiled.

"I would like that very much."

"Then it's settled!"

Nodding, Clark looked around the room.

"So, how are you all doing?" he asked.

"Oh, you know, the same," answered Tony, typing in his computer without even looking at them. "Trying to find money to rebuild the city, improving my armors, trying to convince the president not to arrest you—"

"What?!"

Natasha sighed.

"Don't listen to him, President Ellis doesn't want to arrest you," she said.

"Some people in the government, however…" added Tony.

Clark was visibly shocked and even Tony noticed that.

"Don't worry about it!" he said, waving his hands. "It's nothing out of the usual. I mean, do you know how many people wanted to see the Avengers behind bars after The Incident? Too many!
And it's not like they even know who you are, this is just nonsense to try to gain votes."

That did not seem to relax Clark and Natasha felt like shocking Tony with her Widow's Bite. Of course Clark was still blaming himself for what happened; joking about people wanting to arrest him wasn't exactly funny when you thought yourself to be guilty.

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Bruce. "I mean, if they haven't arrested me yet, you shouldn't be concerned."

Natasha sighed again, rolling her eyes.

"You saved the world, Clark," she said, looking at him. "President Ellis knows this and that's exactly why he hasn't issued any order against you."

"It's true," added Steve. "I talked with him myself, explained what happened. He is very grateful."

"We all are," said Clint, to Natasha's surprise; maybe she shouldn't be, however. Clark had saved his family lives after all.

"And that's exactly why we have a gift for you!" exclaimed Tony, getting up and walking to the middle of the room with his arms opened theatrically. "Tell me, Clark, how would you like to join the Avengers?"
Decision, Decisions…

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Chapter 18 – Decisions, Decisions…

"Tell me, Clark, how would you like to join the Avengers?"

Clark was not expecting this. At all. The idea of actually being part of the Avengers had never occurred to him. And honestly, why would it? It wasn't like he planned to become "Superman" and stand in front of the whole world before. Using his gifts to help people was one thing, but actually revealing he was an alien and flying everywhere helping people in broad daylight was quite another.

After everything that happened, there wasn't a way for things to go back to the way they were. Clark was alright with that. Sure, he would prefer that the news would stop to talk about him 24/7, that the internet wasn't filled with people making up all sorts of weird stuff about him and, mostly, that governments all over the world would just stop to try tailing him, but after Black Zero Event he couldn't actually blame them.

So the question was: what would he do now?

Keep helping people as he was or join the Avengers? What would change? For one, he would have support. Of course, being a Kryptonian and having Kelex on his side made him pretty much self-sufficient, but you could never have enough people on your side. There were things he just wasn't suited to do or that he just didn't have the time to do. Information gathering, for example, was something he could more or less handle, but the time spent doing that could be better used somewhere else, like rescuing someone from an active volcano or stopping an avalanche.

Despite what some crazy people were saying out there, Clark was very aware he wasn't a god. He couldn't be everywhere at all times and he certainly wasn't all-knowing. The whole situation with Zod was enough proof; even being as powerful as he was, there was simply no way he could've done all that by himself. The Avengers helped him all the way and he couldn't imagine what he would do if they weren't there.

But that brought a whole list of cons too. The Avengers answered to SHIELD and SHIELD answered to the World Security Council. The same guys who had actually fired a nuke in New York, the same guys who had used the Tesseract to develop weapons and ended up drawing Loki and Zod to Earth, the same guys who did a lot of shady things everywhere at all times, things that Clark didn't agree with.

Everything the Avengers did had to pass through them first. Obviously, when the situation demanded, he knew the Avengers were more than willing to do things on their own and even disobey direct orders, but on a daily basis how would that work? It wasn't that he thought he was better than the Avengers, that he was always right or that he didn't feel the need to answer for the things he did. He knew they were great people, heroes in every sense of the word.

However, SHIELD, as an organization, wasn't, and the World Security Council even less.

Would they prevent him from helping people because of politics? Clark liked to always think the best of everyone, but that didn't make him naive. He was well aware that there were people around the world comfortable in committing unspeakable acts as long as they gained something doing it.
Governments everywhere had people like that inside them. SHIELD was no different.

That wasn't to say that everyone there was like that. He knew they weren't. He would even go as far as to say that most of them weren't. He was aware of SHIELD's history, he knew about all the good they did to the world. And he had personally met heroes working for SHIELD, and not only the ones in the room with him right now.

But what would that mean if the people in charge weren't like that? How much power did SHIELD, and more importantly, the World Security Council, have over the Avengers? If Clark joined the Avengers only to disobey them on a regular basis, in how much trouble his companions would find themselves? It wouldn't be just him in trouble anymore, it would be all of them, since he would be part of the team.

All those questions passed in a flash inside his mind as Clark just stared at Tony in silence, without really seeing him.

Shaking his head, Clark looked at Tony.

"Can I think about it?" he asked.

Tony opened his arms, full of energy.

"What is there to think about?! It's the Avengers!" he exclaimed.

"Tony!" said Pepper, slapping his ribs. "Let him think! It's not a simple question and you know it!"

"Ugh, fine! Think about it, then, but don't take too long. Who knows if someone else will appear in the meantime and take your spot?"

"Like who?" asked Clark, sitting on the couch by the small table. Everybody sat too, now that the tension of what Clark would answer passed.

"There are all sorts of talented people out there," Tony said. "Like, um, Maria Hill! She would be a really nice addition to the team, so there!"

"Maria wouldn't want to join the Avengers," Bruce answered, distracted as he opened the bags of Chinese food on the table and passed them around. "She is happy at SHIELD."

Bruce was the only one there who hasn't realized his mistake as Tony's smile widened to inhuman proportions.

"Is that so? And how would you know about that, Bruce?" he asked.

Dr. Banner looked up at Tony. Every single person there was staring at him with different degrees of interest, from Natasha's little grin and bright eyes to Thor's full-blown smile.

"I-I mean, that's what I gathered from the small conversations I had with her, that's all," answered Bruce, looking down again.

"I-I mean, that's what I gathered from the small conversations I had with her, that's all," answered Bruce, looking down again.

"When did you have those 'short conversations'?” asked Natasha with a mischievous expression. "After the Hulk saved her life in the Helicarrier? Or when she managed to calm you down enough for you to change back? I'm just trying to build a timeline here."

Clark's own smile got a little bigger when his Kryptonian's eyes managed to see a little blush on Bruce's cheeks.
"Bruce and Maria sitting in a tree, K-I-S–"began Tony.

"Do you want to ask what happened to the Big Guy, Tony?" Bruce asked. "Because that can be arranged."

"–what I mean is, I'm happy for you, my friend!"

Everybody started to laugh together and even Bruce was smiling.

"Jokes aside, I'm really happy you found someone, Bruce," said Steve.

"Who said I did?!" asked Bruce, exasperated. "I just talked to her a little, that's all! She is a friend!"

"Speaking of friends, what about the love of your life, Jane, Thor?" Natasha said, giving a last smile to Bruce as he rolled his eyes. "How is she?"

The Asgardian seemed very happy that she'd asked.

"Jane is doing great! I really missed her and Darcy and Selvig!" He stopped. "Well, Selvig is not so well, but he is getting better."

"Didn't you want to stay with her for a while?" asked Clint with his mouth full of food.

"Oh, I asked her if she didn't mind if I came here to spend some time with you," Thor answered, looking a little puzzled as he tried to eat using the chopsticks. "She said I could do whatever I wanted."

He looked at them with his big smile, only to be faced by shocked expressions; the men there winced, as Natasha and Pepper stared at Thor with their jaws agape.

"What?" he asked.

Pepper sighed as Natasha answered:

"Oh, Thor… You're lucky you're pretty."

The poor Asgardian was clueless, so Clark took pity on him.

"When 'midgardian' women say you should do what you want, it doesn't actually mean that you should do what you want," Clark explained.

"I do not understand," Thor said, confused.

"You don't do what you want," Clint continued Clark's explanation, "you try to do what she wants you to do."

Thor looked around as everyone nodded wisely.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Thor argued, baffled. "If she wanted me to do something, why didn't she say so?"

"Who knows, buddy?" Tony said. "If you, a god, doesn't have all the answers, what can we, mere mortals, do? Women are complicated beings." Natasha and Pepper gazed at him. "Complex, wonderful beings, I mean!"

"Asgardian women don't do this," Thor said, as if remembering something. "I remember once
when Sif—" He stopped for a second in stillness and then widened his eyes. "Oh!"

"Finally caught on, huh?" Clint asked, laughing, as Thor took his hands to the face.

"Forget what I said, I think Asgardian women do that as well," he corrected himself, groaning. He looked around. "What should I do?"

"Say you're sorry," Tony answered immediately.

"But what do I say I'm sorry for?" Thor asked.

"It doesn't matter, just say you're sorry," Tony said and Pepper looked at him with threatening glare. He looked down. "I'm sorry, Pepper, I was inconsiderate."

Natasha rolled her eyes as Pepper smacked Tony on the head again.

"Don't worry, Thor, I'll order some chocolates and flowers and you can apologize tomorrow," Pepper said, to Thor's relief.

"I am grateful!"

"You're welcome," she said, smiling. "But you have to be careful, Thor. Pay attention to her feelings, not her words. Well, her words too, but not only them. Oh! And her body language is extremely important as well."

Thor just stared with a blank expression.

"I do not understand."

There was a ripple of laughs around the small table.

"I don't know why you men think this is funny," Natasha said while eating. "At least he has a girlfriend."

That shut most of them up.

"I have a girlfriend!" Tony bragged.

"Keep doing that and we'll see how long that last," Pepper threatened.

"What about you, Cap?" Tony asked hastily. "How are things going for you with the 'future girls'?"

Steve just sighed.

"They are not going at all," he said. "I don't think I'm ready for dating."

"Nonsense," Natasha said, immediately. "What about your neighbor, the nurse? She likes you."

"How do you know about that?!"

"You should ask her out," she suggested, completely ignoring his question.

"I-I don't think so," he mumbled, his ears red.

Natasha's smiled widened.

"I'll find you a date, I'm good at that."
"Please, don't--"

"And what about you, Clark?" asked Natasha, turning to him.

And there it was, what he was dreading since the beginning of that conversation. Maybe he should just answer if he would join the Avengers, that would be an easier answer.

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Two Weeks Later

Katherine Anne "Kitty" Pryde was not having a good day. Rogue and Jubilee had bought a bottle of cheap vodka last night so they could drink a bit, have some fun, dance and talk about boys. It was a nice plan and Kitty was 100% onboard with it, but after a few doses what promised to be a fun night turned into a sobbing nightmare.

Apparently Rogue was a sad drunk. Who would've thought?

So the "drink a bit" part became the "drain the bottle part," having some fun turned into crying, the dancing was suddenly replaced by she and Jubilee trying to comfort her and the talk about boys turned into a huge, drunken monologue of how she would die alone because she couldn't touch people without killing them and the mutants would probably become extinct.

Rivetin stuff, really.

So not only the night was terrible, but there was also a painful hangover and, maybe worst of all, they woke up late to their flight. The three of them had to run across the city, their heads throbbing with pain, the sun blinding them, so they could get in the airport and board the plane to New York in time.

And now the plane was falling.

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!" chanted Kitty, as she held the armrest so strongly that her fingers became white.

"Logan was right about planes all along!" exclaimed Jubilee, her face pale.

"I don't want to die a virgin!" yelled Rogue, closing her eyes.

Damn New York! This city was definitely cursed! If two alien invasions less than 5 years apart didn't prove that much, there was this. Just when she thought things were quiet enough for her to come back to the mansion, the plane she got on began to malfunction and drop down. It was unbelievable.

Kitty, Rogue and Jubilee were out of town during the Black Zero Event, first doing some X-Men business and then visiting her parents. In fact, as she understood, most of the team was out of New York the day the whole thing happened and before the Professor could even assemble everyone to try to figure out what was going on and what they should do, Superman and the Avengers won the day.

Not without heavy losses to the city where it all happened, of course, but at least they had saved the world.

But apparently they did not break the damn curse on the city! Looking around, Kitty could see every single person in the plane fearing for their lives. Rogue, the part gothic part southern belle mutant with the power to absorb people's essences, had her eyes closed; Jubilee, the Asian descent
mutant who had the power to shoot pyrotechnic energy plasmoids – fireworks as she called them – from her body, was as pale as snow; the rest of the passengers were no different, some praying, some paralyzed with fear.

And then there was her, the brunette mutant who had the convenient power to phase through solid objects.

Kitty was scared, of course, there was no way not to be in a situation like that. But her emotions were a tiny bit more complex at the moment, because, out of every person in that plane, she was the only one with the ability to maybe survive its crash. She had, after all, the ability to walk through walls; meaning, if she phased at the right moment, she wouldn't die when the whole thing collided against the ground.

The problem was: what about everybody else in the plane? Could she really just take her friends and disappear, leaving everybody else to die?

Before she could even start to get to a conclusion, however, Rogue snapped her out of her thoughts with a yelp.

"What do you think you are doing?!" she yelled looking at Jubilee, the smoke and fire of the malfunctioning turbines making her voice hard to hear.

"I-I thought y-you said–" Jubilee started, her face now redder than anything Kitty had ever seen.

"I said I don't want to die a virgin! Preferably doing it with a guy I love!" Rogue snarled at her. "I kissed guys before, you know?! Some of them were in a coma! What were you thinking, trying to kiss me?!"

What?! Kitty looked at Jubilee, seeing her face getting even redder now.

"I'm s-sorry! I was just trying to help, I panicked!"

"Everybody shut up!" Kitty screamed at them, trying to make her voice heard over the sound of the broken turbines. She approached her friends and talked in a lower voice: "Look, I can take us out of here, but–"

Rogue's eyes widened.

"That's true! Oh my god, I can't believe I forgot!"

"That's awesome!" agreed Jubilee, just as happy. But then the same thought that occurred to Kitty passed on to her. "But… What about everyone else?"

In unison, they all looked around, seeing all the people in the plane. Normal, ordinary people who had no chance at surviving a plane crash: men, women, elderly, children. Kitty thought she had even seen a baby somewhere. She could save their lives if she used her gift and took some of them out of the plane safe and sound.

But everyone else there would die.

"So?" asked Rogue, looking at Jubilee and her now. "What about them?"

"Rogue!" exclaimed Jubilee.

"Look, Kitty can't phase everyone," Rogue said. "I don't even know if she can phase us three in
time! There isn't anything we can do for them."

"But shouldn't I... shouldn't I at least try?" asked Kitty, her voice almost a whisper.

"Why? Why would you?!" snapped Rogue. "Do you think any of them would do the same for us? Risk their lives for a bunch of mutants?"

No, Kitty didn't think so. She would like to believe they would, that the simple fact that they were born different wouldn't change how they were perceived by others, but she had already seen too much to know that being a mutant changed everything. Since joining the X-Men, how many horrible things done to mutants had she witnessed?

Parents abandoning their children after finding out what they were, mobs literally hunting and beating mutants in the streets, governments making experiments on them that would make the conditions in some torture dungeons look kind... To most, mutants just weren't seen as people at all.

Not too long ago, there was even a mutant factory operating inside New York! And how many government people were involved on covering that up? She remembered the day that news went on air, everybody in the mansion together watching the horror on TV, Jean and Scott telling them to take the children back to their rooms so they wouldn't see that.

And she wanted to risk her life, most likely condemning her and her friends to a horrible death, to save them?

In silence Kitty looked through the window, right at the moment they passed through the parts of the city destroyed during the Black Zero Event, and, suddenly, her thoughts turned to Superman. She and pretty much every single person in the whole world had seen the battle passing on TV, the several images pieced together by the TV stations in an almost infinite loop since that day.

She had seen the brutal fight, Superman giving his best to protect everybody, the unbelievable effort Kal-El did to stop General Zod, almost giving his life in the attempt. She had seen Superman fly around the city after that, rescuing people, saving lives nonstop. And she had seen him continuing to do that ever since, helping people, fighting crime, stopping accidents. Even then, there were still people calling him a monster, telling him to get out of Earth, asking for the government to kill him.

That wasn't the impressive stuff, Kitty knew by now how evil humans could be. No, the impressive stuff was that Superman never stopped saving people, even after being treated like that by many, even when the same people he was saving were the ones doing that. No matter what they said, no matter what they did, Superman never lost his will to stand up for what was right.

Kitty wanted to be like that too.

"I'm helping them," she announced, her eyes full of certainty.

She expected Rogue and Jubilee to argue with her, but both of them just looked at her and nodded in certainty; Kitty smiled. Rogue talked a lot, but she was an X-Men for a reason.

"I'll need everybody to touch each other," she explained, opening her seatbelt. "And then, right when the plane is about to crash, I'll try phasing us."

"Do you think you can do it?" asked Rogue, worried.

Kitty didn't answer immediately.
"I don't know. But I know I have to try."

And then she got up; right at the moment something blue flew by her window with incredible speed. She opened an enormous smile; Kitty couldn't believe her eyes.

"IT'S SUPERMAN!" she yelled.

Every person turned to the windows, their fear forgotten for the moment; Kitty heard someone laughing and cheering. Just like that, all the horror passed, and hope filled them all.

They felt the plunging plane reduce its speed and stabilize, as Superman probably lifted the whole thing on his back. Kitty, Rogue and Jubilee couldn't stop smiling.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have excellent news! Superman is carrying us to the airport safe and sound!" the pilot said.

Somehow, excellent news didn't quite describe how good Kitty was feeling right now.

"I LOVE YOU, SUPERMAN!" yelled Rogue, punching the air in happiness.

Well, that probably worked, Kitty thought, as she glued herself to the window yelling cheerful nonsense just like Rogue and Jubilee.

"We need back up!" yelled officer Brett Mahoney in his radio, as he hid behind the police car.

BANG BANG BANG! The sounds of bullets penetrating through the car rang loudly in his ears as the criminals shot continuously against him and his partner. What a stupid thing they did following those guys alone! Brett wanted to kick himself. Every police officer he knew would have waited for back up before trying to go after the robbers, but Brett had seen them shooting all around and endangering civilians, and if they went after them, at least they would be shooting at someone who could shoot back.

That was his thought at the time, at least; now he wasn't so sure about it anymore. They managed to crash the police car against the van and force it to stop, all according to the plan.

The robbers getting out of the van carrying military grade weapons, however, wasn't something he had considered.

He was lucky as hell that the first bomb had only tossed the police car away instead of blowing everything up, but now they were pinned down by gunfire, while trying to protect themselves behind the upside down car.

And soon, they would be out of ammunition and the only thing keeping the assailants away would be gone.

Brett ejected his last magazine and sighed. So this was how it ended, he thought. At least… At least he would die like a true cop. An honest one, incorruptible until the very end. That was something.

He closed his eyes to pray for one last time, and that was when there was a thundering sound above as if the sky split open.

The shooting stopped as everybody looked to the sky, looking for what was making that noise; in that moment a blue blur descended fast, crashing against the top of the van with incredible force.
The van bended like scrap and all the windows broke.

Shocked, Brett risked himself and looked at what was happening, only to see Superman standing on top of the robber's van, looking down at them.

The surprising thing? None of them fired. There wasn't a single bullet fired against Superman. Maybe they already knew it was pointless – it wasn't like it was the first time Superman intervened against armed thugs in the last days – or maybe they were just too afraid, but not a single one of them dared to shoot.

Instead, all of them just tossed their guns to the ground and raised their hands in the air, already resigned to their fate.

Brett had seen a lot of things in his time as cop, but a flying alien coming down from the sky to save his life was a first.

But it wasn't all bad, he had to admit that much.

"She looked at him with her blue eyes and for the first time there was emotion in them. 'Kal-El, it is our duty to save Krypton,' Faora said, getting closer. 'And we will have to do it the old fashioned way,' she added, leaning for a kiss. The kiss was forceful, but tender, and Superman felt in it all the unspoken love the sub-commander, once his enemy, had for him–"

Jessica just couldn't keep reading anymore, as she started laughing so hard her voice simply wouldn't come out. Clark, however, wasn't laughing; he was horrified.

"What the hell is this thing?!!" he exclaimed, getting up from the couch of his apartment and walking closer to Jessica's notebook.

She tried to answer, but she was laughing so much that all she could do was flap around and make noises like a retarded seal. So Clark took matters into his own hand, leaning and looking at the screen.

"Faora: The Path to Atonement," Clark read, too shocked to say anything else; Jessica was laughing even harder now. "A love story between Faora and Superman. Can love mend a broken planet?"

Jesus Christ. Clark knew bad things came with fame. People telling him he should go back to his planet was bad enough – not only because he didn't have a planet to go back to but because it was just rude – the government trying to track him down and control him was also bad, but this? This was the worst thing he could've possibly imagined.

They were writing about him. They were writing love stories of him and that crazy psychopath, Faora. They were writing… Yep, they were also writing love stories of him and Zod too. Him and Steve, him and Tony, him and Thor…

"Who the hell is DL166?!" he asked, almost using Kelex to track whoever this was and do something about it. "This-this can't be legal!"

"And what are you going to do?" asked Jessica, finally calming down enough to say some words, her eyes full of tears. "Find a lawyer and sue? Superman is an alien, there is no law against this sort of thing."

"Where did you find this?" Clark asked.
"Trish showed me. Apparently, she has a few listeners that are into that kind of shit. But this is…" she started to laugh again.

Clark sighed and turned, trying to forget about this while he was getting ready to leave. He had a dinner with Natasha tonight, to ask her a few questions about their offer for him to join; it had been two weeks already, after all.

"You know, Faora would be very jealous if she knew you were getting all handsome for a date with another woman," Jessica said as Clark rolled his eyes with a groan.

"First, Faora was a textbook psychopath, she had no emotions whatsoever. And second, it's not a date."

"Riiight," Jessica said, sarcastically, giving him a thumbs up. "No date with Miss Black Widow at all, no sir! Just a tip, don't bring her here after your non-date. She seems to be a classy woman and your apartment is a dump, you'll never be able to convince her to sleep with you here."

"It's not a date!" he repeated and then looked around. "And is my apartment really that bad?"

"It's falling apart, Clark! Last time I closed the door, a piece of the ceiling fell off."

"You were the one who did that?!!"

"No… Like I said, the apartment is falling apart. It wasn't my fault," Jessica answered, diverting her eyes in a suspicious manner.

"I caught someone looking through it the other day, you know? I had to close that thing with a piece of duct tape."

"You can see through walls, 'Mr. I Want Privacy But I Can Hear And See Everything Everybody Does At All Times!'" said Jessica. Well, she had a point there.

Deciding to ignore her, Clark looked in the mirror to see how he looked. Not bad at all, he thought, seeing his black suit. It wasn't an expansive one, since he had no money for that kind of thing, but it was nice.

"How did you get a date with Black Widow, anyway?" Jessica asked, typing something.

Clark sighed. She wouldn't let that go, would she? He decided to turn the tables.

"Why? Are you jealous? I know she is your favorite Avenger, but maybe you wanted something… more?"

She snapped her head up to look at him; there was a small blush on her cheeks.

"Fuck off!" she said, as Clark laughed. "I don't have a favorite Avenger and I'm not into chicks!"

"Hey, there is no need to be ashamed! I won't think any less of you because of this, what do you think I am?"

Jessica's answer was to give him the finger. He laughed and turned to leave.

"Lock the door when you leave," he asked her.

When he was almost in the elevator, she yelled: "Put a sock on the doorknob if you're lucky!"
Well, since he had super-hearing and she didn't, apparently she would have the last word today.

Natasha looked around the fancy restaurant as she waited for Clark to arrive. He wasn't late – it would be hard to be late with that speed of his –, but she liked to arrive early to assess the environment; she blamed her upbringing for this. Maybe it was unnecessary today, but her paranoia had kept her alive during all those years of spying.

So she did what she always did. Planned her escape routes, checked the customers and the staff to see if there wasn't any threat, strapped a gun under the table for rapid access and prepared her anti-poison SHIELD kit; she was immune to most common poisons, perks of growing up in the Red Room, but one could never know when a tasty bite could be your last.

A few minutes later, she saw Clark coming in, following the directions he was given; he probably spotted her first, which was a novelty. How did she know this? He widened his eyes and looked very surprised.

Smiling, Natasha got up and kissed his cheek.

"Hi," he said, still looking at her. "You are–"

"Beautiful?" she completed.

He nodded, a little embarrassed.

"That too, but I was going to say 'blond'."

She knew that, of course, but it was fun to play.

"Special dye, for a quick appearance change," she explained. "It will go back to normal later, but I didn't think Clark Kent would like his date with the Avenger Natasha Romanoff to be on the news tomorrow."

"Wow, that was very thoughtful of you. Did you say date?"

Natasha grinned.

"We'll see how it goes, handsome," she answered, enjoying his awkwardness more than she should.

The waiter approached the table and gave each of them a menu, so they stopped talking for a moment. Instead of reading hers, she already knew what she wanted, she decided to observe Clark. His reaction was exactly as she imagined.

"Jesus… Natasha, did you see those prices?!" he whispered, alarmed.

She almost laughed; when was the last time her "date" had the courage do even imply he couldn't give her anything she would desire? Clark, however, wasn't a corrupt politician or a rich business man that she would usually approach as an agent, he was a starting freelance journalist, hardly someone with the money to eat where they were.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it," she reassured him.

"I-I can't ask you to pay for everything!"

"Oh, I won't," Natasha answered, showing him a credit card, a credit card that had the name Stark Industries printed on it. "Stark will."
His eyebrows rose as he tried to understand what was happening.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I worked for Stark?" she asked, knowing very well she didn't. "Well, actually I was assessing him for the Avengers Initiative, but anyway, I was given a company credit card for expenses and, when I left, I guess he forgot to take it back."

"And you've been using it?!" he asked startled.

Natasha smiled at his shock. She knew Tony hadn't forgotten anything, well, maybe he did, but something like this would never pass through Jarvis or Pepper unnoticed. If the credit card still worked, it was a deliberate act. Probably an apology for being a terribly annoying boss.

But her story sounded cooler.

"It'll be our little secret," she whispered, placing her finger on her lips.

Clark looked at the prices again.

"I'll pay him back later," he said in a low voice, knowing very well he couldn't pay for anything there. She just laughed.

Natasha called the waiter and they ordered, getting a very expansive bottle of wine too; Clark looked terribly worried, she would have to tell him the truth later.

"So, how are you doing, Clark? Well, I hope."

"Oh, I'm good. Had some busy days, fixed my mom's house…"

"How is she?" Natasha asked with genuine interest. She liked Martha.

"Ma is doing great, thanks for asking. And what about you? And everyone else?" he asked.

"I'm doing very well too and so is everyone. Tony and Bruce are doing some science related stuff in the Tower, Thor is with Jane, Clint is busy healing his leg and I'm packing my bags to go to Washington, DC. Steve too."

"You live there?"

"I don't actually live anywhere, really, but I'm overseeing Steve's training, so I should be where he is."

"You are training Captain America?!" he said.

"Well, he is a little rusty," she joked, smiling. "Steve is the best soldier in the world, but technology changes and so do military tactics. I'm just giving him a crash course. He learns fast, so soon enough I won't be needed there anymore."

"That's good. He really is working for SHIELD then?"

"He is, at least for now. My guess is that Steve doesn't really know what to do right now, so working in an organization created by two of his best friends is his way of keeping himself occupied until he decides what he really wants to do."

Clark looked down.

"I can't even imagine how it must be to wake up to see your whole life gone. Maybe I should visit
him, he seems like a nice guy."

"I'm sure he would like that. And, maybe, when you have a little time you could visit another friend you know in Washington too…"

His head snapped up.

"Of course I'll visit you!" he said immediately and she smiled. "I mean, Ma would be very mad at me if I didn't deliver some of her pies to her biggest fan."

Natasha laughed openly; she had to agree, it was a delicious pie and she had ate a lot that day.

"So, Clark, I heard you have questions?" she asked, sipping her wine. "About our offer. Stark has been climbing the walls waiting for your answer."

He looked up from his glass, still looking at the red wine, probably wondering why anyone would ever pay so much for it.

"Yes, I have," Clark finally answered. He stopped to think for a second. "I thought about it during these two weeks, very hard. But, the truth is, I really don't know what I'll be required to do if I join."

Natasha stared at him.

"To be honest, Clark, there isn't a rule book," she admitted. "The Avengers were created by Fury so SHIELD could protect the world against threats that our usual forces couldn't handle. Or at least, that was the idea behind the Avengers Initiative."

"What changed?"

"Well, before we could even set the rules of the game, decide how things would work out, Loki invaded. So Fury assembled the Avengers as a last resort to fight him. Pretty much everything we planned went through the window and we did what we could with what we had. And it worked."

And Natasha still couldn't believe it had worked, to be honest. Stark was a complete narcissistic and uncontrollable man, Steve was a soldier out of his time, Thor was an unknown and wasn't even there when it began, she and Clint were just a couple of spies and the Hulk… Well, the Hulk was the very embodiment of rage and destruction.

Nothing about that team seemed like it work, but it did and they had saved the world because of it.

"The Avengers were supposed to be an elite group inside of SHIELD," Natasha continued, "but we all know it doesn't work like that. Tony, Bruce and Thor couldn't care less about what SHIELD and the World Security Council wants. Steve, even though he is working for SHIELD now, probably doesn't either."

"And what about you and Clint?" he asked.

"We… We believe in what SHIELD represents," she answered, looking at him. "But we also know that sometimes, sometimes their orders have to be disobeyed. Even Fury knows that."

Clark nodded, digesting what she had said to him.

"The nuke thing," he guessed.

She smiled.
"That was an extreme example, but yes."

"But even so, SHIELD does have the power to order the Avengers, doesn't it?" Clark asked.

"Well, sure, but Nick knows exactly with who he is dealing with. The Avengers are not agents, Clark, we are not a team he can command like any other. It exists only to be used in extreme circumstances, like, you know, when aliens invade or something like that. For anything else SHIELD uses its agents. Or do you think Bruce, Stark and Thor would ever be okay with being sent to steal terrorist plans somewhere or try to prevent a coup in some country? Fury knows that if he asks for something that they are not willing to do, they simply won't do it."

Clark nodded again, his eyes unfocused as he pondered on her answer. The waiter approached the table again, bringing their food, and for a moment none of them spoke; she just observed him eating with a smile, taking very small bites from the very small plate.

"You can ask another one if you want, Clark," she said.

He flushed.

"No, that's quite alright. God knows when I'll have the money to pay Tony back for this one…"

She rolled her eyes.

"It was a joke, Clark. Stark knows very well I have this card. Go wild."

"Really? Oh, thank god! Waiter!"

Natasha had to control herself not to laugh at how happy he looked now; he probably was very hungry. She waited for him to order his food and then, when the waiter left, she said: "Clark, tell me what you want to know, I won't be offended. You're worried about joining and I'm not sure why."

He turned to her and sighed.

"Alright. Okay, look, I help people, Natasha, that's what I do. And I'll keep doing it for as long as there are people needing help. Here, yes, but also around the world."

That was an understatement. The things Clark had been doing during these two weeks were, well, unbelievable was not quite the word, but it was close. Amazing. Sometimes frightening. He had stopped a plane from crashing in New York, saved who knows how many people from natural disasters all over the world, channeled rivers so thirsty tribes in South America and Africa could drink and grow crops, basically scared every single gang in New York and the rest of the country to the point that a lot of them just stopped their operations…

It was incredible and it was no wonder that some would call him a god. How could they not, when he could actually hear most of them calling for help and answered?

But at the same time, a lot of people were wary. Clark showed the world what he could do and that kind of power wasn't something people just ignored. There would be those who would try to control him, to use his powers for their gain. Others would try to fight him and Natasha couldn't imagine that would end well.

"So you help people," she said, finally. "So do we."

"I know. What I meant was there may not be written rules for being an Avenger, but there are
rules. The fact that SHIELD and the World Security Council haven't said anything yet shows that you've been following them. Or at least not disobeying too much," Clark said. "I'm afraid that if I join and keep doing what I do, that might change."

Natasha sat up.

"What do you mean?"

Clark looked in her eyes.

"If someone needs help, I'll help. I don't care if it isn't convenient with their laws or international rules. I won't close my eyes if a dictator starts to oppress his people or if someone sends troops against innocents. I'm not going to kill anyone, you know I won't, but I have other means to stop them and bring them to justice. And I will do so. The thing is: how would SHIELD and the World Security Council feel about this?"

How would they feel if Clark started to involve himself into government's internal matters all around the world? Not well, she imagined. On this world, every act was a political act, or so they would say. She knew Clark was there only to help those who needed help, but a lot of people wouldn't see it like that at all. To have Clark engaging in these kinds of state-level interventions… That would scare the hell out of SHIELD, the World Security Council and every single government in the world.

For the first time in the history of the world, there would be someone there with power to just say: no, you won't do that, I won't let you.

What she was thinking probably showed on her face, because Clark smiled sadly at her.

"You see what I'm talking about? Do you really want me to involve the Avengers in this?"

Before she could answer, the waiter approached bringing Clark's additional order. They were in silence as he ate, both thinking about what that would mean for Clark, the Avengers and the world. That was not a decision to be made lightly, she realized now.

Natasha grabbed her phone; she needed the team.

Clark looked around the room in the Avengers Tower, seeing the faces of every single member of the Avengers. He had just explained his fears to them and now they were thinking about it a little harder than when they made the offer. It wasn't really their fault, he supposed.

How do you predict something like a Superman in the world? Not even he had predicted that.

"Okay, okay, I see your points," said Tony, looking at him. "And I get it, I really do."

"You do?" asked Bruce, surprised.

Tony turned to him.

"What do you think the U.S army thought when I went around the Middle East destroying every single weapon Stark Industries sold? How do you think they reacted to my Iron Man suit?"

"That's true," Bruce agreed, and then looked at Clark. "And I understand too, at least a little bit. I mean, I was hunted because of the Big Guy all over the world. Ross really didn't want the Hulk around."
"I do not understand this," Thor said, frowning. "Why would they stop you from helping people? That's absurd!"

Clark wasn't surprised Thor didn't understand. He wasn't, in any way, stupid, even though he was brash and quick to act; his culture was just completely different from Earth's. In Asgard, warriors had honor and respect and they stopped wrongdoings wherever they could find them. While Clark was sure there were politics all around the Realms, they didn't let that affect their actions.

It helped that they had a good ruler in Odin, of course, one powerful enough to do what was required, but noble enough to not abuse his power. The day a tyrant sat at Asgard's throne would be the day the whole thing would fall apart.

"Your father banished you that time for something similar," Clark explained. "You saw something wrong happening and you went to Jotunheim to solve it, didn't you? Except, since you are Prince of Asgard your actions involved Asgard and by doing that you almost started a war."

Thor looked down.

"I see. And you are afraid of doing the same thing with the Avengers," he said.

Clark nodded.

"I don't want that to happen, but I won't ignore someone asking for help because it's inconvenient for me to help them."

He couldn't even if he wanted to, those were the downsides of his gifts.

"If you see a situation pointing south, you can't ignore it," Steve said, suddenly.

That summarized pretty well what he thought about the whole thing.

"Yeah, I won't," Clark agreed. "And I don't want to make you guys suffer for it."

He looked around the room, seeing Steve, Tony, Bruce, Thor, Natasha and Clint.

"So maybe it would be better to say no," Clark concluded.

Nobody said anything in what seemed to be minutes; until Clint slapped the table.

"I say fuck it!" he said. They all turned to him. "We saved the world. Twice! And both times because some people just thought they knew better than everybody and played with stuff they didn't understand without a care in the world. I don't know about you guys, but I'm tired of closing my eyes and allowing all this shit to hit the fan just because some people up there say it should. We… I almost did that with the mutant factory and it was only because of you that I didn't. In my opinion, you're free to join if you want and damn the consequences."

Clark honestly couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was Clint thanking him for tricking him back then?

"What if we play it smart?" asked Natasha. "A middle ground."

Tony smiled.

"Something like a consultant?" he suggested.

"With all the perks and none of the backlash?" Bruce said.
Steve was also smiling.

"That seems like the perfect alternative," Captain America said.

"So you are part of the team," Thor began, "but, if they ask, not really?"

"That's exactly what it means, Point Break!" Tony announced.

Steve got up from the couch and went to him, touching his shoulder.

"Well, then," he said, as everyone looked at him, "have we reached a decision?"

Clark couldn't help but smiling. His father had told him, once, that the world was not ready for him, for what he could do. And maybe that was true, maybe the world really wasn't ready for Superman. Clark didn't know. He didn't even know if he was ready for Superman. But if it meant helping all those people who needed help, then he would try.

And with friends by his side, well, things would definitely be easier.

"Welcome to the Avengers!"
"Look at this beauty!" said Tony Stark, lifting a t-shirt with the symbol of the House of El displayed on the chest. "What do you think?"

Clark honestly wasn't thinking much, not when the table in front of him was full of merchandise bearing the red "S" from his House on them. T-shirts, mugs, posters, caps, costumes, comic books, figurines. It was a never ending amount of every conceivable kind of merchandise, all with his symbol.

Tony had called him earlier wanting to talk about something important, so Clark flew there in a hurry, but he was truly at loss about what was happening.

"I'm, um, a little confused," he admitted.

He imagined that wasn't an unknown situation to Tony, his mind worked so fast that even he probably got confused by it sometimes.

"I've trademarked you!" he announced with a winning smile. "Every single thing people sell with your image grants you a percentage of their value. All the Avengers are trademarked. The money is deposited in an account I made."

Clark was still looking at him blankly.

"But why?" he asked.

Tony seemed exasperated.

"You are a big hit right now! People are making and selling all kinds of stuff using your image and you are not receiving a penny for it. Pepper told me she saw a figurine of Superman with a mustache! They were calling it 'Superhombre'. It's selling like crazy!"

"How much money exactly—"

"A lot!" He appeared a little miffed about something. "More than Iron Man, but I'm sure it's just a phase," he added.

Clark looked at the merchandise again.

"Tony, I can't take that money," he said. "It doesn't really feel right, I didn't start this to earn money. And another thing, how exactly do you expect Clark Kent suddenly becoming rich to work with my secret identity thing?"

"Don't give me that!" he exclaimed, walking up to him. "Look, Clark, I'm not going to convince you of the benefits of having a lot of money. I can see you honestly don't give a damn about that and it's alright, I get it. I mean, I don't get it, but I can roll with it. But right now, all that money is going to the pockets of people who have absolutely no right over it. There is nothing wrong about making money, it's not like they are hurting anyone by doing that, but the money could be going to the people who really need it right now. Like the ones who lost everything during the Black Zero
Surprisingly, Clark agreed with every word Tony said. He really didn't care about money, at all. It wasn't like he truly needed it, after all. Clark was happy where he was living at, not because the place wasn't great, but because he could be close to Jessica and he wasn't one for luxury. Not being able to get sick and having the ability to go everywhere in the world without having to buy a car or plane tickets played a part in that as well, no doubt.

So deep down, he didn't care about people using the symbol of the House of El to sell stuff, but Tony was absolutely right that the money could be used for something else.

"So you want to donate the profits?" he asked.

"We're all doing it," Tony said. "Truth is, nobody in the Avengers really needs that money, so we usually give it to charity. Right now, we are helping with the reconstruction of all that mess caused by the Black Zero Event. The government is doing what they can, but let's be honest, they need all the help available."

He looked at Clark. "And, of course, it can help you too. You don't have the most stable job in the world, do you? So you can always take some money when you need to make ends meet."

Clark looked again to the table, thinking how in the world something like that happened in his life. There were children playing with Superman toys, reading Superman comics, wearing Superman clothes. It wasn't exactly what he meant to do when he started helping people, but as long as it made people happy he didn't think it was a bad thing.

"Okay, let's do it," he said.

Tony cheered.

"I knew you would agree! Pepper can give you all the information about it later, she is the one handling this."

He rolled his eyes, as if Tony needed to tell him that.

"You know, you made me consider something," Tony said suddenly, and for once he sounded actually serious. He looked at Clark. "I've been working on upgrades for my suit, making them more powerful, preparing them to withstand the next big threat. I mean, it has to be done, don't get me wrong, but it isn't enough."

Tony looked through the big window.

"What use are my suits if after the fight the very place we were protecting is completely destroyed?" Tony asked. "You were there to help all those people and you saved god knows how many lives, but I didn't."

"You helped, Tony--"

"Yeah, sure, but not as much as I could," he interrupted. "The Iron Legion was not made to search for buried people, put out fires, and help with first aid. They are for defense and the most they could do was lift some heavy things." He turned to look at Clark. "But I can do better."

He started to walk toward the big screen and turned it on.

"I've started a new project: Iron Hope."
The screen began to show the images of Tony's new project, new suits and automated vehicles working in his lab, not for defense, as he said, but for helping in all sorts of other things. There were "firefighter suits," built to access burning buildings and put the fire out, using some kind of foam that expanded and swallowed the fire, "medic suits" that could stabilize an injured person and move that person safely to the hospital, and big "excavator suits" to search for people under collapsed buildings and to move very heavy objects, some kind of flying builder machine that could build an entire house in a matter of minutes and safely bring down a collapsing one and flying vehicles that could take the injured and dying people to a hospital fast.

Clark was without words to describe how amazing that was.

"This is incredible!" he said and Tony, astonishingly, looked down scratching his head instead of agreeing immediately. Was he embarrassed?

"It's a work in progress," he said finally. "There are still a lot of improvements needed. When it's ready, I'm going to make a trial period here, in New York, and if it works expand to the rest of the country. And maybe someday go global, who knows?"

He looked at Tony with a big smile.

"That's a very nice thing you're doing, Tony, I really mean it. You should be proud."

Now Tony was without a doubt embarrassed.

"Well, of course it is, I'm awesome."

Before Clark could answer, the elevator in the room opened with a beep and Thor came in.

"Kal!" Thor yelled in boisterous voice. "I'm so glad you are here! I wanted to speak with you before I left."

"You're leaving back to Asgard already?" Clark asked surprised, shaking his hand.

"Only for a little while. My father sent me here to find out what was happening with the Kryptonian invasion and I fear I have already over Stayed. " Thor sighed. "I have duties on Asgard, after all."

"So what did you want to talk about?"

Thor smiled.

"Yes, I was almost forgetting!" He straightened himself up and said, "I would like to invite you to watch the Convergence from Asgard!"

Clark didn't know exactly what the Convergence was, but he had just been invited to go to Asgard; he was having trouble acting as if that was normal. Luckily, Tony entered the conversation.

"What is this Convergence and why was I not invited to the party?"

The Prince of Asgard seemed glad to be asked.

"The Convergence is a cosmic event that happens every 5000 years. It is when the Nine Realms align themselves. Do you have some paper?"

Tony scoffed.
"Paper, what is this, the Stone Age?" he mumbled, activating a hologram.

Thor walked up to the screen with a big smile, using his fingers to draw what seemed to be a crude representation of the universe.

"Here are the Nine Realms, scattered throughout the cosmos. Now, at first glance, there is no connection between them. They are distant from each other, each one in a part of the universe. But in reality every single one of them is part of the Yggdrasil."

He began to draw a tree linking the Nine Realms with its branches.

"What is the Yggdrasil?" Tony asked, looking at Thor's drawing as if he could barely identify what it was; Clark too was having problems, to be honest, but at least he knew what it was already.

"It's the Tree of Life!" Thor explained.

Clark saw Tony's face twitch.

"It's a representation of a cosmic nimbus that connects all Nine Realms," Clark clarified, before Tony could comment on the drawing. "It's the reason the Nine Realms, Earth included, have any connection to one another, because as Thor said, they are very distant, so logically, there shouldn't be any. This nimbus keeps the Realms linked since the beginning of the universe, sometimes causing rifts in space that connect one Realm to another, making traveling between worlds possible without the need for space travel, to those who know how."

All this was studied by his father, when he began to develop the Phantom Drive, according to the information gathered by Kelex. Of course, the Phantom Zone was another dimension and the Nine Realms, even far away from each other, belonged to the same universe, but the concept of bending space, creating rifts, was acquired from there.

"It's because of the Yggdrasil that the cultures from the Nine Realms often have influence from one another," Clark continued. "They've been interacting since the beginning, either on purpose or by accident, when objects or even people would cross the rifts without knowing what they were."

"How exactly does that work?" Tony asked, his eyes lightened up with the curiosity and interest.

Clark didn't know how to answer that question yet, so he looked at Thor; the Asgardian, also, just shrugged.

"Thanks a lot!" Tony said, ironically. "So what about the Convergence?"

Thor moved the nine circles he had drawn into a line.

"The Convergence is when this happens: the alignment of the Nine Realms," he said. "I have never seen it, of course, but during this time the boundaries between the Realms weaken and for a brief period cease to exist completely, connecting all the Realms." He looked at them. "It is a very rare event and we celebrate it in Asgard, not only because of the Convergence itself, but because the Convergence marks the date my grandfather, Bor Burison, defeated the Dark Elves."

Clark had heard about the Dark Elves, but he didn't know about the Convergence. No wonder his father had studied this phenomenon, if it could naturally link far away worlds like that.

"And what about my second question?" asked Tony. "Why am I not invited to the party?"

This time Thor wasn't so eager to answer.
"It is very rare for humans to visit Asgard, but I am sure that in normal circumstances all the Avengers would be granted that honor," Thor began, slowly. "But my father is not exactly happy with recent events--"

"It's about Jane, isn't it?" Tony asked shrewdly.

Thor just sighed and nodded.

"The Allfather does not agree with my choice. He says I do not belong with a mortal."

"Wow, that's very racist! Why?"

"He has a very long list of complaints. He believes that she is a distraction and only – how did Darcy called it? – a crush!"

Both Clark and Tony had to control themselves not to laugh.

"I love her, but I can't blame my father for thinking this, unfortunately," Thor continued. "In my youth I would occasionally sneak to Midgard with my brother and my friends to--"

"Sleep with so many mortal women that people worshiped you as the god of fertility?" Tony said between laughs.

The big Asgardian seemed very embarrassed.

"Yes, something like that, though I'm not sure why they would think such a thing, since I never had any children." He scratched his head, still a little ashamed. "But my father's most pressing concern is our different lifespans. Mortals are fleeting, he says. And, of course, he also wants me to become King and--"

"Wait a minute, did you just say you're going to be King? How come we are only learning this now?!" said Tony.

Thor sighed again.

"Because I have no desire to be King. At least, not now."

He stopped for a second in silence and then laughed a little. "There was a time when I would have given anything to be King. It was what I wanted most in my life. But now..." He shrugged.

"It's not only because of Jane, is it?" asked Clark.

"She is a big reason, yes, but like you said, not the only one," Thor answered. "The truth is I do not think myself ready for this yet." He smiled sadly. "It is funny, but if my brother had not done what he did, I would gladly let him have the crown. I think he would be a better King than me."

"No offense, Point Break, but your brother was a little crazy to be King," Tony said and Clark glared at him. "What?! I said no offense!"

"It is alright," Thor said. "You do not have to remind me of my brother's shortcomings, I know them too well. But he did have many qualities that would have been invaluable to a King. I... I am not sure I have them."

"You have heart," Clark said. "You can learn the other stuff, surround yourself with people who know the things you don't, but you can't acquire morals if you never had them to begin with."

"And it's not like your parents would just leave you alone, right?" Tony added. "I mean, I would be
screwed if I had to run my company alone. Without Pepper, well, I'm pretty sure it would not run this smoothly."

"I had not considered that," Thor said pensively, and then he smiled and looked at them. "My gratitude, friends! So, Kal, what do you say? There is going to be banquets and tournaments, plenty to eat and drink! And I am sure my father would be very interested in meeting you."

Yes, that was what Clark was worried about. He didn't know Odin other than what he knew from the legends, but he did not seem like a laid back guy at all. Would he blame him for what the Kryptonians did? Would he expect Clark to be a representative of his entire race, even though he knew so little?

In the end, however, he knew that despite his worries he would accept the invitation. Not only because he was truly curious about the Realm Eternal, but also refusing such an invitation was just plain rude.

"I would be honored, Thor," he said and the Asgardian gave him a big smiled and a powerful slap on the back that would probably have killed a human.

"Then it is settled!" he announced. "I should be back by the end of the week, then we will depart."

Saying this, Thor shook hands with him and Tony, said his goodbyes and went outside to yell for Heimdall, disappearing in a kaleidoscope of colors.

Tony put a hand on his forehead.

"The Bifrost is covering my tower with those weird runes!"

Clark laughed.

Jane looked around the deserted yard when Darcy finally stopped the car. Well, she had certainly found something.

When Selvig asked her and Darcy to move to London – well, asked Jane at least – saying he was onto something big, Jane was a little bit excited, but that feeling passed quickly. Whatever Selvig was studding, big or not, remained a mystery when they arrived due to his mysterious disappearance. This left them working by themselves, trying to make sense of his weird calculations.

It took days until she could understand what Selvig's notes meant, but when she finally comprehended, her excitement came back. It certainly seemed that Selvig's findings were big and the feeling of regret about moving faded quickly.

Of course, helping Selvig was only half the reason Jane had accepted moving to London, the other half was Thor. When he left after saving the world during The Incident, without so much as a hello, she waited for him. And waited, and waited and then waited some more. Eventually, her sadness and apathy became rage and she had to do something. Moving and trying to date new people were the first steps towards healing a broken heart and forgetting about Thor, or so she thought.

Things didn't go as planned. There was another invasion in New York, a horrible one that made The Incident look like a small thing, another alien had shown up to save the day, a guy named Superman or Kal-El, that Jane was pretty much certain it was the same guy that saved her life in Ellesmere Island, and then Thor was back.
The first thing she did when she saw the colors of the Bifrost was to slap him as hard as she could, and it didn't hurt him one bit, almost broke her hand, but it conveyed the message that she was not happy with his disappearance. Luckily for him, Thor actually had a good excuse for vanishing all this time.

What kind of boyfriend could honestly say that he "didn't call back" because he was saving the Nine Realms from a huge war?

Jane was pretty much obligated to forgive him after that, but not without a very nice apology first. A very long, very arduous, steamy apology.

"Stop thinking about Thor when I'm at your side!" complained Darcy.

"Who says I'm--"

"You are drooling!" she interrupted. "I mean, I would drool too, don't get me wrong, but you're scaring the intern!"

"It's Ian," the intern corrected, but neither of them was listening anymore.

Shaking her head to focus, Jane got out of the car, looking around. Thor coming back had also shed some light on Selvig's research. Apparently, Selvig had been studying something called the Convergence, a phenomenon very well known in Asgard that happened approximately every 5000 years when the Nine Realms were aligned. The boundaries of the Realms got thinner and light, gravity and even matter managed to pass through.

Thor seemed to think it was a magnificent and wondrous event; Selvig thought it had everything to be catastrophic.

Jane didn't exactly know which of the two was right, but she was leaning on Selvig's opinion if what she was seeing had anything to do with the Convergence. The yard they were in was exhibiting signs of the Alignment, something was messing with the gravity of the place according to her instruments.

And according to her eyes too, since the very big, very heavy shipping containers scattered around were toppled and piled together and even a truck was overturned.

Thor saw nothing wrong with the Convergence, claiming it was a natural event. Well, tornados and tsunamis were also natural. Maybe to a godlike alien like him those things weren't a problem, but for humans? If the gravitational field went haywire everywhere there would be chaos. So she needed to study the event and try to find a way to contain it.

Following Darcy's intern, they entered an abandoned factory, except that the sounds of footsteps made it clear it was not that abandoned.

"I am not getting stabbed in the name of science," Darcy said, raising her arms. "It's okay, we are Americans!"

Jane sighed.

"Is that supposed to make them like us?" she asked.

Darcy's shouting seemed to work, however, because a bunch of children showed up timorously.

"Oh, they're kids," Jane said, relieved since she did not want to depend on Darcy's taser again.
"Are you the police?" asked a little girl.

"No, we're scientists," Jane answered, trying to calm her. "Well, I am."

"Thanks," Darcy mumbled sarcastically.

"We just found it," a boy said.

Jane smiled; it seemed they were in the right place.

"Can you show us?"

The kids looked at each other for a second and then nodded. The three of them followed the kids to a room where a big truck was parked. One of the boys approached it and, with a single hand, he lifted it.

For one second, Jane wondered if the boy was super-strong like Thor was, but then he stepped back and the truck remained in the air, floating and spinning slowly. The gravity, she finally understood, the effects of the Convergence.

Finding their surprised expressions funny, the group of kids guided them upstairs, to show another thing. Jane followed eagerly. They stopped high up and looked down to the empty space in the middle of the stairs. One of the kids grabbed a bottle of something and dropped it, instead of falling all the way down or floating like the truck, the bottle simply disappeared. It was like it crossed some invisible barrier.

"Where did it go?" she asked and the little girl pointed up.

And just like she said, the bottle appeared from the sky, like it came out of nowhere, falling all the way down until it disappeared again, reappearing a few seconds later up in the sky again.

"That's, that's incredible!" she exclaimed, laughing.

It was like Thor and Selvig explained, the bottle was crossing the boundaries of the Realms. To those kids, it was a simple disappearing trick, but the reality was much, much more impressive. That bottle had just travelled who knows how many light-years across the universe in a couple of seconds.

Amazed with what she had just seen, Darcy threw the first object she could find; it fell down, disappeared and everybody looked up. It did not come back.

"Sometimes they come back," said the girl, "sometimes they don't."

Impressive and intriguing, of course, but all Jane could think was were those the car keys.

Before Darcy could say anything, her equipment began to beep like crazy. She hadn't seen readings like these since New Mexico when Thor appeared!

"Don't touch anything!" she yelled to them, running upstairs, following the source of what was making her equipment respond.

She could hear Darcy, the intern and the kids laughing while they walked down the deserted hallways, following the increasing beeping. Whatever her equipment was picking up, it had to be big. Maybe it was a tear in space.

Jane was so concentrated in her thoughts that she didn't notice the wind blowing in the closed
rooms or the weird fact that the leaves were being pulled towards something, not until whatever was pulling all that managed to grab a hold of her.

She couldn't stop as the force pulled her, making her slide on the ground like she was ice skating, and then the factory around her disappeared and she was at the edge of a very tall, very scary cliff in a dark cave.

"Darcy!" she yelled, her voice echoing.

Looking around, Jane studied the place, trying to control her own fear. Why did she always get in those situations?! Well, she knew exactly why, but that didn't matter right now. The place she was in wasn't exactly a cave, it was more like a city or a big castle in ruins, but she had no idea where. And since she had just crossed a space rift, that meant she could be anywhere in the Nine Realms.

Great!

Turning back from the cliff, Jane walked until she saw two big blocks of stone behind her, one on top of the other. Massive, way taller than her, the blocks seemed to not actually be touching themselves, leaving a small opening in the middle, an opening where something red was glowing.

Warily, Jane approached very carefully, remembering vividly the time when the robot pierced her in the alien ship back in Canada. There was something floating there, some kind of red liquid that appeared to be moving by itself.

And then the red thing lunged at her.

Yelling, Jane tried to get away, but whatever that red thing was, it was faster than her. It touched her and seemed to enter her body, disappearing inside her. The upper block fell back down when the red liquid left completely, closing the little opening.

But Jane saw none of that, falling to unconsciousness.

Clark opened his old fridge, looking for the sandwich he had left there to eat later; of course, it wasn't there anymore.

"Jessica!" he yelled, turning to look at her.

Sitting on his couch, typing something on her notebook, Jessica looked at him.

"That thing was there for three days, Clark. I did you a favor," she said.

Sighing, he closed the fridge and went to the couch, sat down. Clark had just finished writing and sending his last story to Mr. Ellison, a quick piece about the amount of people still homeless after the Black Zero Event. Hopefully, it would draw attention to the fact and inspire people to do something. All hard work, especially after flying around being Superman, and now he was very hungry.

He looked at Jessica.

"I was really looking forward to eating that sandwich," he said. "Do you have any idea how busy was my day?"

Jessica rolled her eyes and leaned to the side, reaching for the bottle of cheap whisky on the table, emptying it inside a coffee mug and then giving it to him.
"Do you have any idea how much I want to drink this instead of hearing you whining? And yet, here I am, giving it to you, hoping that you'll stop talking and let me work!"

Clark didn't take the mug.

"I'm not really much of a drinker," he said. "It doesn't work on me and the taste, well, the taste is not that good."

Rolling her eyes again, she drank the entire content of the mug.

"More for me, then."

"I don't know why you drink so much either. It's not like it affects you."

"Hey, I used to drink a lot more! But for your sake I'm trying to tone it down a little."

"My sake?"

"Well, it certainly ain't for mine, I can tell you that much. Not after the night I had."

Placing the mug back on the table, Jessica began to type again. Clark was curious.

"I thought you were working last night," he said.

"Yep, check that photo over there."

She pointed to a bunch of photos scattered around and Clark got up to look at them. Immediately he wished he hadn't.

"Oh my god, is this guy naked?!" Clark exclaimed.

Jessica laughed like crazy.

"That depends on your definition," she said. "Does having a body covered in so much hair that it makes it look like he is actually wearing something counts as clothes?"

Clark placed the photo down with disgust, making her laugh even more.

"I didn't need to see that. Ever!"

"Hey, I spent my entire night seeing that guy screwing his mistress inside his car. The least you could do is show a little support."

"But why? Why would you do that?!"

"What do you mean why? Because he is cheating on his wife, of course!"

He had to look again to the picture, regretting at the same time.

"I'm just guessing here, but I don't think this guy have a wife and a mistress because of his outstanding personality, right?"

Jessica grinned.

"Of course it is, he has several million personalities in his accounts, as I understand," she answered. "But not for long, I imagine."
"Why is that?"

"Well, apparently they have an infidelity clause in their prenup. He insisted, god knows why, and now his wife has him by the balls." Jessica grinned wickedly. "Gotta tell you, it's nice to be received with happiness and a glass of champagne for a change. Usually people just cry and call me names."

"Why would they call you names?" Clark asked.

She shrugged.

"Human nature, I suppose. They know something is wrong, they hire me to figure out what is wrong. I bring them proof and suddenly I'm the liar asshole that wants to destroy their relationship."

"You should find another job," Clark suggested.

Jessica snickered.

"Like?"

Clark thought for a second.

"Ultimate Fighting?"

She laughed.

"Yeah, I can see myself being paid to hit people."

Before Clark could agree, however, his cellphone began to ring. He fished it out of his pocket and answered.

"Hello."

"Clark, it's Natasha."

"Hey, Natasha, how are you? Everything alright in Washington?" he asked, smiling, slapping Jessica's feet when she started making kissy faces, which made her yelp.

"I'm fine, everything is okay here, but S.H.I.E.L.D. has just intercepted a call to the police in London from Darcy Lewis. Apparently, Jane is missing."

He sat up.

"Missing? Like, kidnapped?"

"We don't know. Miss Lewis told the police they entered an old factory to study some readings of their equipment and, when she realized, Jane was gone."

"Readings? Readings of… Oh, shit," Clark cursed, realizing just what Jane was studying. The same thing, he suspected, that Thor had invited him to watch from Asgard.

"What? You know what happened?" Natasha asked.

"No, not for certain, but I'm guessing she was studying the Convergence. And if I'm right, well, she could be anywhere in the Nine Realms."
Natasha didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"What exactly is this Convergence?" she asked, her voice suddenly dangerous.

Thor hadn't told them about this either. Clark sighed.

"In very few words, it's the alignment of the Nine Realms," Clark answered. "It will happen soon. Thor actually invited me to watch it from Asgard. Between us, I think Odin wants to meet me." Before Natasha could ask anything else, Clark added: "I'll fly there and check things, don't worry. I can get there fast."

"That is what I was about to ask you," she said. "The cops won't know what to do and you can get there faster than any of us."

"Alright, I'm on it. Bye."

Clark got up, already rushing to change his clothes.

"Hey, hey, what do you mean you are going to Asgard?!" asked Jessica. "When?"

"I'm not sure yet," he said, entering his room and changing into his skinsuit fast. "Thor was supposed to come back and get me in a few days, I think."

"Jesus fucking Christ, you are going to outer space and you didn't even tell me?!"

He stopped and looked at her.

"I would have told you, I just forgot," he said. "Why are you freaking out?"

"I'm not freaking out, I just like to know when my friend is leaving the fucking planet!" she exclaimed. "When are you coming back?"

Clark looked at her for a full minute. Was she… worried? He smiled at her.

"Why are you smiling like that?" she asked, frowning. "Stop smiling like that!"

"No reason," Clark said, still smiling. "No reason at all. I just find it very touching that you are so concerned about me."

"Motherfuc-"

"Bye, Jes!"

---

Thor walked across the Bifrost, every step making the rainbow bridge glow under his boots. The wind made his cape and his hair sway as he approached the unmoving guardian clad in a golden armor.

"How fare the stars?" Thor asked, knowing very well Heimdall already sensed his presence.

"Still shining," answered Heimdall, his powerful voice echoing. "From here I can see Nine Realms and ten trillions souls."

He grabbed the long sword that activated the Bifrost and pushed it down; the dome of the rainbow bridge began to turn.
"The Convergence approaches," Heimdall continued, walking to Thor. "The universe hasn't seen this marvel since before my watch began. Few can sense it and even fewer can see it. But while its effects can be dangerous, it is truly beautiful."

Thor could see Heimdall's glowing eyes reflecting the sky full of stars in front of them, so powerful that he could see everything happening in the Nine Realms from there. The all-seeing and all-hearing Watcher of Worlds, guardian of the Bifrost and of Asgard.

And his friend. Smiling, Thor looked towards the stars.

"I see nothing," he said.

It was Heimdall's turn to smile.

"Or, perhaps, that is not the beauty you seek."

Thor laughed.

"How is she doing?" he asked. It hadn't been long since he left, but he already missed Jane.

"She is quite clever," Heimdall answered. "She studies the Convergence as well. Even—"

Heimdall stopped talking abruptly, widening his eyes. Thor approached him.

"What?" he asked, worried.

He was silent, only looking to the stars for almost a minute. Then he looked at Thor.

"I can't see her."

Jane didn't know what was happening anymore. Worse than that, she didn't care. Her mind was filled with a presence that was not hers and all she could do was float in a universe made of red liquid, surrounding everything. There was no sound other than the sound of the presence, no feeling other than the red presence.

And all she could do was drown in it and lose any sense of self.

When she opened her eyes, her vision was blurry. Blinking fast to get her eyes adjusted to the light, Jane got up. She felt tired, more than she ever remembered being. Groaning, she looked around, finding herself inside the abandoned factory alone.

Was all that a dream?

With one last look, Jane started to move outside, hearing the beginnings of a storm. Walking fast, she got to the exit and saw the place full of cops.

"Jane!" yelled Darcy, running to her. "Where the hell were you?!

She couldn't believe in this.

"Tell me you didn't call the police," she said, knowing very well that she probably had.

"What was I supposed to do?" Darcy asked, agitated.

"Not call the police?" Jane suggested.
"I was freaking out!"

"You call the cops, they call the feds, next thing we know we have SHIELD crawling all over 'Area 51-ing' the place!"

"Jane!"

"We had a stable gravitation anomaly!" Jane continued, not even hearing Darcy talking. "We had unimpeded access! Our only competition was 10 years old!"

"JANE! You were gone for 5 hours!" Darcy yelled. "What was I supposed to do other than call the cops? Call Superman?!"

And at the very moment she said this, there was a supersonic sound in the sky, their jaws dropped simultaneously.

"Did you–"

"No!"

Apparently he did appear when people said his name.

Clark saw Jane and Darcy way before he got close enough to be noticed; he sighed in relief. Jane was apparently okay, still on Earth and not lost across the cosmos. Speeding through the sky and ignoring the perimeter the cops had made, he landed close to them.

"Oh my god!" yelled Darcy, before he could open his mouth. "It is you! Do you remember us?!"

Was it still too late to wear his glasses?

"Thank you so much for saving Jane!" Darcy continued, still not letting him speak. "And then saving the world! But what are you doing here? Is it true you appear when people say your name?!"

"I–"

"Because that's totally cool! I will have to use that concept on 'The Path to Atonement.'" she interrupted. "I told Jane that–"

"Darcy, shut up!" Jane said; that seemed to work. She looked at him a little embarrassed because of her outburst. "Hi, thank you for saving my life."

Clark actually expected to be interrupted again.

"Don't worry about it," he answered. "And yes, Miss Lewis, I remember both of you. But if you could, you know, not say that out loud…"

Wait a second, did she just say Path to Atonement?

"Of course, secret identity!" Darcy whispered, before he could ask anything. "My bad. It's not like we know your real name, but I get it."

Sighed, Clark looked back at Jane.

"I got a call from SHIELD," he began and Jane groaned, "saying that you disappeared. They asked
me to check on you. I was actually worried you got lost while studying the Convergence."

Both of them widened their eyes.

"You know about it?" asked Jane.

Clark nodded.

"It's a long story, but yes. Anyway, are you alright?"

Jane seemed to think about it for a minute, which pretty much told Clark all he needed to know; something strange happened to her. Before he could do a quick x-ray scan on Jane, however, one cop decided to approach, looking warily at him.

"Um, excuse me," he said, his stare still on Clark. Everyone's eyes were on him. "This is p-private property… I'm going to have to ask you to--"

Whatever the cop was going to say was interrupted when a bright light came from the sky, illuminating everything around: the Bifrost.

"Jane?!" Thor yelled. "Are you alright? Heimdall couldn't see you!"

"Thor?" she asked, running to him and hugging the Asgardian. "You're back!"

"Hey Thor," Clark greeted, together with Darcy.

The Asgardian Prince widened his eyes.

"Kal, what are you…Did you come here to help Jane?" he asked.

Clark just nodded and before he could react the huge Asgardian hugged him as well.

"You have my gratitude once again!" he said and Clark gave a few embarrassed taps on his back.

"No need, buddy."

Thor turned back to Jane again, but before he could speak, Darcy interrupted.

"Jane, I'm pretty sure Mr. Cop here was about to arrest us." She looked at him. "Weren't you, sir?"

"Um, yes, you are trespassing--"

"Sir, wait, I can explain," said Jane, touching the man's shoulder.

Before she could speak a single word, however, there was a strong blast of red energy causing everyone around Jane to be sent flying. Pushed back by whatever that was, Clark managed to hold Darcy and, dashing forward, he held the flying cop before he was about to crash into his car.

"Jane!" Thor screamed, running to Jane who was lying on the ground.

Clark got up and took a step in her direction and then Kelex beeped.

"Sir, I'm sensing the energy signature of an Infinity Stone," she said.

His eyes widened as did Thor's and both of them turned to look at Jane. Groaning, Jane got up, holding on Thor's arm.
"What just happened?" she asked.

Thor didn't get a chance to answer, however, because the cops decided it was a good idea to approach Superman and Thor with a couple of tasers pointed at them. Darcy actually laughed.

"Place your hands on your heads!"

Clark sighed and stepped forward with his arms raised, a clear sign he wasn't a threat.

"You know who I am and you know who Thor is," he said, looking around the cops. "You know we aren't a threat to you. We are here to help."

The man was shaking a bit, but Clark's words made him calm himself a little, so he lowered the Taser.

"Okay, okay. As you say, Superman," he said and Clark nodded, smiling.

"Thank you."

Turning his back at him, Clark came toward Thor and Jane. Thor looked at him with a solemn expression.

"I need to take her to Asgard," he said. "She needs healing. If you are coming, now is the time."

Clark looked around for a second, but his choice was already made; there was an Infinity Stone inside Jane. She and Thor needed his help.

"Let's go."

Thor looked to the sky and nodded. A second later, the Bifrost descended from the heavens, surrounding them with its bright lights. Clark felt himself being pulled up at an incredible speed, almost becoming one with the rainbow bridge, as the universe passed fast all around him.

And then, as fast as it had started, it was over.

Clark landed a few steps behind Thor and Jane, just in time to see an Asgardian wearing a golden armor pulling a sword from a pedestal and closing the Bifrost. He gazed at them with his glowing orange eyes.

"Welcome to Asgard."
Chapter 20 – The Realm Eternal

Clark stared at the city in wonder. The city seemed to shine like pure gold, a jewel under the sun. Circulated around buildings, waterfalls glistened under the sunlight, with streams flowing through the green hills and the golden towers. The ocean under the Bifrost was bright and clear, reflecting the sky, and each step they took glowed with the colors of the rainbow. Countless islands were linked together through golden bridges, each one more beautiful than the one before.

The Rainbow Bridge made a straight line to the royal palace, a truly massive congregation of towers that rose to the sky, taller than any other building around as Thor carried Jane on his arms.

"I can walk, you know?" Jane complained, to Thor's great amusement.

"But why would you, when we can be joined like this?" he asked, kissing her forehead, making her blush. "I am really happy that you are here, Jane, despite the circumstances. I want to show you Asgard since I have met you."

Jane stared at him for a moment and then leaned to close the gap between them for a kiss.

"Come on, guys, I'm right here!" Clark cut in, and Jane immediately pulled away, mortified. "We have not even crossed half of the Bifrost yet and I already feel like a third wheel."

Thor frowned.

"I do not understand."

"You know, the extra, useless part that it's just there."

"Oh, you are not useless at all, my friend!" Thor said, smiling at him. "You were there for Jane when I wasn't and saved her life!" He looked back at Jane. "I could not bear the thought of losing you."

And they kissed again. Clark sighed, shaking his head.

Looking away from the loving couple, Clark tried to entertain himself by looking at the beautiful view. This was the first time since his birth that he stepped into another planet and Clark was giddy with excitement and curiosity. Of course, by the memories Zod had shown him, Krypton was as different from Asgard as two planets could possibly be, but the feeling of being somewhere alien was still there.

Asgard was something out of a myth. A legend, plain and simple, that took form right in front of his eyes. Yet it was easy to see how much Asgardian culture had influenced parts of Midgard's culture. The shape of the armors and weapons, the architecture of the buildings, the form of the ships. Obviously, what they had on Earth a thousand years ago was a poor replication of what they had here. The armors and weapons of Asgard were able to beat high-tech equipment on Earth, the building's architecture stood tall, reaching to the sky, and Asgardian ships could fly. Still, they had carved their mark on Earth, that much was clear.

The city soon appeared around them, separated because of the Bifrost, but Clark could easily watch
the Asgardians living their lives. Aside from the fact that the city was something straight out of mythology, they were not that different from what he usually saw whenever he flew over New York. Apparently, gods went shopping as well, if the groceries they were carrying and the hyper kids were any indication.

He was so absorbed by the view that he only noticed they arrived at the palace when there were guards in front of the gate. Huge wasn't really the word to describe the palace in front of him, Clark thought as they crossed through the gate as the guards nodded at Thor. It was more like colossal and that wasn't even the main door to the palace, just some sort of back door to the Bifrost.

"This way," Thor said, entering a corridor that looked more like a city street than anything else.

They passed several Asgardians and every last one of them stopped what they were doing to look at them and bowed at Thor. Clark felt a lot of eyes following him and the whispers began to travel the palace, talking about the Kryptonian and Thor's Midgardian lover. Gods liked to gossip too, Clark thought.

It didn't take much longer for them to reach the room that Thor was looking for: the infirmary. Clark could only stare at what seemed to be a true combination of a Viking palace with high-tech alien equipment. The doctors, or healers as they called them, approached Thor and it took only a few words from him for them to start examining Jane.

"What's that?" asked Jane in excitement when the machine made a replica of her body in a cloud of red particles.

"Be still," the healer said, focusing on her work.

Thor and Clark watched from the sidelines, worry etched on their faces.

"We do not know what it is," said one of the healers in a low voice. "But she will not survive the amount of energy surging within her."

Thor looked at Jane in solemn.

"We know what it is," he answered and turned to the healer. "We just need to know how to take it off her."

By the expression on her face, she was as clueless as they were.

Jane asked: "That's a quantum field generator, isn't it?"

The healer answered: "It's a soul forge."

Clark smiled. Different cultures, different names, but the same thing.

"Does a soul forge transfer molecular energy from one place to another?" Jane asked.

The healer stopped what she was doing for the first time and looked at her.

"Yes," she answered, looking surprised that Jane actually knew what she was talking about.

Jane smiled and whispered at Thor: "Quantum field generator!"

Thor smiled back at her, his worry forgotten for a few seconds. Young love; could be annoying as hell to be around them, but it was a beautiful thing to see. It made him want to help Jane even more than he already wanted to.
"Kelex, can you tell us anything else?" Clark asked, watching it taking into drone form.

"Wow! And what is that?!" Jane asked, shocked.

She wasn't the only one shocked. The healers looked at Kelex with widened eyes for a second and then turned to Clark, their eyes sharpened. It seemed that doctors anywhere in the universe didn't like to be second guessed.

"The readings are consistent with the energy exhibited by an Infinity Stone," Kelex said, repeating what it had already told them. "And like all Infinity Stones, its power is taking a toll on her body."

Everybody in the room stopped what they were doing to look at Kelex, eyes wide. It seemed Infinity Stones were not exactly unknown in these parts.

"Do you know how we take it off her?" Thor asked.

Kelex remained still for a few seconds, like a computer using its processing power to search for something.

"Unknown," she finally answered. "My database does not contain any information about this particular Infinity Stone, only that it is an Infinity Stone."

"But ours does," said a woman approaching.

The healers in the room looked to the woman approaching and immediately bowed, opening a path for her to come through. If Clark had to define her in one word, it would be "noble". That's the first thing that crossed his mind when he looked at her, seeing the regal way she seemed to move, her magnificent green dress swaying at each step, and yet without appearing arrogant. She was blond, like Thor was, with blue eyes and a beautiful face. Of course Clark couldn't hope to calculate her age since she could very well be thousands of years old, but she looked to be, appearance wise, as old as his own mother.

Clark had no doubt in his mind as to who that was.

"Jane, Kal, meet my mother, Frigga, Queen of Asgard," Thor introduced as his mother smiled at them. "Do you know anything about this, Mother?"

Frigga didn't answer as she got close to Jane and scanned her body. Gently, she took Jane's arm and passed her hand over it; a red glow, like a flowing river made of ruby dust, appeared under her skin. The queen's expression turned serious.

"I do," she answered. "But your father knows more. We should go to him." She helped Jane get up and smiled kindly at her. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, my dear. Thor has been telling me about you nonstop since he came back."

Jane seemed flattered and embarrassed at the same time, so she settled with a smile and a small bow.

"You told your mother about me?" she whispered, and Clark almost rolled his eyes at her surprised and pleased tone.

He managed to resist the temptation though because as Frigga turned her gaze fell on him, she smiled brightly.

"Kal-El, the Kryptonian, savior of Midgard," she said. "I heard a lot about you too."
"Only good things, I hope," he answered, honestly feeling a little self-conscious as the Queen of Asgard smiled at him. What was the protocol here? Should he kneel? Should he bow?

It didn't seem to matter one way or the other to her.

"Of course! My son knows better than to speak ill of someone behind their backs," she answered. "Not that there was any ill to speak of about the man who saved the life of his beloved and Midgard itself."

"Beloved?!" Jane whispered, blushing and looking at Thor.

Frigga got closer and touched his shoulder, guiding them out of the room. On Clark's wrist, Kelex returned back as a watch.

"I must apologize, but we were only expecting your arrival a few days from now, so your reception will leave much to be desired, I'm afraid."

Reception?! Thor did not say anything about that. He was glad to get there a few days earlier if he was truly avoiding a big spectacle, and if there was one thing Clark didn't like, that would be being in the spotlight.

"Oh, don't worry about it, your Highness. You--"

"You may call me Frigga," she interrupted, looking at Jane as well. "And so can you, my dear. We do not stand on ceremony here in Asgard, at least when we do not absolutely have to."

They walked through a big hall, the ample windows allowing them to admire Asgard's beauty as they walked.

"So, Mother, what do you know about this?" Thor asked, while he helped Jane to walk.

"Impatient as always," Frigga reprehended with a smile, but then her expression became serious. "But I suppose the circumstances are not ideal." She walked a few more steps, thinking about her words. "What lies inside Jane's body is an Infinity Stone, as you already know, known as the Aether."

The name meant nothing to Clark, but Thor's face showed recognition and fear.

"The weapon of the Dark Elves?" he asked.

"Dark Elves?!" asked Jane, looking surprised. "They are real?"

"They were real," Thor corrected her. "Now they are no more than stories. 'Born of eternal night, the Dark Elves come to steal away the light'. Mother told it to us as children," he added, looking at Frigga. "A long, long time ago, my grandfather, Bor, defeated them and hid the Aether, somewhere it could not be found."

Not well enough, apparently.

"How did you come by it, Jane?" asked Clark. "I mean, I know you crossed a Convergence's rift, but not much else."

"I don't know," Jane said. "One minute I was there, the next something pulled me and I was by a cliff's edge, in another place entirely. There was something, some kind of stone block with a red stuff in it, and then… I don't remember. I woke up back at the factory and met Darcy and you and
then Thor."

Frigga listened to her story and nodded.

"It's the nature of the Aether," she explained. "Unlike the other relics, the Aether is not a stone. It is fluid and ever changing, thus it needs a host to fully manifest itself, drawing strength from their life-force." Frigga looked at Jane. "It latched onto you because you were the only living being nearby. It was not your fault."

Jane seemed thankful at Frigga's attempt at comforting her despite the dire situation, but Thor didn't seem so relaxed.

"How do we take it out?" he asked again, agitated. "It's killing her!"

"We will find a way, Thor," Frigga said, soothing his anxiousness. "Your father knows more than me and I have several sorcery books to search. Do not despair."

Frigga's speech was meant to calm them, but Jane apparently only listened to a single word she said.

"Sorcery?" she repeated.

Thor didn't seem to understand the skeptical tone in her voice.

"Yes, mother is one of the greatest sorceresses in all Nine Realms," he said.

Again, he did not fully understand Jane's expression.

"Magic is just science that we do not understand yet," Jane quoted, turning to Frigga. "So that means you are a scientist, like me?"

Frigga smiled in understanding. Unlike Thor, Jane didn't believe in magic. The queen looked at Jane.

"What you said is true, but not in the way you understand," Frigga said. "Magic is science, in the sense that it obeys the laws of the universe, like anything else in existence. Like gravity and thermodynamics, it follows a set of rules. It is, like them, a force of nature." She smiled again, seeing Jane's focused attention. "It is a part of science, of course, but magic itself is very real."

"B-But that is impossible!" Jane exclaimed. "You mean that it seems magic, because it is so advanced? Like, like a plane would to cave men!"

"I mean it is magic," Frigga answered, opening her arms. "The language of the mystic arts is as old as civilization in the universe. We harness energy, drawn from other dimensions of the multiverse," she said, moving her arms and making red sparks appear several meters in front of them, "or from inside ourselves."

She snapped her fingers, making the sparks take the shape of a circle. "To make spells and illusions," she continued, pointing her opened hands towards the circle of red sparks, "to make magic!"

As Frigga said this, the inside of the circle seemed to disappear, as if an invisible window was opened; what before was the other half of the hall they were walking to, now it was another place entirely. The wind blowing had a different smell, the location they were looking at was completely different.
Frigga had just opened a portal in front of them.

Jane and Clark stared in wonder as they followed Frigga, looking around, trying to understand what had just happened. Clark knew magic was real. Krypton even had its own magic users once upon a time before the council deemed the practice was too dangerous and should be dropped. It was all well documented in his ship's archives.

But knowing it was real and seeing it right before his eyes were two very different things.

"This is amazing!" Clark said marveled, laughing like a child. Jane was in too much shock to speak. "What else can you do?"

Frigga smiled at her.

"I will show you another time. But I think my husband would like a word with you."

Clark quickly looked behind him as Frigga said that. He was so surprised at seeing Frigga's portal that he didn't even realized where the portal took them: right in front of the Allfather, Odin Borson, King of Asgard.

Darcy looked around the holding cell, her muscles tensed, evaluating the possible scenarios of her imminent death. Two hookers were chatting in one corner, wearing skimpy clothes and lots of makeup. They obviously had some kind of improvised hidden weapon and experience in using it, Darcy was sure of it, so she was better off far away from them. On the other side was a drunken woman covered in vomit and dirt, sleeping on the dingy floor. Darcy suspected that she might be a threat of the highest levels. Sitting by her side was a gigantic woman, someone who could crush her head with a single hand it she wanted to.

She was doomed. She was going to die here.

Protection, that was what she needed. Maybe some of them would be open to some sort of trade. She still had her hat, that would buy her at least a day of safety, wouldn't it? But what if it wasn't enough?! She looked around again, her eyes fell upon the gigantic woman who looked back at her. It wouldn't be enough, she realized. She would want more.

No, no, no, Darcy would rather die! She would not become a toy in a prison, someone to be passed around. She refused!

"Hey!" the woman called.

"Do whatever you want with me, just let me live!" Darcy yelled, closing her eyes. The whole room fell into silence.

There was no answer and Darcy could only imagine what the woman had in store for her. What kind of torments? Would she hurt her? Did she like that sort of thing? Maybe she would want more than just a toy, Darcy considered with her eyes still closed. Maybe she wanted a partner, a Bonnie to her Clyde. Could Darcy do this? Become her partner in crime?

A queen of crime... That could be interesting.

"HEY! There is someone waiting for you!" the woman called again, raising her voice loud enough to make Darcy to look at the direction she was pointing.

Natasha Romanoff was watching her from the other side of the bars with a single eyebrow raised.
Darcy blushed and took a look at the woman, rushing out of the holding cell.

"Oh, thank you so much for saving me!" Darcy almost yelled when she got out. "I didn't think I could survive much longer with those criminals."

The Black Widow didn't answer immediately, looking at the holding cell.

"Which ones?" she asked. "The prostitutes who were taken in to get out of the cold, the drunk, or is it her sister, the nun, who volunteered to keep an eye on her?"

Darcy did a double take. "Clyde" was a nun?! Huh, who would've thought?

"So, why are you here?" Darcy asked.

Natasha guided her out of the hall so they could speak with a bit more privacy.

"I received a call that Dr. Foster had disappeared, only to learn that she reappeared in the same place 5 hours later, and then disappear again, this time via the Bifrost with Superman and Thor." She looked at Darcy. "I want to know what happened."

Darcy sighed.

"Me too," she said. "Look, I know as much as you do. Probably less!"

"Why were you there?" Natasha asked.

"Okay, Selvig called Jane and asked her to move here, saying that he needed her help with something," Darcy explained, leaning on the wall. "We came here and he just vanished, just like that!" She snapped her fingers. "So Jane started studying his papers and found out he was trying to understand something called Conversion--"

"Convergence," Natasha corrected.

"Convergence," Natasha corrected.

"So you know about it!"

"Only what a little birdy called Superman told me on the phone."

"OH MY GOD, you have Superman's phone?! How is--"

"Focus!" Miss Romanoff interrupted again.

Well, that was rude.

"Okay, listen, I don't know anything about it. Thor said it has something to do with the worlds aligning themselves and I saw things disappearing in the factory when we tossed them and a flying truck! But, really, if you want a scientific explanation, you'll have to ask Selvig, because I have no idea. Problem is, I don't know where he is either."

Natasha took out her phone, typed something on the screen and showed Darcy the beginning of a video.

"Jesus, why is Selvig running around naked in Stonehenge?!" She looked at Natasha, horrified. "Why did you show this to me? It isn't even blurred! I won't be able to look at him ever again!"

Darcy could be wrong, but she thought she saw a small smile on Natasha's lips. Before she could ask, the SHIELD agent began to guide her out.
"We are going to pick him up and then find out what is happening. You are coming with me."

Well, that didn't leave Darcy much of a choice. Suddenly, she remembered something.

"My intern!" she said. "You have to take him out of the cell too!"

She thought Natasha would complain, but apparently she was in a hurry, because she just nodded.

"What's his name?"

Darcy's mind froze.

"Intern?"

Malekith looked around the ship, watching his soldiers preparing themselves. The time had come: the Aether had called for them. Turning around, he looked at the big screens of his ship, seeing the mapping of the Nine Realms nearly in a straight line.

"The worlds are nearly aligned," said Algrim, his best warrior and second-in-command, brother in all but blood.

He nodded, without moving his eyes from the screens. This was the only chance they had. The last chance to save their people from the tyranny of the light. Malekith couldn't possibly name all that his people had lost since the end of their universe. Pain and suffering were constants in their lives now, the very composition of this universe eating them little by little.

The Dark Elves were once such a beautiful and prideful race, full of hope and dreams, masters of their destiny. Now, most of them covered their faces behind masks, too disgusted with the deformities the light caused them, devouring their faces bit by bit.

The Aether could end that suffering, bringing the never-ending night again and ensuring the survival of his race. But first they had to get it.

Malekith knew where it was. Every Dark Elf could feel it, but he had a connection with it that surpassed all beings, from this universe and the last. The Aether was a piece of their home, a stone remnant of their universe that he had personally crafted into the ever changing Aether. It called to them as they called to it. And right now the Aether was in the hands of their old enemies, the Asgardians.

Once upon a time, Malekith could have marched upon Asgard and turned it into dust with his armies, but that time was long gone. The light had killed his people, the constant battles against the new life forms of this accursed universe had weakened them further and Bor had finished the job when he stole the Aether from them, right when the Convergence had reached its peak.

And now they would take it back.

Unsheathing his knife, Malekith turned away from the screen and walked to his friend. Algrim was the best warrior he had ever met, but they needed more than a warrior now, they needed a living weapon.

"You will be the last of the Kursed," Malekith said, looking into his eyes.

Algrim didn't even flinch.

"Let my life be sacrificed," he said. "It is no less than our people did. Or you have done."
Malekith looked at his brother one last time, touching his shoulder. He hesitated for a second, but in the end he pierced him with his knife. Algrim groaned in pain and he touched his forehead with his own as one of his soldiers opened a box.

"You will become darkness, cursed to this existence until it consumes you," Malekith said, knowing that he would feel the agony and despair of losing his friend. He picked up the burning stone his soldier gave him and put it inside Algrim's wound. "Until then, no power our enemies possess can stop you."

Algrim breathed hard for a moment, until his wound healed itself over the stone. He looked up at Malekith.

"I will tear down their defenses and ensure your return to a universe reborn."

Clark forgot all about Frigga's magic at the moment as he looked toward Odin, seeing the King of Asgard for the first time. His appearance pretty much matched the stories, Clark decided, with hair grayed with age and long beard, the right eye covered by an eye patch. Clad in full armor, Odin was the very picture of a warrior god, with thousands of years of training and experience behind him.

Before his eyes was one of the most powerful beings in the universe.

Odin was studying Clark with his one eye, as if judging his worth. He had to admit: it was unnerving. He was in silence for what seemed to be minutes without blinking once, and then he finally turned and his gaze fell upon Jane.

"I told you to bring back one and instead you bring one and a half?" he said, his voice powerful, looking from Jane to Thor.

That was harsh. Frigga stepped over and touched Jane's arm.

"Actually, my husband, Thor brought back three," she announced, forcing the Aether to appear behind her skin one more time.

Odin didn't say anything for a long time, his expression barely changed but Clark could tell he was surprised. He approached them in quick steps, picking Jane's arm without saying anything and repeated the same gesture Frigga had done. The result was the same.

"Impossible," he whispered. "The Aether was supposed to be hidden. How did you come by it?"

Jane opened her mouth to say something, but Thor answered first: "The Convergence, father. Jane crossed one of its passages by accident and found herself in the Aether's hiding place."

The King didn't say anything in response, letting Jane's hand fall down again and turning his back.

"I told them you knew more about the Aether than I do," Frigga said. "Care to share that knowledge?"

Imperceptibly, Odin nodded, walking to the center of the room. The room was big, darker as if it was night time, beautifully crafted like every other place in the palace he had seen. What was impressive about this room, however, was the projection of the Yggdrasil in the center.

The Tree of Life rose from the center of the room, reaching all the way to the very high ceiling, its branches spreading to the whole extension of the place. In where it connected to the branches were
the representations of the Nine Realms, each glowing with a different color.

It was one of the most beautiful things Clark had ever seen.

Odin crossed through the Yggdrasil reflection and arrived at a pedestal. With one gesture of his hand, a bright light glowed and a book formed itself on top of it.

"There are relics that pre-date the universe itself. What lies within her appears to be one of them," Odin spoke, opening the golden book. "The Nine Realms, like us, are not eternal. They had a dawn as they will have a dusk. But before that dawn, the dark forces, the Dark Elves, reigned absolute and unchallenged."

The book showed a moving image of a Dark Elf and, as Odin touched it, the reflection of the Yggdrasil disappeared, replaced by an entirely different thing. It was like they weren't in the room anymore but on a different world. A dark world with clouds shrouded in shadow and a ground that seemed to be made of ashes. They could see a tall cliff where two Dark Elves stood, right in front of a huge block of stone.

"That's the block of stone where the Aether was!" exclaimed Jane, pointing at it.

Odin nodded.

"The Aether was used as weapon by their leader, Malekith, forged from the darkness of the old universe," Odin continued. "The Aether is capable of changing matter into dark matter, seeking out host-bodies, drawing strength from their life forces. Malekith sought to use the Aether's power to return the universe to one of darkness. But, after eternities of bloodshed, my father Bor finally triumphed, ushering in a peace that lasted thousands of years."

"What happened?" Jane asked.

The King looked at her with a smile that would make a Viking warlord proud.

"He killed them all." And Odin touched the book once again.

As he did it, the images around the room shifted, showing them the memories written on those pages. The memories of the Battle of Svartalfheim. Clark watched openly as the hordes of Asgardians advanced upon an equally massive army of Dark Elves, their steps making the ashes on the ground rise. The troops of Asgardian Einherjar raised their shields, defending themselves against the energy weapons of the Dark Elves until they could arrive close enough to unleash chaos upon them with their swords and spears.

In the sky above them, hundreds of ships battled as well, tower like ships that belonged to the Dark Elves and the Asgardian ships, that looked like a bigger version of the Viking's long ships. It was like watching a naval battle fought in the air as the big ships fired upon each other with little concern about dodging, leaving the maneuver to the smaller crafts that seemed to fly everywhere in great speed. Every once in a while, a ship would take too much damage and just fall upon the soldiers fighting down there.

It was war in a scale Clark hoped that he would never see, but he couldn't stop looking at the scenes of the brutal battle.

"Send in the Kursed!" yelled Malekith.

Losing foothold, the Dark Elves in the back lines crushed some weird glowing rock in their hands. Instantly, their bodies seemed to catch on fire, growing into a huge horned monstrosity. The
Kursed jumped over their fellow companions, falling on top of the Asgardians, slaughtering them in ways that Clark couldn't believe, moving through them as if the Asgardian weapons couldn't hurt them at all.

It was at that moment that the Bifrost glowed in the middle of the battleground, transporting a group of elite Einherjar and leading them was King Bor, carrying a spear that fired powerful bursts of energy beams that disintegrated everything in his way. They advanced upon the Kursed without hesitation, the battle suddenly becoming much more brutal than before.

The whole battle, however, had only one purpose: to delay the Asgardian forces until the moment of the Convergence. And that moment was happening.

Clark looked up as did Malekith, watching the Nine Realms completely aligned, the boundaries between them ceasing to exist at all. It was like looking at eight consecutive big, round portals.

Turning his back to the battle, Malekith approached the Aether Chamber and raised his hand. The red substance reacted to him, beginning to flow in his direction.

In the moment before the Aether was about to touch his hand, the Bifrost glowed, right upon the Aether Chamber, taking it away. Clark saw the hopelessness that Malekith had in his eyes as he stared at the marking on the ground, right in the place that the Aether was a second ago.

The battle was lost. At each minute the Asgardians advanced more, destroying the Dark Elves in their path, running in Malekith's direction. But before they could get to him, all the Dark Elves ships plunged to the ground, crashing against the battlefield in a last blaze of glory.

The images disappeared and they were once again back in the room with the Yggdrasil.

"Could the Dark Elves have survived this?" Thor asked. "The Aether was supposed to be hidden forever, but here it is."

Odin looked at Thor with certainty.

"The Dark Elves are dead."

Though Odin was certain, Clark couldn't help but wonder.

Jane approached, glancing at the golden book.

"Does your book happens to mention how to get it out of me?" she asked.

The King snapped the book shut, allowing it to disappear back to where it came from.

"It does not."

Clark sighed, seeing Thor's worry increase.

"We will find a way," Frigga said. "Do not worry."

"Frigga, take the mortal to her chambers, it seems she will have to stay. For now." Odin turned to Thor and Clark. "You two, stay."

With one last look at Thor, Jane turned to follow Frigga, leaving him and Thor behind with Odin. Clark had to control himself not to bolt behind them. He wasn't exactly afraid of Odin, and he had no reason to be, but that didn't mean he felt comfortable around the severe King of Asgard.
Nobody spoke anything for a whole minute after the door closed. Odin seemed to be evaluating Clark the whole time.

"Kal-El, the Last Son of Krypton, protector of Midgard," Odin said, looking at him without blinking. "It seems I owe you gratitude for protecting the Nine Realms from General Zod."

Whatever Clark was expecting from this meeting, this wasn't it. He waited a few seconds, but Odin didn't say anything anymore.

"You don't have to thank me, your Majesty," Clark said, respectfully. "I fought to protect my home and the people in it, no more than that."

"Yes, a Kryptonian battling other Kryptonians to protect mortals," he said. "Not something I would ever expect from your race."

What? Was that an observation or an insult? Thor seemed to think it was the latter, because he approached.

"Kal knows nothing of Krypton, father. Judging him for their mistakes would be the same as judging us for Loki's."

That seemed to bring a reaction to Odin's expression, even if a small one.

"I do not judge, but I am surprised," Odin said. "Tell me, Kal-El, what do you know of your history?"

Clark shook his head.

"Nothing much, only what I could learn from my ship's archives. In hindsight, Kryptonians would not be exactly impartial when talking about themselves."

Odin, surprisingly, smiled.

"That is true for us all, I'm afraid. Vanity is a curse that afflicts every being in the universe." Saying this, Odin got up and turned. "Come with me, I want to show you something."

Curiously, Clark and Thor followed Odin out of the room, walking through the corridors until they arrived in a small library. The place was empty of people, but the whole room filled with stacks of books, from the ground to the ceiling. That was probably Odin's private selection. Looking around for a second, Odin grabbed an old book from the bookstand and opened it over the table.

Like the golden book from before, this one also glowed and moved, more like a computer screen than an actual book. What surprised Clark, however, wasn't the fact that the picture was moving, it was the picture itself: the symbol of the House of El. Stunned, he looked from the book to Odin.

"This book was given to me by my father when I was but a child," Odin explained, turning the book so Clark could see it better. "Everything we learned about the Kryptonians is in here, all our interactions with them, all our battles, all the wars we fought together. Asgardians and Kryptonians have interacted since before the Age of Kings."

Taking the book in his hand, Odin closed it and gave it to Clark.

"It is yours."

The words to express what he was feeling now escaped Clark as he reached and took the book.
from Odin. To someone who didn't have a home anymore, his people, any piece of history about his home world was incredibly precious.

"Thank you," he said, looking Odin in the eye.

Odin just nodded.

"I know you did not fight for the sake of the Nine Realms or Asgard, but you did guard the Realms and at great personal cost," Odin said. "Honor, duty, sacrifice. These are the qualities of every good warrior and you possess them in great amount."

"That is certainly true!" Thor added, smacking his back with a laugh.

Clark only nodded, thanking the compliment.

"I appreciate the kind words, but I am not a warrior," he said. "I fought Zod because I had to, no other reason."

"A great warrior does not seek war," Thor said, looking down. "I had to be banished to learn that. It is a good thing that you already do."

"My son speaks the truth," Odin said, looking at Clark. "I wanted to meet you so I could know what kind of man you truly were, to know if you were another mistake I needed to fix. And yet you proved yourself, not through battle, but through humility. I have seen, through Heimdall, your feats in Midgard." He pointed at Thor's hammer. "Mjölnir's power has no equal, as a weapon to destroy or as a tool to build. That was a lesson I taught Thor a long time ago, one which I had to remind him of recently. It is not about the power you have, but what you do with it."

Odin sat down behind the table.

"Now I will ask you to leave me, for I have research to do. The feasts cooked for the Convergence will serve for your welcoming, Kal-El, since apparently we have bigger issues at hand right now."

"Oh, you don't have to worry abo--"

"It is going to be incredible, Kal!" Thor said, smacking his back again. "We will eat like kings and drink like boars!" He looked at his father, smiling. "Or is it the other way around, father?"

Odin raised his one eye, looking menacing at Thor, but Clark could tell he was far from offended because Thor laughed.

"Thank you again for the gift, your Maj--"

"Call me Odin," he cut in, then he added, "One other thing, be careful with the Aether, you especially, Kal-El."

Clark stopped and turned to look at Odin, frowning.

"Why?"

The King of Asgard pointed at the book in his hands.

"You will find out when you read this book that the Asgardians weren't the only enemies of the Dark Elves. The Kryptonians fought them for thousands of years as well. The last battle led by my father was but the last step in a very long walk. The Kryptonians fought together with the Asgardians every step of the way until the Dark Elves were driven back at their Dark World and
finally defeated.

Odin looked at him pointedly.

"The Dark Elves had a special distaste for Kryptonians," he said. "They are made from darkness as much as you are made from light. Your kind is the highest form of heresy to them and the Aether will sense that. Keep that in mind."

Frigga led Jane through the palace halls, delighted in knowing the woman her son was so in love with. Odin might not approve, but Frigga could see how much Thor cared about her and how much she cared about him. Love was love, you couldn't and shouldn't fight it, no matter what other people might think about it.

"So, about your portal," started Jane and Frigga could barely contain her smile. The girl was truly shocked about magic. "You broke every single law of physics when you did that!"

The queen looked at Jane.

"Every law you know of," she said mysteriously. "It doesn't mean the laws you follow are completely right or that there aren't other laws at work."

"But–"

She threw her head back, laughing.

"My dear, I promise I will tell you all about it. If you'd like, I can even teach you some."

"Really?" she asked, her eyes lightened up. "Can anyone do that?"

"Any person can sing, but it doesn't mean they can sing well. We'll see where your talents lie. At worst you can at least learn how it works. But not right now," she said, gesturing at the servants. "Now you are going to clean yourself, put on a dress and prepare yourself for the feast."

"Like a welcoming feast?"

"No, a common feast," she corrected, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "Now go! We will speak again later."

Leaving Jane in her servant's capable hands, Frigga turned around and went to her own room, opening a portal to reach her chambers. Without sparing a glance around the room, Frigga looked at the mirror for a second.

Today had been a busy day, but it's a good one. Her son had brought his beloved and a new friend, a Kryptonian! She would have to teach him all about the old sorcerers of Krypton and the ancient tales, he would love that. There was only one thing missing in her day to make it perfect.

Her other son.

She sighed, knowing Loki wouldn't walk the halls of the palace unchained ever again. She missed him so much her heart hurt and it killed her to keep him in the cells with the other criminals. But liking it or not, that was what he was. And he didn't show any regret for what he did.

Frigga had no illusions that she and Odin, and even Thor, hadn't committed any mistakes. She knew they all did. But what Loki did in retaliation was unforgivable. Knowing that, however, did nothing to alleviate her pain. Only one thing would.
Closing her eyes, Frigga concentrated, feeling her mind slip out of her body and appearing in somewhere else.

"Hello, mother," Loki greeted without looking at her as her astral form appeared in the middle of his cell. He turned and smiled at her; a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I heard we have new guests."
Chapter 21 – Hakuna Matata

Lady Sif stepped through the Bifrost. Behind her, the chained Marauders, who were captured in Vanaheim, arrived with Fandral, Volstagg and the company of Einherjar.

Nodding to Heimdall, Sif continued her path through the Bifrost, leaving the Marauders in Fandral and Volstagg's care. The battle was finally over, it seemed. With the Bifrost repaired, the Asgardian army was able to restore peace swiftly, allowing the Nine Realms to continue in harmony once again. Still, as swiftly as it was, the battles were tiring and Sif was truly exhausted.

With Thor leaving in the middle of the campaign, it meant a longer battle. Still, Vanaheim was mostly back under their control by the time he left and Sif didn't exactly blame him for leaving, not when she found out the reason he had left. Kryptonians. Kryptonians had arrived in Midgard to wreak havoc and were stopped by another Kryptonian, one who lived his entire life in that very Realm.

Sif couldn't believe that had really happened. The Kryptonians had isolated themselves for so long that most Asgardians had never even seen one of them before and the chance to see one ever again fell to zero after they learned Krypton had imploded. Or so they thought. Apparently, they were wrong and that assumption nearly cost them Midgard and all humanity.

General Zod was a name that Sif had paid close attention over the years as had every Asgardian warrior. Krypton might be isolated, but there were always those that were either too brave or too stupid to try to invade their space. That never ended well. The things General Zod did over the years had resonated through the universe.

To see that same General Zod trying to invade Midgard was surprising, even more after the news of Krypton destruction. Knowing that Zod was defeated by another Kryptonian who lived his whole life in Midgard and fought to save humanity was shocking.

Sif was the first to admit that she didn't think much about Kryptonians. She knew by the myth and legends that they were unbelievably advanced and incredibly powerful under a yellow sun, but their culture was strange to her. Too formal, too closed off, too arrogant. According to the documentation, other life forms were barely worthy of note to Kryptonians. Zod was a famous example of that.

There were exceptions. There were Kryptonians in history who fought with the Asgardians against the threats to the universe, even against the wishes of their own council. There were those who sacrificed themselves to save "lower" life forms without hesitation. There were even those who went against their very own race in pursue of what was right.

The one who defeated Zod seemed to be like that. Kal-El, if the warrior's gossip was worth anything, was a Kryptonian raised by humans, the last of his kind now. It was a story worthy of legends and songs and Asgardians loved that kind of thing, so it was no surprise that word of his deeds traveled across the Realms. She wondered if Thor would bring him here. It would be interesting to meet a Kryptonian.

In a moment in which she was crossing the Bifrost over the city, one building exploded in a rain of
debris.

Sif turned to where the noise came from, unsheathing her sword, just in time to see a huge creature passing through the walls of a building. It was green, scaly, with four immense paws full of claws, massive horns and teeth. Right now, it was trampling everything in its path.

A bilgesnipe.

Sif readied herself to pursue the bilgesnipe, wondering who was the thundering imbecile allowing one of them to roam free in the middle of the town. Bilgesnipes were very strong beasts, incredibly destructive, violent and tough to bring down. These were excellent reasons for them not to allow them close to where people lived. Whoever managed to do that stupidity deserved to be trampled by it. Maybe death could heal them of that affliction.

Her question about who was involved in this mess said itself almost immediately.

"You are not a match for the mighty Thor!" a familiar voice yelled as she saw her old friend jumping from a building and falling on top of the bilgesnipe.

Sighing, Sif jumped to the streets, landed on the ground with absolute grace, her eyes never leaving Thor as he rode the bilgesnipe through the middle of the crowds. The people were jumping out of the way, tossing themselves anywhere to escape the unstoppable fury of the animal, as Thor laughed manically while he held its horns.

Visibly irritated with the Asgardian on its back, the bilgesnipe turned and went through a building, trying to shake him off. Both Thor and the beast broke through the stone wall, with a cloud of smoke rising. Sif ran in pursuit imagining how in the world they would stop that thing before the whole city fell apart.

Bilgesnipes were tough to hunt. When they started to trample, they didn't stop until they were dead or unconscious. Asgardians hunted them in teams and even so there were tricks to avoid people dying, tricks that they could hardly replicate in the middle of the city, even less with no help.

Thor and the bilgesnipe appeared through the other side of the building, leaving a trail of rubbles behind them. Thor laughed the whole time. They got out in the middle of the market, the huge paws destroying everything in sight, as Sif prepared herself to attack. Maybe if she could harm its legs, she could bring it down.

At the moment her muscles tensed for her to jump, there was a huge boom in the sky. Sif looked up just in time to see a blue blur sped through, colliding against the bilgesnipe's side with a thundering crack. Her eyes widened when the beast was tossed in the air alongside Thor, falling on its side.

In unbelievably speed, the man clad in blue began to immobilize the bilgesnipe, passing a truly thick chain around its neck while the beast tried to get up again.

"Thor, the hammer!" he yelled, tossing the chain in Thor's direction.

Thor grabbed the chain quickly, getting up much faster than the animal, and wrapped it around Mjölnir. The bilgesnipe managed to get up, roaring in fury, looking for the one who had tackled it. Finding its target, the bilgesnipe aimed and exploded forward, its paws breaking the ground.

When it was about to collide against the Kryptonian with all its strength, Thor dropped Mjölnir.

The chain whipped through the air—WHISH—as the Mjölnir remained unmoved in place, tightening itself against the bilgesnipe's throat with such strength that the beast fell back, breaking
the concrete. The beast glanced around, breathless, struggling to get up once again, and then looking confused as to why it couldn't move more than a few meters.

Sighing in relief, Sif sheathed her sword again as the people around began to cheer.

"HA! Good thinking, Kal!" Thor yelled, raising a fist to the Kryptonian. "I did nearly the same thing with my brother once!"

If Sif had any questions about the man in front of her, they were said now.

"You put a leash on your brother?" Kal asked, giving the raging bilgesnipe a wide berth.

"No, I just dropped the hammer on him," Thor said. "Long story."

"What are you fools doing?!" Sif asked loudly. Both of them turned to her in surprise, as did everyone around. "Do you want to bring the city down?"

"Sif! How good to see you again!" Thor said, completely ignoring her question. "Sif, let me introduce you to Kal-El, Savior of Midgard. Kal, this is Lady Sif, one of the greatest warriors I had the pleasure to fight with."

Catching her eyes, the Kryptonian raised his hand and approached to greet her, a smile on his lips. Giving Thor a last annoyed look, Sif turned to Kal.

"It is an honor to meet you, Kal-El," she said, shaking his hand.

"The honor is all mine, Lady Sif," he said, politely.

Sif nodded courteously and turned to Thor again, slapping his chest.

"Now answer me, what were you thinking?!"

"It wasn't my fault!" Thor defended himself. "It was a straggler from the herds, they thought it would be a good idea to capture it for the tournament."

"It really wasn't," Kal added, sighing.

"It got away quite quickly, I agree," Thor laughed. "Still, good fun!"

Fun? Sif wanted to beat him.

"What are they going to do with it?" the Kryptonian asked, eyeing the beast. "Not kill it, right?"

He sounded almost regretful when he said that. Sif couldn't imagine why; if that little display didn't show what a bilgesnipe was capable of, she didn't know what would take.

"No, there is no honor in killing a caged beast," Thor said, waving his hands. "We will fight it in the tournament, maybe, and then send it back to where it can't hurt anyone. No need to kill it."

Oh, yes, Thor also had a soft spot for huge, savage creatures, to the point where he actually tried to raise a bilgesnipe when they were children. "Bilgy" didn't seem interested in share their company, if the destruction it brought in the royal palace meant something.

Sometimes Sif thought she was the only sane person in their group.

"That's good, I never liked hurting animals," Kal said.
Said animal tried to attack him again, only to be stopped by the chain like last time and fell back.

"It doesn't seem to share your kindness," Sif said, turning to Thor with a smirk. "Anyway, remember to warn me when you try to reclaim your hammer. This will be interesting to watch."

Suddenly, Thor wasn't smiling anymore.

Clark was stunned about the day he was having. Not too long after meeting the King of Asgard, Thor took him to see the preparations for the Convergence's festival. The fields on the outskirts of the city were filled with tents and overflowing with people, bustling around. Warriors practicing hand to hand combat against each other, blacksmiths hammering the molten metal, music playing in the air. A big arena had been built too, taking the horizon view.

And, of course, there was a big cage holding the scariest animal Clark had ever seen. A bilgesnipe, Thor said, that had been captured for the safety of the people and, instead of being sent back to where it belonged, it would stay for a little longer, so the Asgardians could test themselves against it.

Needless to say that Clark didn't enjoy it. Dangerous or not, it was just an animal and he couldn't agree with fighting it. According to Thor, however, bilgesnipes thrived in conflicts just as Asgardians did and it was just so strong that it hadn't any chance of actually dying in a conflict against a single Asgardian.

Before Clark could say anything in response to that, he had a glimpse of how strong a bilgesnipe really was. Waking up from its slumber, the huge animal ripped off the energy barrier surrounding the cage as if it wasn't there and got out, trampling everything in its path. He and Thor jumped forward to help, Clark incredibly worried about the people being tossed up.

Thor, however, was laughing.

And he wasn't the only one. Instead of running away scared, the Asgardians began to throw themselves against the beast, laughing too, trying to wrestle it. The bilgesnipe easily tossed them away, even trampling some, but not even then the people stopped to attack it.

It took him a few seconds to remember he wasn't on Earth anymore.

Humans were fragile beings. A particularly hard fall could kill them quite easily. If that crowd he was seeing was composed of humans, they would all be dead by now; Asgardians, however, were sturdy. Clark saw them flying meters up in the air and crashing against the ground strongly enough to break it, only to get up laughing to try again. It was unbelievable. For the first time Clark was witnessing a race as strong as he was, living in a world where they didn't need to watch out for every single gesture they made in fear to break something.

It was a very weird thing to see. In a way, it was quite freeing.

Clark caught himself enjoying the chase through the city, not having to worry so much about the wellbeing of the citizens down there. Some of the buildings, of course, were destroyed by the bilgesnipe and the overzealous Asgardians, but nobody seemed concerned and soon enough Clark saw why: one of the first buildings to come down simply restored itself back together, the stones being pulled back to their previously places and fitting together once again.

They probably had a limit about the severity of the damage that they could restore themselves from, but something like a big animal trampling the city things seemed to be just fine. He didn't pretend to understand how that worked, be it was magic or technology, and he couldn't lie about
being curious. He had bigger things to worry about, things like the huge animal that had broken
those buildings in the first place.

Grabbing a truly thick chain close by, he took off to the sky, using his eyes to track the beast,
watching the Asgardians running behind it through the streets with Thor leading them. Following
the crowd, Clark saw Thor jumping all the way up to the roof of a building, running through it to
cut the path to the bilgesnipe; without a care in the world, the Prince jumped from the roof, falling
right on top of it, riding it as if he were a cowboy.

Clark smiled as he saw this. Well, it was time to join the hunt. Flying quickly, he aimed at the
bilgesnipe side and exploded down, knowing that a half-assed hit would just drop him instead, and
clashed against the big animal with strength, sending it and Thor flying away.

And then he laughed, without a worry in the world, knowing Thor would be just fine.

From there on, it was a matter of working together with Thor to chain the bilgesnipe again and
making sure it wouldn't run off. The people began to cheer, not in the least scared about what had
just happened, and Clark couldn't help but compare this behavior to Earth; if something like this
happened in New York, it would probably be a case serious enough for them to call the army.

It was then that Thor's friend, Lady Sif, arrived, ready to fight as well. Clark looked on curiously
as she talked to Thor for a while, being quite excited about seeing another figure from the myths of
old, the Goddess Sif in the flesh. Most of the stories were probably nonsense, of course, but that
didn't change the fact that she was incredibly famous, almost as much as Thor; she probably made
quite the impression on those little trips Thor and his friends took to Midgard.

Clark could see why. Sif was as deadly as she was beautiful. He couldn't help but to compare her to
Faora, another beautiful and dangerous warrior, but that was where the similarities ended. Sif didn't
have the cold eyes Faora had, nor she exuded that aura of pure arrogance and terror Faora did; even
knowing she was a warrior and probably a very lethal one, Sif didn't look like someone who killed
for pleasure. Quite the contrary, in her armor, she was the very picture of the medieval knights of
old, honored and esteemed, at least in the stories of course.

"So you are back from Vanaheim?" Thor asked as the Einherjar arrived to put the bilgesnipe back
in the cage. "Is it over?"

Clark listened to the conversation, seeing Sif nod.

"It is over. Fandral and Volstagg are taking the last of them to the dungeons. Hogun stayed, as you
know."

"Yes, he misses home," Thor said, smiling. "But we will still have many adventures together, I am
certain of it."

"Adventures," Sif sighed, rolling her eyes. "Last time we got in one of those 'adventures' we almost
started a war with the Frost Giants and you got banished."

"Yes! I can only imagine what we will do next!" Thor laughed, turning to Clark. "Can you even
think what we can accomplish with a Kryptonian by our side? Starting with our battle in the
tournament!"

Wait, what?

"Our battle in the tournament?" Clark asked, almost certain he had misheard it.
"I forgot to tell you!" Thor slapped his own forehead. "We are all in it. I have always wanted to fight a Kryptonian!"

Clark was having difficulty to find the words to explain that he didn't want, in any circumstance, to fight in a tournament, when Thor grabbed his shoulder.

"It will be a tale worthy of Asgard's stories!"

"T- Thor, I don't know how—"

"THOR!" a loud voice interrupted.

They all turned to see two men walking through the crowd. One of them, the one who yelled, was the very picture of what most thought a Viking would look like. Tall, strong, with long hair and beard of a vivid red and a huge axe strapped on his back. The other was tall too, but slender, with blond hair, a mustache and goatee, intelligent eyes and a handsome face.


"Oh, yes, the Kryptonian!" said Volstagg and then his face acquired an excited expression. "Are you here for the tournament?!"

Jesus Christ, what was the deal these people had with this tournament?! As if reading his mind, Sif deadpanned: "We like to fight."

"Like? We love it!" Volstagg laughed then stopped once he saw Clark silent. "You don't?"

"Well, no, not unless it's absolutely necessary, really," Clark said.

Thor, Volstagg and Fandral turned to look at him, jaws agape. Clark truly didn't understand why they were so surprised.

"But you were the one who defeated Zod!" Volstagg retorted. "We all saw Heimdall's memories of that fight, it was amazing!"

"It was truly inspiring," Fandral agreed, nodding sagely.

"I fought to stop him from killing everybody on Earth," Clark said, solemn. "Thousands of people died, many more lost their homes and everything they had. There was nothing inspiring about it."

Silence fell when he said that. Thor, Volstagg, Fandral and Sif stared at him.

"You are right," Thor finally said, sobering up. "Sometimes we forget Earth is not ready for these kinds of conflicts." He looked at Clark. "But what you did was inspiring."

"Thor is right," Sif added. "If it weren't for you, Midgard would be gone and Asgard would be fighting another war right now."

Volstagg touched his shoulder.

"I am sorry for my careless words, but know that I truly value what you did."

"As do I," Fandral said.

"And that is why I signed you in this tournament," Thor said.
Clark turned to him, confused.

"What do you mean?"

"Kal, have you ever fought for fun?" Thor asked. "Used your strength not to save people, but to
unwind a little bit? To relax?"

No, Clark had not. How could he, when a single twitch of his fingers could kill someone? If there
was one thing he was good at, that was control. Clark, in every moment of his life, kept himself
under control, so he wouldn't destroy everything around him.

The fight against Zod was the first time he had used all his gifts, but there was nothing "relaxing"
happening at that time.

"I haven't," he said, slowly.

Thor smiled and slapped his shoulder again.

"You are in Asgard, my friend. Forget about your worries for a bit. Here you are among beings a
little stronger than in Midgard. Relax."

Clark was ready to disagree, but then the bilgesnipe chase crossed his mind. Thor was right,
Asgardians didn't need his help. Here he didn't have to worry about bumping into someone and
sending him to the hospital, touching a wall and turning it into dust, snapping his fingers
accidentally and piercing someone's eardrums with the sound. For the first time in his life, he didn't
feel like a bull in a china shop.

"I don't know how to fight," he said, lamely.

Thor's smile got even wider.

"Oh, do not worry about that. We can solve that quite easily."

Tony looked around the building with disdain on his face.

"Is this what the slums look like?" he asked, looking at Pepper. "I mean, I knew it would be bad,
but this is terrible!"

Pepper sighed and rolled her eyes.

"It's just a cheap building, Tony," she said. "You know he is not rich."

"He is!"

"Maybe now, but I don't see him spending money to go live in Malibu."

"Well, at least he is bullet proof, right? I'm really scared about Happy down there. Someone will
stab him for sure."

"All the more reason for us to move fast, then," Pepper said, stopping in front of Clark's apartment.
"Do you have his key?"

It was Tony's turn to roll his eyes.

"Of course I don't, but that is easily fixed," he said, taking a little cylinder from his pocket.
Pressing a small button on the cylinder, Tony stuck it into the keyhole of the apartment. As if coming to life, the little cylinder began to open, revealing several tiny arms, holding itself alone and beginning to pick the lock with amazing speed. In less than 10 seconds, they heard a click and Tony opened the door.

Pepper might have said it was just a cheap place, but Tony was shocked that Clark really lived here. This was the guy who was most definitely the strongest man on the planet, possessor of tech that cost more than his own and – his ego almost made him bury this thought – the most famous person on Earth at the moment.

And he lived in a dump. One thing he could agree upon was how little Clark cared about money and fame; Pepper would say it was a good thing, but he wasn't that sure.

Looking at Pepper, Tony could see the disapproval on her face as well, even if much more concealed than his own. Pepper could talk a lot, but she was used to the finest things in life, there was no denying that. So maybe it wasn't a back alley, but it was way less than any of them was accustomed.

He opened his mouth to say that when they heard a toilet flushing; both of them turned to the direction the sound was coming. There was someone inside the apartment. Very carefully, Tony put his hand inside his pocket, retrieving the small repulsor glove. He had no idea what a thief could steal from this place, but he wasn't about to let that happen.

The bathroom's door swung opened with such a force that caused it to bounce against the wall, and Tony immediately stepped in front of Pepper. A woman came out, wearing only panties and an old t-shirt. And then she looked at them.

"Who the fuck are you?!" she asked, sneering, and not waiting for an answer, she continued, "You know what, it doesn't matter. You have 10 seconds to leave through that door before I make you leave through the window."

"Wait!" Pepper said, raising her hands in the air. "We are not robbers! We--"

"I don't give a shit about who you are," the woman interrupted. "You are trespassing."

"So are you," Tony said, looking around. "This isn't your place."

The woman stared at him and stepped forward, a very intimidating expression on her face for someone of that size; Tony caught himself stepping back.

"Wait, I'm Tony Stark!" he said, before he was forced to use his repulsor on the girl.

The woman slapped on the light switch. The woman stared at his face.

"You really are that Iron-Dude," she finally said.

Tony gave her a winning smile.

"See, there is no reason for viol--"

"You have 5 seconds to get out."

God dammit! Tony opened his mouth to speak again, knowing for certain he could say something to make her stand down, but Pepper didn't seem to agree with him, because she stepped from behind him.
"How do you know Clark?" she asked.

The woman turned her eyes to Pepper.

"Neighbors," she said. Then she smirked. "And how do you know Clark, Mr. Iron-Briefs?"

Well, what the hell was he supposed to say now? That he knew her neighbor because he happened to also be Superman?

"He is, uh, my personal reporter!" he babbled.

Both the woman and Pepper looked at him with disbelief.

"What is that even supposed to mean?! Does he write stories about you? Does he take pictures? What is it?"

"He, uh, he does all those things, of course. That's what a personal reporter does. All that. Clark is--"

"You know he is Superman, don't you?" Pepper suddenly said and Tony felt his heart stop beating for a second.

He turned to the woman, ready to see the incredulity on her face, but there wasn't any. She wasn't surprised or scared, she was just looking at Pepper, a single eyebrow raised.

Suddenly, she gave a little laugh.

"And people say he is the smart one?" she mocked; Tony was offended, even more when Pepper laughed as well.

"When it comes to his inventions, he has no match. When it comes to anything else…"

"When the hell did you two teamed up against me?!" Tony said.

"Hush, dear, women are talking," Pepper said. "So, how did you find out your neighbor is Superman? And does he know you know?"

The woman sighed.

"When I met him he wasn't Superman. There was no Superman. I just saw a guy being hit by a car and turning the car into scrap. I confronted him, broke my hand on his chin and then one thing led to another and I'm here."

It was a terrible story, but she clearly had no idea how to build suspense.

"What is your name?" Pepper asked. "I'm Pepper, by the way."

"I know who you are, my sister, Trish, talks about you a lot."

Wait a second.

"Are you Trish's sister? Jessica?" Pepper said and Tony was feeling a bit left out.

"Yep, in the flesh," Jessica deadpanned. "So, what are you two doing here? Trying to be robbed? Hell's Kitchen changed a lot since The Incident, it isn't that safe to walk here without that fancy suit of yours."
Tony swallowed, feeling Pepper's fingers holding his own for a second. If there was one thing he didn't like, then that would be remembering all the terrible consequences of the Battle of New York. Still, that was hard to do when he was in the epicenter of it.

"Clark is in Asgard with Thor," Tony said and Jessica's eyes widened for a second. "We wanted to take this as a chance to see where he was liv--"

"Wait a minute, he is in Asgard??" Jessica interrupted, pissed. "He told me he would warn me!"

Okay, that was weird. Were they dating?

"Are you da--"

"We are not dating, damn it!"

"Alright, jeez, it was just a question!" Tony tried to calm her. "Anyway, Clark had to go to Asgard, there was a problem with Thor's girlfriend and he went there to help, at least that was what Romanoff told me. So I took this opportunity to check where Clark lived."

"Why?" Jessica asked. "What's it to you?"

That woman was very aggressive, Tony finally realized.

"We just wanted to help," Pepper said, before Tony could say anything else. "We know he doesn't have much money, so--"

"So you came to check the slums where he lived?" Jessica said.

"Ye--" Pepper elbowed his ribs before he could finish. "I mean, no."

Jessica Jones got closer. Tony was taller than her, he had his repulsor glove in his pocket and he had faced truly scary enemies over the course of his hero career. And yet, for some reason, he was feeling a tiny bit intimidated right now.

"Get out," she said.

And then she turned her back to them, obviously waiting for them to leave. But of course he wouldn't.

"I would, but turns out the entire building is mine," he retorted. Jessica stopped and turned slowly. "I bought it on a whim, didn't really spend much, but hey? It's the right market to buy in Hell's Kitchen."

Jessica turned again, looking at him with eyes that sworn to bring fury and hell. He felt Pepper poking him so he would be quiet.

"We were planning to surprise Clark. Renovate the whole place, make it sparkle!" he continued, looking at Jessica. "Maybe I could be convinced to renovate two apartments instead, if you know a cool neighbor here in the building, of course."

She stopped, no longer looking threatening, but interested.

"I'm listening."

"Punch me," Volstagg said, looking Clark in the eye. "Go ahead, punch me!"
Clark could only stare at the crazy Asgardian in front of him. After the bilgesnipe was once again secured and Thor had retrieved his hammer, the four of them went back to the outskirts of the city, continued to oversee the preparations. Of course, apparently, that was just an excuse to bring Clark here and force him to fight them.

"I don't want to hurt you!" Clark said, exasperated, for the 1000th time.

"You are not going to hurt me! I can take it! Punch me, come on!"


"He will not stop pestering you," Fandral added.

"Go ahead, Kal, you are not going to hurt him," Thor said, stifling a laugh.

Clark sighed, looking down. He closed his hand into a fist.

"Okay, one."

"YES!" Volstagg laughed. "A strong one!"

Volstagg prepared himself, offering his face so Clark could punch him; he couldn't help but to sigh again. What exactly was he doing?! Preparing himself, still not sure about this, Clark raised his fist and punched him.

The sound of his knuckles hitting Volstagg's face echoed through the outskirts of the city and Volstagg had to retreat five steps back so he wouldn't fall. Okay, Clark had punched him, now it was over.

But of course it wasn't.

"You call that a punch?!" Volstagg said. "My grandmother could punch stronger and I mean that literally! She would knock me out frequently!"

"You could do better," Sif said, and Clark looked at her, annoyed. "What? I speak the truth."

"Just punch him, Kal," Thor said again, a hand on his shoulder. "We are Asgardians, you will not hurt us. Just let yourself go for a moment."

Let himself go? Could he really do that? Clark didn't know. To actually punch someone who hadn't done anything to deserve it, to risk a serious injury. He wouldn't be injured, Thor said. Maybe, just once, he could try.

Closing his hand into a fist again, Clark dug his feet into the ground, preparing his stance. He looked into Volstagg's eyes, feeling his own muscles contracting, feeling the energy surrounding his body, and then he punched him again, this time hard.

BOOOOM!

Like a cannon firing, it echoed. Clark felt his hand colliding against Volstagg's face with power, the air actually simmering around them, the grass, his cape, his hair swaying with the impact. This time Volstagg was sent flying in the air, gaining speed like a missile until he crashed against a building, the stone walls breaking with a BANG!

No words spoke from Thor and his cohorts. Everybody just stared at him and Clark himself couldn't move, just looking at where his punch sent Volstagg. Slowly, he turned and looked at
Thor who was also glued to where Volstagg was.

"That was awesome!" Thor yelled, laughing like crazy.

His words seemed to break everyone from their stupors and everybody began to cheer and laugh.

"Is he okay?" Clark asked in a low voice to the only one who wasn't cheering, Sif.

The Asgardian woman had a shocked expression on her face, her jaw agape, but she shook her head slowly.

"Volstagg has a hard head, I am certain he will be fine."

In the exact moment, the entire building collapsed on top of Volstagg.

All of them ran toward the fallen building, ready to dig Volstagg out from the pile of debris. Clark remained in daze, still not believing in what he had just done.

"Do not worry, my friend!" Thor said. "Volstagg will be just fine!"

"That was an incredible punch, by the way," Fandral said.

"Not now, Fandral!" Sif said.

They removed the stones, each and every one of them lifting huge piles of debris with ease and tossing them to the side. Clark used his x-ray vision to find Volstagg and jumped there. That's when the whole thing began to vibrate, like a small earthquake.

It took him almost a minute to understand that Volstagg was laughing.

The stones flew apart and then Volstagg stood tall, laughing and coughing at the same time, trying to dust himself.

"Great punch, Kal-El!" he said as soon as he could, massaging the bruise on his face, that was already fading. "I don't think even Thor's hammer could be that strong!"

"Of course it can!" Thor cut in, then smiling at Clark. "I would very much like to try it against you! It is decided, Kal: I will teach you how to fight and we will face each other in the tournament!"

"No." Clark was surprised because he wasn't the one who said that, Sif was. She looked at Thor and then at him. "I will teach him how to fight."

"What?! No, Sif, I said it first!" Thor said.

"You are a brawler, Thor!" Sif said and Clark could only stare as both of them decided that for him, without even bothering to ask if he wanted to fight in the first place. "He does not need strength or speed, he already has too much of that. What he need is technique. I can teach him that way better than anyone else."

Clark didn't understand what was happening anymore. It seemed he was participating on that tournament agreeing with it or not.

"I have a lot of technique," Fandral objected. "Why shouldn't I have the honor to train the Kryptonian?"

"And what about me?" Volstagg asked.
"Ha! And what would you teach him, Volstagg? How to get punched and destroy buildings with your own head?" Fandral laughed.

Before anyone could say anything else, however, Sif took front.

"It is already decided!"

And so it was, Clark accepted, too dazed to say anything.

"The universe rotates in a 5000 years cycle and once a cycle all the worlds align!" Doctor Erik Selvig said, pointing at drawings of the Realms on the blackboard.

He ran off and picked up a shoe from somewhere. "Imagine, imagine this is our world. And this – oh, thank you! – is another world," he said, picking up another shoe and holding one in each hand. "Normally they are separate. But during the Alignment," he said, putting one on top of the other, "everything is connected, all Nine Realms. All Nine Realms are passing through each other and gravity, light and even matter is crashing from one world to the other."

He hit one shoe against it other, as if to demonstrate what would happen, and went back to the blackboard.

"But if this happens to us now, the result would be cataclysmic," Selvig continued, picking up a pair of pencils from the table. "My gravimetric spikes can stabilize the focal point of the Convergence. With them, the Alignment and all the other worlds would just pass us by. It's beautiful. It's simple. Any questions?"

Natasha raised her hand. If anyone ever told her she would be sitting in an asylum, amongst several mental patients, listening to a confused astrophysicist give a speech about the alignment of the Nine Realms of the Norse Mythology, Natasha would say they were out of their minds.

But such were the times.

"What will happen if we don't use the gravimetric spikes?" she asked, behaving as if she was in a classroom, Darcy sitting at her side.

"Excellent question!" Selvig said, pointing at her. "Five points to Gryffindor! See what I did there? Anyway, like I said, it would be catastrophic. Each Realm has its own environment. Jotunheim, for example, is colder than any place we have on Earth. Imagine if the barriers between the Realms cease to exist and Earth comes into contact with those winds? Depending where they hit, we could lose entire oceans or continents to a new Ice Age!"

Selvig seemed extremely agitated, going from one side to the other, not wearing any pants.

"Or worse, imagine if a city comes into contact with Muspelheim?!" he continued. "The Realm of the Fire Giants, a world of fire! Millions could die! That's without taking into account the indigenous life forms that could pass through. Creatures from other Realms, maybe even whole armies could end up here by accident!"

That did not sound good at all, Natasha had to agree.

"And your gravimetric spikes can stop that?" Natasha asked.

"Yes! Well, maybe. Actually they can't!" Selvig said.
"Make up your mind, Selvig!" Darcy said.

"They can't stop the Convergence, that is impossible," Selvig said. "But they can limit the amount of contact our Realm will have with the others. Instead of allowing the entire borders disappear, we will restrict it to a single place, a single focal point. It will work like, like a containment field, not allowing the Convergence to reach its full potential."

"And where will this focal point be?" Natasha asked. "Where is the center?"

"Here, of course!" Selvig said, laughing. "What else would I be doing in England?"

"Says the guy in the mental hospital," Darcy whispered.

Natasha didn't answer, too busy taking her cellphone and making a call.

"Fury, we have a big problem," she said, as soon as he said. "Yes, I know you don't like it, I don't like it either, but it is our job. I'm going to need backup here in London. Yes, a science team as well."

She turned to Selvig.

"Doctor, you are coming with me. We need your expertise."

"It would be my pleasure!"

"Don't forget your pants!" Darcy yelled. "And give the shoes back to their respectively crazy owners!"

Natasha sighed as Fury talked incessantly. She began to miss the old days when all she had to do was killing people.

"Hello, Mother," Loki said, a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I heard we have new guests."

Frigga looked at her son. "We do."

"Yes, I've heard. A Kryptonian! The last one." He looked at her. "And your son's lover. How proud are you that Asgard's Heir decided to bring a mortal to this palace, I wonder. Well, it is not like she will be a problem for much longer, will she? We all know how quick mortals are to die."

"We are not better than them, Loki."

Loki sneered. At that moment, the doors to the prisons opened, allowing a big groups of captured Marauders to go in, all of them chained and guarded by the Einherjar.

"Odin continues to bring me new friends," Loki said, glanced at them. "How thoughtful."

"The books I sent, do they not interest you?" Frigga asked, pointing at the piles of books in the cell.

"Is that how I am to while away eternity? Reading?" Loki asked.

"I've done everything in my power to make you comfortable, Loki."

"Have you?" He leaned over the table to look at her. "Does Odin share your concern? Does Thor? It must be terribly inconvenient, them asking after me day and night." Loki laughed mirthlessly. "And now you have a new visitor in these halls, someone to brighten up the shadows I brought."
My, you are even making him a feast!"

"You know full well it was your actions that brought you here," Frigga said, her lips tightened into a thin line.

"My actions? I was merely giving truth to the lie that I been fed my entire life, that I was born to be a king."

"A king? A true king admits his faults. I have heard you blame every single person in this Realm for your actions, but never yourself. What of the lives you took on Earth?"

"A mere handful compared to the number that Odin has taken himself!" Loki retorted.

"Your father—"

"HE IS NOT MY FATHER!" Loki shouted.

Frigga only stared at her son sadly.

"Then am I not your mother?"

Loki held her gaze for a long time and then finally said: "You are not."

The Queen of Asgard gave a mirthless laugh.

"You are always so perceptive about everyone but yourself." She turned her back at him for a moment. "Our guest, the Kryptonian? You two were not so different once upon a time. Both of you were adopted by parents that loved you more than anything. Both of you grew up to be incredible men."

Frigga looked at Loki again.

"And yet he risked his life to save a people that was not his own and you are in a cell for killing that same people because you cannot consider them equals."

She walked to him, raising her hands and touching his cheek. As she did, her astral body lost form, beginning to fade.

"Choices, Loki, choices. Take responsibility for what you have done and maybe one day you can redeem yourself. Or stay here, in this cell, blaming everybody but yourself for this. There comes a time you have to choose what kind of man you want to be. I know you can do better. But I worry you do not."

Saying that, her astral form disappeared.

"DRINK, DRINK, DRINK!"

Clark downed the tall mead mug, the contents burning his throat; that was something he had never, ever, imagined he would feel. For all his life Clark thought he was immune to alcohol. Apparently, that only happened with Midgardian alcohol. Asgardian alcohol, aged for thousands of years in barrels made from fleets wrecks, were enough to make him tipsy.

Did he know that when he started to drink? No. Would he still drink if he knew that? His first answer would be "no", but he couldn't exactly lie and say he wasn't curious about drinking Asgardian alcohol.
Well, here he was just one more man drinking mead. And Clark was happy about it. Thor was right, he had to stop worrying for a bit. Share the load, stop carrying the world on his back.

"You should slow down, Kal-El," Sif said, looking at him, her pale face slightly rosy from the drinks. "As I understand you have never tried these before, right? There is no way you can beat me, then."

It was a challenge and drunken Clark did not back down from a challenge; another new characteristic he learned about himself. What a curious thing, Clark thought, as he raised yet another mug to his mouth, Sif copying him. The table was full of empty mugs and the women serving the food and the drinks would quickly replace them again, only for him and Sif to drink once more.

"You don't know who you are dealing with, Lady Sif," Clark bragged, his voice slurred. "I am Kal-El, Superman, last son of Krypton!"

"SUPERMAN, SUPERMAN, SUPERMAN!"

"See, they know what's up!" he laughed.

"We want someone to beat her!" Fandral said, as he flirted with a beautiful woman. "Volstagg was the one who got closer, but Sif is undefeated. It cannot stand!"

"You wish, Fandral!" Sif barked back, drinking another mug.

"Give him another!" yelled Volstagg.

Clark lost count of how many mugs he had drank. For the first time in his life, his vision was blurred and his coordination was impaired. And yet he was laughing. He didn't even know why, but he felt quite happy. Looking at his side, he saw Sif holding a mug while she looked up, a grimace on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Ready to give up?"

She didn't answer and Clark followed her eyes to see what she was staring at. In the second floor of the feast hall he could see Thor and Jane holding each other, talking softly and occasionally kissing. His mind slowed because of the drink, so Clark took a while to understand the look on Sif's face, but eventually he understood: she was jealous.

"You like Thor?" he whispered.

"It is none of your business!" she snarled, drinking her mead.

Clark nodded. Any other time he wouldn't pursue this line of questioning. Any other day he would just drop it and allow Sif to keep her answers. But not this day, because this day Clark was a little bit drunk.

"You know, Thor is a great guy. I mean, I don't know him that much, but I can tell," Clark said to a grumpy Sif who remained silent. He looked at her. "But so are you. I mean, a great girl, of course. You know what I mean. You are a warrior, really cool, you have a thousand years of martial training, you fought in wars across the Nine Realms! And you are so beautiful!"

Sif was looking at him now, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

"And I know you are probably not happy about Thor dating Jane," Clark continued. "No one likes
when a loved one starts to go out with other people. I was really jealous when Lana started dating too! But you shouldn't think that you lost. Nobody lost anything here. Thor found happiness in Jane, Jane found happiness in him and you will find happiness with someone too, it's only a matter of time."

Lady Sif stared at him for a long time. After a few minutes, Sif gave him a huge smile.

"Maybe you are right."

Clark groaned when his eyes opened. His head was killing him. He felt like the World Engine had tossed him in the middle of the blue beam of death again, because he could actually feel his head pulsing. Was this a hangover? Why did humans drink?! Shaking, almost not able to lift his arm, Clark extended a single finger towards a ray of sunshine entering through the balcony. As the tip of his finger touched the light, he began to feel the energy thrumming through his vein.

Relieved, Clark turned, looking around, feeling the soft sheets under him. He didn't remember everything that happened last night, but he was pretty certain he hadn't fought anybody. Yet the appearance of the room was that of a battlefield. There was a hole in the wall, like a body had been tossed through it. The ceiling was cracked, the tables were broken, and the floor had the marks of a person's body. Eyes wide, Clark looked around, searching for the source of all that destruction, his jaw dropped when he finally looked at his bed.

Sleeping peacefully by his side, not a single piece of clothing to cover her body, was Lady Sif.
"Oh my god!" Clark whispered, his heart beginning to beat so fast that he might have a heart attack if he were human. As quickly as he could, he lifted the sheet and covered Sif, in any moment actually looking at her very evident nakedness.

What in the name of everything that was holy had happened?! Jumping from the bed, Clark looked around, searching for anything to cover his own naked body, settling for a ripped sheet tossed on the ground, all the while trying to remember how he came to be in this situation. And little by little, pieces of memory came into one.

Clark had flashes of kissing Sif, tasting the mead in her mouth, their hands exploring each other bodies. He remembered ripping her clothes apart, the metal of her armor bending under his fingers, and then she grinning as she pushed him against the wall with strength enough to turn the stones into dust; he remembered liking that quite a lot for some reason.

There was no gentleness, no romance, no holding back. There wasn't anything in his memories that indicated any semblance of self-control. It was just… raw passion. Pure desire and lust. Nothing that Clark had even remotely experienced before in his life. And right now he wasn't sure what to do.

Before he could reach a decision, however, the choice was taken from him.

"Are you done – how do they say in Midgard these days? – 'freaking out'?” asked Sif.

Without thinking, Clark turned to look at her, turning his eyes to the ceiling immediately when confronted with her, once again, naked body.

"Uh, Sif, I-I can see your, I mean–"

"Argh, just look at me!" Sif demanded, suddenly jumping forward and pulling the sheet he was using to cover himself, ripping it apart. "See, now we are both bare. Sit down."

Clark couldn't know for sure, but he was pretty certain he was blushing all over right now. Looking at Sif's face, and only her face, Clark slowly, carefully, sat down back on the bed, ignoring her not as contained roaming eyes. Raising her eyes, she looked back at his face, getting closer from him on the bed; he made a conscious effort not to back out again.

"Now, what is the problem?” Sif asked. "You did not seem this shy last night. Do not tell me this was your first time because no one can be that good at--""

"It was not my first time!" Clark interrupted, getting even more embarrassed, even if a bit proud. "I mean, I had a girlfriend before, but we never… I mean, we did, but not before we knew each other well!"

"So what is the problem? Is it me?” Sif asked, almost challenging him.

"No, of course not!" Clark guaranteed as fast as he could. "Sif, you are great, any men would–"
"Then why?" she cut him off.

Clark sighed.

"I never… I never did this before."

Sif frowned.

"You just said—"

"I've had sex before! But this? Drinking and-and just spending the night together… We aren't dating! We met yesterday! I feel like I'm taking advantage of you!"

He realized he said the wrong thing a millisecond later after the words had left his mouth.

"Taking advantage of me?!!" Sif roared, her face almost touching his. "If you had touched me without my permission you would know, Kal-El! Do you know how? Because you would not have that hand anymore!" She looked down, quite deliberately. "And you would also be lacking something else."

Instinctively, Clark took both hands to cover his groin.

"That hole in the wall? It is there because I tossed you through it! Inside the room, over the bed!" Sif continued, still very much angered. "Nothing that happened here last night, not a single thing, happened against my will. Did it happen against yours?!"

"No!" Clark answered fast, but truthfully.

"Then we were both here because we wanted to," Sif stated. "And we did what we wanted to. So I ask again: what is the problem?"

Clark sighed again. There was no problem, not really, just his own culture and morals clashing against Sif's different ones. He was taught by his family to be a gentleman, to value women and to treat them with the utmost respect; except Clark was realizing just now that respect might mean different things to different people.

"I'm sorry, Sif," Clark said, looking back at her. "I shouldn't have freaked out. It's just… Different cultures, I guess. From where I come from, to sleep with a woman without being in a relationship, without loving each other or without the intention of getting in a relationship with her would be, well, wrong."

"If they both wanted it, why would it be wrong?" Sif asked.

"I-I don't know," Clark answered, shrugging. "It's just the way it is. Not everyone thinks like that, of course, but that was how I was taught." He looked at her. "It's not like this here, is it? I mean, you don't want to date me, do you? Because—"

"I have no interest in 'dating' anyone, Kal!" Sif clarified, raising her voice again. But before she started getting mad again, she looked in his eyes for a second; whatever she saw there made her anger disappear. "Kal, not everything has to be so serious. This? We do not have to be married or to love each other to enjoy each other's company. Friendship, companionship, the respect among equals… Sometimes those are enough."

As she said this, Sif touched his face; Clark didn't shy away from her touch. Maybe, just maybe, she was right. Nobody had taken advantage of anybody here. They were both consenting adults,
both more than fully capable of taking care of themselves. And they both respected each other greatly, even if they didn't know each other for a long time.

Clark didn't even realize what he was doing when he leaned and kissed her.

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Thor was sitting at the long table in the dining hall with Jane by his side, his mother in front of him and his father at the head of the table. The room brightened in sheers of gold under glowing lights as the servants walked around, carrying the food and the drinks for the breakfast. The hall was full of people, warriors filling their stomachs to begin the day, and in any other time the room would be echoing with loud voices.

There wasn't a single person talking at that moment, however, as everybody looked up, to see the chandeliers swinging to one side to the other as the entire room trembled. The drinks in the mugs were shaking and even the silverware was clattering against the plates. There was a little bit of dust falling from the ceiling in regular intervals.

"Thor, let's take a walk?" Jane suggested, her eyes wide as she looked up. "Please!"

Yes, a walk seemed like a good idea right now; if things were like the night before, Kal and Sif wouldn't come down for breakfast so soon. As if the people in the room were waiting for a signal, when Thor got up everybody did the same. Some were shocked like Jane was, some were impressed, some were laughing and gossiping. Odin left with his mother, shaking his head and murmuring he was too old for this, as Frigga guided him across the halls with an amused expression.

Despite the unsuitable setting to have breakfast with friends and family that this situation provided, Thor was quite happy with what happened. Despite what people may think, he wasn't blind to Sif's feelings towards him. Once upon a time they had been more than friends and if he hadn't met Jane he might have cared about her like that once again, but right now he simply didn't. And it pained him to see Sif suffer because of this.

Sif was one of his best friends, maybe the best he ever had. Someone who always treated him not as a Prince, but as she would treat anyone, not afraid to hit him on the head when he deserved or to say things he didn't want to hear, but needed to. So naturally he wanted only the best for her. He wanted her to be happy.

He wasn't foolish enough to think Kal and Sif loved each other, at least not yet. He knew quite well that the source of these recent "earthquakes" had nothing to do with love. But maybe it could grow into something in the future. Or maybe it wouldn't, Thor didn't know, but the very fact that Sif had found someone to be with, even if for a little while, was a good indicative that she was getting over him. That made him glad. Sif deserved happiness. And so did Kal.

"My god, don't they get tired?!!" muttered Jane, when the window they were just passing cracked.

"Well, those are the perks of sleeping with an Asgardian," Thor whispered in her ear, kissing her temple and making her giggle. "We do not tire easily."

"Stop it!" Jane laughed, slapping his chest. "You are terrible, Thor!"

Thor smiled back and lifted her, carrying her like a princess through the hallway, as she pretended to fight him. It was good to be with her, here, in Asgard; he just wished it were under better circumstances. Thor was doing his best to remain calm, to not panic and end up scaring Jane, but it was a difficult thing to do. There was an Infinity Stone inside Jane and it was feeding on her life
And they had no idea how to take it out.

 Granted, it had been only a day since they started looking for ways to remove the Aether, but not even Frigga and Odin had found the answers they needed yet. And if his parents didn't know about it, the number of people who had this knowledge had to be small indeed, if they existed at all.

Jane wasn't showing signs of debilitation, but that was a matter of time. She was mortal, her body wasn't strong enough to sustain an Infinity Stone for long. Not even an Asgardian could, especially this particular stone, even though their physiology would resist much better. The Aether was forged by the Dark Elves, to be used by them; only they could use the Aether without fear of being consumed and even then, only the strongest amongst them.

Holding Jane as close as he could, Thor walked through the hallway, going outside the palace. He didn't know what to do right now, except trust his parents.

"Your mother told me she would teach me how to do magic," Jane said, when they finally left the palace. "Do you know how to do it?"

"Only a little bit," Thor admitted. "My brother was always more talented than me when it came to the magic arts. I was always more of a–"

"Big guy who likes to beat people with a hammer?" Jane completed.

"I was going to say warrior, but they are pretty much the same," Thor laughed.

"I still can't believe magic exists. Real magic! How wonderful is the universe?"

"I told you magic was real."

"You agreed with me when I said magic was just science we don't understand!" Jane complained. Thor honestly didn't understand the difference.

"But it is," he said.

Jane just groaned.

"I know it is! But not like I was thinking!"

"How did you think my hammer worked?" Thor asked, smiling.

"Argh, I don't know! How does it work?" Jane asked and Thor suddenly lost his smile.

"It, uh, draws strength from other dimensions and from myself."

"But how?"

"It is enchanted," Thor answered.

"Enchanted how?" Jane asked, grinning.

Thor sighed.

"You will have to ask my mother."
"I rest my case!" Jane exclaimed.

Maybe Thor did need some lessons in magic.

Time was a relative concept. Steve certainly didn't feel he was away from London that long, but in truth decades had passed since he stepped in the city. It showed; the place was completely different from what he remembered, exactly like New York was. It was like looking at another place completely.

Last time, there was damage from the war in the streets. Collapsed buildings from the aerial attacks made against the city. The buildings weren't so tall as they were now and there weren't that many cars in the streets, certainly not the same modern looking models. Clothes, obviously, were changed, fashion evolving like everything else.

And, of course, there was the small fact that he was here because of something called "The Convergence", a natural and rare event when the boundaries of the Nine Realms faded and all worlds were joined together.

If that didn't show how things were different in his life, Steve didn't know what would.

"Why are the gravimetric spikes taped together?" Steve heard Tony asking Selvig nearby. "The pieces are literally being held together with duct tape!"

"We must do what we can with what we have," Selvig answered sagely. "I learned that in the asylum."

Steve could definitely understand the sceptic look Tony had in his eyes right now.

"We can worry about that later," Bruce said, before Tony could open his mouth. "Let's just make sure they work."

Bruce's interruption seemed to work and the three of them, plus a whole SHIELD's science team, went on their way, learning what they would have to do. He still wasn't sure exactly why he was here – it wasn't like he could even pretend to understand the science behind what was about to happen – however, Fury had insisted so there he was, at the Old Royal Naval College, in the Greenwich borough of London.

"Bored?" Natasha asked, seemingly appearing out of thin air from behind him. "Clint was almost catatonic last time I saw him."

Steve turned fast, looking at the red haired spy approaching, walking the beautiful and very old hallway of the building.

"No, no, just confused as to what exactly I'm doing here," Steve answered. "Especially when I found out I'm here because a certain someone requested me."

Natasha just smiled, leaning on the window by his side.

"Call it a guess that we'll need Captain America here," she said.

He frowned.

"Are we expecting a battle?"

"Always," she grinned. "Right now though? I hope not. But you know how these 'space doorways'
are, don't you?"

Steve had experience with one "space doorway", really, but in his opinion it was more than enough to last a lifetime.

"Point taken," he sighed.

Both of them were in silence for a few moments, just watching the view from the window; of course that didn't last. Steve could hear the amusement in her voice before she even talked.

"So, Steve, tell me," Natasha began, turning to look at him. "Any beautiful British girl caught your eye?"

And there it was. For some reason, Natasha had gotten into her head that it was her job to find him a girlfriend. He could appreciate the effort in trying to make him at home in this new time, but Natasha had taken that to a whole new level. Honestly, Steve wasn't ready to date anyone yet and he was sure Natasha knew that; no way not to, being that good at reading people as she was.

Steve was beginning to think that was just her way of pranking him, to make him feel like one of them. Just friends joking around. And deep down, even if sometimes he was annoyed, he was very grateful for that.

"The last British girl that caught my eye was Peggy," he answered truthfully, without any kind of venom.

She smiled at him, kindly.

"She was quite the beauty," Natasha said. "I've seen the pictures. It's no wonder Captain America was mesmerized."

He chuckled.

"No, it isn't. It really isn't."

Natasha looked at him, her expression softening perceptibly.

"Have you already visited her?" she asked.

Steve looked down, suddenly unable to face her. No, no he hasn't. Why? The simple answer was "fear". He was afraid. Afraid to look at the face of the woman he loved and see her gone. Peggy lived her life, aged, loved… Steve hadn't. To actually lay eyes on her, to see all that… That frightened him more than anything.

His silence was answer enough.

"I can't begin to imagine how hard that must be for you, Steve," Natasha finally said, her voice almost inaudible. "But you owe it to yourself to see her at least once again. Otherwise you are going to regret it for the rest of your life."

Natasha was right and he knew it. Of course he knew it. It didn't make it any less difficult though.

"On another note," Natasha continued, not waiting for him to say anything, "if you are really bored with all the scientific stuff we know nothing about, there is something interesting here you'll like."

She looked at him. "The library is exceptional, I hear, and you do like to read, don't you?"

Steve smiled.
"I do."

"Well, then, it's that way," she pointed. "And Steve? Make sure to ask for Lydia. You share some of the same interests, I think you'll like her."

Steve, frowned.

"I thought we had evacuated the place," he said.

"We did, but some of the college's staff stayed behind to make sure we don't destroy anything."

"Why? When did we ever destroy anything?" Steve asked, smiling, already walking in the library's direction.

"I know, right?" he heard Natasha's answer as he left the corridor.

Steve was actually glad to have something to do for now. He was already bored to death of hearing Tony, Bruce and Selvig arguing about science, using terms he didn't even want to guess what they meant. And Natasha was right, he did like to read. Walking through the college's building, Steve looked for the library and finally found it. He was amazed when he entered.

It was huge. And beautifully crafted. London might have changed a lot since the last time he was here, but there were places that remained frozen in time and that room was clearly one of them. Steve was so fascinated by it he didn't even notice an elderly woman approaching.

"Oh, excuse me," Steve said as he noticed her. "I was just admiring the books."

The very old, very frail lady smiled at him.

"It is no problem at all, dear. Few people seem to take pleasure in the simple things anymore. Look all you want, I'm sure you'll find something enjoyable to read. Oh, I'm Ms. Pierce, the librarian responsible for all this."

Steve had no doubt he would find something to read.

"Thank you, ma'am, I will. I'm Steve, by the way, pleasure to meet you," he said, turning to look at the books. As he turned, however, he remembered what Natasha had told him. Well, what did he have to lose? "Say, Ms. Pierce, do you know anyone named Lydia? Is she a teacher here, perhaps?"

As he said this, he was already looking around, trying to see if there was anyone else in the library with them.

"Oh, dear, I'm Lydia!" the elderly lady answered.

Steve did a double take. He didn't know why the hell he was so surprised.

"Strength, without purpose, is meaningless," Sif said, her body adopting a perfect martial stance. "Speed, without technique, is simply waste of movement. Your body must be under your control, at all times, and not the other way around."

Clark watched as Sif released a flurry of punches and kicks in the air, her body moving with such grace on the emerald green field that it made her movements look like a dance. He could tell, though, that every single hit had lethal force behind it; a deadly dance indeed.

"What you need is a fighting style that suits your purposes," Sif explained, looking at him, the
royal palace glowing in the distance behind her. "Something that allows you to use your gifts to their fullest potential. And unfortunately, no Asgardian style will serve you."

"Why not?" Clark asked.

"One simple reason: we cannot fly," Sif stated. "That, by itself, already makes any Asgardian or Midgardian martial style unsuitable for you. It would restrict you too much."

What she said made sense, even to Clark's limited understanding. Still, even with all that, he was still unsure as to why Sif wanted to teach him a martial style so badly.

"Okay, I get it. But if no fighting style you know will help me, isn't it better for me to just stay as I am? I mean, do I really have to--"

His question was interrupted when Sif suddenly drew her sword. Her movement was so fast that she became a blur and the blade simply disappeared as she struck; to Clark's Kryptonian's reflexes, however, the attack was not only visible, it was defensible. He raised his arm, seeing the sword approaching, and opened his hand.

And with unbelievable speed, closed it, holding the sword without touching the sharp edges and stopping it before it reached him.

For a brief moment, both of them just stared at each other, until Clark raised his eyebrow; he might have being able to defend himself, but it didn't make her attack any less frightening. Especially when he didn't know exactly how sharp her blade was. It probably wouldn't have hurt him too badly, but still…

"How did you defend yourself?" Sif asked, still not moving. "Reflexes, speed and strength, correct? Only because you are faster and stronger than I am." She pulled her sword back, sheathing it. "What happens when you meet someone stronger and faster than you? Are you willing to bet the safety of Midgard on the possibility of that never happening?"

Clark looked down for a second. No, he was not willing to let Earth be destroyed because he was too bothered to learn to fight better, that wasn't a question he needed time to think about.

"You are right," he answered, looking back at her. "And I do want your help. So how do we do this?"

Sif smiled at him, too quickly to anyone else but him to notice.

"Well, like I said, the Asgardians do not have a proper fighting style for Kryptonians under a yellow sun," she said, walking towards him," but Kryptonians do."

His eyebrows shot up when he heard that.

"I heard the Allfather gave you a gift," Sif continued and Clark immediately looked at the small bag he had brought with them; to the place he kept the book Odin had given him.

The book that recorded all interactions between Asgardians and Kryptonians. Without waiting for her to say anything else, Clark walked to the bag and took the book from it, glancing at the symbol of the House of El on the cover.

"Are you sure it has anything about fighting styles?" he asked, turning to Sif.

She rolled her eyes and pulled him down, sitting by his side on the ground.
"Believe me, if this book was written by us about a newly discovered and powerful race, the first thing we would have written about is their martial prowess," she said.

Knowing about their obsession with fighting, that was probably true. He looked back at the book and, with very slowly movements, he opened it. Clark still hadn't had the time to see what was in that book, even though it was in the front of his thoughts ever since Odin had given it to him. Circumstances, however, had kept him from it. Until now.

The pages glowed when he opened it, as if they possessed light in them. Pictures and drawings, of symbols and people, moved as if he was watching a computer screen instead of the pages of a book. The whole book was written in some weird runes he did not understand, but as he touched it, the letters changed to English.

"How—"

"All-Tongue or Allspeak," Sif answered. "It is a magical language, it can be understood by anyone, no matter which tongue they speak." She grinned at him. "You did not think we were speaking some Midgardian dialect with you, did you?"

Well, that was convenient. Still, pretty useful, so Clark began to quickly read the magical language in search of something about fighting styles. His eyes passed fast through the pages, barely giving any attention to anything he wasn't looking for, but he was actually holding himself back not to read everything.

He had in his hands, after all, a part of the history of his people.

The book was extensive and it had a lot of information. It began with the meeting of the two peoples, that apparently happened because the Kree had shot down a Kryptonian ship a long time ago. There were several parts about meetings between Asgardians and Kryptonians, battles they fought against each other and by each other's side, a deep analysis about their physiology, powers and technology… And finally, a study about Kryptonian martial arts.

"What did I tell you?" Sif gloated.

Yep, she was right, there was no denying it. The pages of the book showed moving drawings of martial stances, pictures of warriors facing each other, weapons and armors. There was a description of what they knew about the martial arts, how they were created and developed, how they were used. It was deep and rich, but not as complete as Clark imagined it would be. But maybe he was wrong about expecting that much detail, since the Asgardians obviously had written that book simply by observing Kryptonians fighting; maybe by fighting them as well.

As far as he could see, there were three martial arts depicted in the book: Klurkor, Horu-Kanu and one that was divided in two parts, Torquasm-Rao and Torquasm-Vo.

The book might not have all the information Clark wished it had, but Kelex probably did.

"Kelex, what can you tell me about these martial arts?" he asked.

The bracelet on his left arm unmade itself, taking the form of a floating drone.

"Klurkor is a hard martial art, heavily reliant on fists, feet and elbows, created to fight multiple opponents at the same time," Kelex answered. "The date it was created is unknown, but there are records of Klurkor being taught in Krypton hundreds of thousands of years ago, in several different places."
Clark and Sif heard the explanation enraptured, lowering their eyes to see the several hundred different stances drawn on the pages of the book. It seemed like an interesting fighting style and it had stances created specifically to fight with swords, modern weapons and even under a yellow sun.

"It reminds me a bit of karate," Clark mentioned.

"True," Sif agreed, to Clark's surprise. "What? Did you think Asgardians would ignore humans and their martial arts?"

"I really hadn't considered it, that's all," Clark said, looking at Kelex. "What about Horu-Kanu, Kelex?"

"Horus-Kanu is a lethal martial art, focused on the application of force on pressure points with the intent of killing and crippling enemies as fast and painful as possible. Sub-commander Faora-Ul was a Horu-Kanu master."

He blinked, a little bit shocked.

"Well, let's, uh, let's forget this one for the moment, then," Clark added fast. "And the last one? Torquasm-Rao and Torquasm-Vo? Are they really just one martial art?"

"Torquasm-Rao and Torquasm-Vo are two sides of the same coin," Kelex explained. "One is to master the body, the other to master the mind. Supposedly, a true master of both sides of this martial art is unbeatable."

Sif scoffed.

"No warrior is unbeatable, no matter how powerful," she disagreed.

Kelex turned to her.

"There was only one Kryptonian considered a true master in Torquasm-Rao and Torquasm-Vo in all history, the man who invented the style. Rao became so powerful that he was considered by some to be a Kryptonian god."

Both of them widened their eyes, but probably for different reasons. Sif was probably very impressed with a man that could be considered by his own people, beings capable of incredible things, to be a god; Clark, however, was surprised because the name Rao wasn't strange to him at all. Krypton's sun was named Rao and even Zod's elite soldiers were named the Sword of Rao.

He never imagined Rao was actually a person.

"I thought he truly was a god," Clark said.

"Kryptonians don't have a god, sir. Rao was, however, the closest thing to one they had. Some would even call him a prophet. Some would even come to worship him. Krypton's sun was named in his honor."

"And he was the one who created this style?" Sif asked.

"That is correct, Lady Sif."

Clark looked back at the book, seeing the images of the stances, the attacks and defenses. He wasn't a specialist, but he thought the movements looked a lot like tai chi, or at least what he
understood about tai chi, which wasn't much to be honest. The warriors seemed to flow like water, their movements like the stream of a river, as attack and defense seemed to blend in a single continuous action. And the most impressive part? The style seemed suited for air combat as well, because the warriors would float in all directions as they attacked, not limiting themselves to the ground in any moment.

"What you are seeing is the physical aspect, the Torquasm-Rao. General Zod was an adept of this fighting style," Kelex said, to Clark's astonishment. "There is also the mental aspect or, as some would call it, the spiritual aspect."

"Which is?" Clark asked.

"Magic, Kal," Sif answered, rolling her eyes.

"Lady Sif is correct again, sir. Torquasm-Vo is the magical discipline side of the coin. Mental fortitude and spiritual prowess. Combined with Torquasm-Rao, it is said to make a warrior complete."

Sif looked at him and grinned.

"What do you say, Kal? I know nothing of magic, but I can help you with Torquasm-Rao. We have three days until the tournament. Shall we see what you can learn until then?" She raised a single eyebrow and appraised him from head to toe. "We both know you do learn fast."

Clark blushed, his mind conjuring images that had nothing to do with martial arts, but he got up, decided. Three days to learn what he could and then fight in an Asgardian tournament. His life was getting weirder and weirder every day.

Food, that's what Clark needed right now. Food and rest. He finally understood why Asgardians ate as much as they did; no way around it, when crazy people like Sif were in charge of training. Clark may be constantly recharged by the yellow sun, but the intense workout of learning the Kryptonian martial art was making even he tired.

Two days had passed since his training began; one day to go for him to fight in the tournament. Clark still wasn't sure about that, but after Sif spent all this time helping him he wouldn't just turn his back and refuse to participate. And it would be a real test to see how much he had really learned.

He wasn't crazy enough to think he would be a master in only two days. Torquasm-Rao was extremely complex, a martial art that took a lifetime to learn. But little by little he was beginning to understand it. His thinking speed and his muscle memory enabled Clark to learn faster than any human would think possible and Sif was helping him more than he could put into words, but he wasn't even at the beginning of the path. Still, he already had the basics mastered. And if he really applied himself, who knows?

Right now, however, Clark wasn't thinking about Torquasm-Rao or the tournament, he was thinking about the delicious smell of food coming from the feast in front of him. Not bothering to hide his Kryptonian speed, Clark began to eat as fast as he could, practically inhaling the food; which wasn't that much different of how the Asguardians around him were eating too.

"Is Sif tiring you out, Kal?" Thor asked with a laugh. And, yes, Clark was absolutely sure the joke was intentional.

"At least the earthquakes stopped now that you are training," Jane muttered under her breath.
Clark would have defended himself, except he was too busy eating.

"Sif always takes things too far," Fandral said, drinking his mead. "I swear, one of these days she will kill someone. And not on purpose!"

"That is true," Volstagg agreed, eating as fast as Clark was. "Remember the last recruits she trained? I will never forget their faces, they appeared to have returned from a long campaign in Muspelheim itself."

"I would not speak of Sif behind her back if I were you," Frigga warned, approaching the table they were sitting at with a smile. "Her philosophy towards that happens to be the same as mine and I guarantee none of you will like it."

Fandral and Volstagg got a little pale when she said that, but Thor just laughed.

"Are you done eating, Jane?" Frigga asked, kindly. "I would like to examine you again. I may have found something capable of delaying the symptoms of the Aether."

Her words worked like magic and both her and Thor got up fast; Clark, with one last look to the food, got up as well. That was tremendously good news and the first one they had about that subject since they arrived. If Clark was already feeling worried, he couldn't even imagine how Thor and Jane were feeling.

The three of them followed Frigga outside the feast hall, walking the corridors of the palace until they finally got to a big, golden door; Frigga opened it without even touching, with a gesture of her hand. The room behind them was immense, incredibly well decorated, located on the side of the palace and therefore with a breathtaking view of Asgard.

"Please, sit down," Frigga asked, grabbing a book as she passed.

Thor and Jane sat together on a couch and Clark sat on a chair by their side.

"Finding information on the Aether is proving to be a truly difficult task," Frigga said, as she opened the book. "I have travelled all across the universe during the course of my life, learning everything I could about magic, and even with all this knowledge this information eludes us."

"But you did find something?" Thor asked.

Frigga nodded.

"Yes, I did." And without explaining anything else, she touched Jane's forehead.

A bright light appeared on the palm of her hand and for a moment the entire room was engulfed into it. Clark could actually feel the energy pulsing, as if Frigga was channeling the strength of an entire sun through her hand. And after almost a minute, she closed her fingers and stepped back.

Jane took a long breath, as if she was holding it the entire time.

"What did you do?!" Jane exclaimed, still breathing fast. "I feel great!"

Thor touched her face, obviously looking for any signs of injuries, but she barely paid any attention, looking at Frigga's smile. Without answering, Frigga turned to Clark.

"You realized what I did, didn't you?" she asked him.

Clark hesitated, not knowing exactly what to answer, but then his mind finally caught up with him.
He had felt all that energy as if his own body was also receiving it; there was only one thing that could be then.

"Sunlight!" he said, suddenly. "You channeled sunlight into her!"

Jane and Thor looked from Clark to Frigga, seeing the pleased look on her face.

"Good answer!" she congratulated him. "Not just sunlight, the essence of a star."

"But why?" Thor asked, frowning. "Jane is not a Kryptonian."

"No, but the Aether certainly doesn't like it," Clark guessed. "It was created by the Dark Elves, wasn't it?"

"The Aether will be weakened by it, at last for some time," Frigga explained it. "Inside Jane it does not have the power yet to convert the sunlight into darkness, so it will avoid it. It should give us some additional time to search for a permanent measure."

Jane got up and held Frigga's hands.

"Thank you," she said.

Frigga only smiled, touching her cheeks.

"There is no need to thank me, child. What kind of teacher would I be if I allowed my newest student to perish days after I began teaching her?"

She certainly looked touched when Frigga said that.

"So you really are learning magic?" Clark asked.

"I'm not doing anything yet," Jane answered. "But I'm learning about it. It's fascinating!"

"I completely agree, the Mystical Arts are truly amazing," Frigga added. "I have been interested in them since I was a little child."

"Who was the one who taught you, Mother?" Thor asked. "I do not think you ever told me."

"I had dozens of masters, Thor. And hundreds of apprentices, all over the cosmos."

"Even on Earth?" Jane asked.

Frigga smiled again.

"In Gaul, if I recall. She was exceptional."

That was a while ago, then, Clark considered. But then something else popped into his head.

"Have you ever heard of a Kryptonian martial art named Torquasm-Vo?" Clark asked her.

To his surprise, Frigga didn't even hesitate.

"Absolutely. A martial art developed to use magic as attack and defense. Unbelievably dangerous and even more difficult to learn." She turned to Clark. "I am not a master of it, but I could give you some direction if you are interested, once this entire situation with the Aether is dealt with."

For a moment, Clark was too stunned to accept, but he quickly nodded, too thankful to put into
"Now, Thor, you should take Jane back to the feast hall. She needs to eat and rest," Frigga said, giving Jane a last smile as they got up to leave. Clark was about to follow then, when Frigga called him. "Kal, could you stay for a moment?"

Nodding, he walked back to her. She looked at him, her kind expression actually making him remember his own mother for a second.

"How are you enjoying Asgard, Kal?" she asked.

He felt himself smiling.

"A lot more than I thought I would, to be honest," he answered, looking at the beautiful view. "Don't get me wrong, I love Earth, it's my home. But sometimes... sometimes it's nice to not have to worry all the time. To just be, well, myself."

Frigga smiled and touched his shoulder.

"It makes me glad to know that, Kal," she finally said. "And know that you are welcome to stay, should you want to."

"Stay?" Clark asked, actually confused. "You mean, live here?"

The Queen of Asgard nodded. Well, that particular thought hadn't occurred to Clark in any moment, if he was honest with himself. He liked Asgard, a lot, but to leave Earth and stay here?

"I can see what you are thinking, Kal," Frigga started, calling his attention back at her. "You love Midgard. You have loved ones there. I am not asking you to choose between them and Asgard. While my invitation is certainly valid now, that was not my intention when I spoke."

"What do you mean?" Clark asked.

Frigga sighed, looking down for a moment and then back at Clark.

"You can come back and stay any time you want, Kal. Now, 10 years from now, 100 years from now. Even 1000 years from now, should you wish."

And suddenly her words made sense; Clark felt the comprehension hit him like a hammer to the face. Frigga wasn't asking him to come live in Asgard now. She was inviting him to come live with them when everything he knew back on Earth no longer existed. No family, no friends, maybe not even a country.

Different lifespans. Clark knew he would live longer than humans, especially under a yellow sun, but to actually face that reality wasn't something he was willing to do right now.

"You do not have to answer me, Kal," Frigga said, her voice kind. "Just know that you are welcome among us, anytime you wish, if you wish."

With that, she kissed his cheek just like his own mother would, and left the room; Clark stayed there for a long time after that.

The Asgardian horns echoed in the distance, sounded by the Einherjar, making even the loud voices in the arena calm down for a moment. The people on the stands looked down, seeing the competitors entering the arena, every one of them as excited to be there as the people watching.
Except Clark, who was mostly just very tense.

The group of warriors walked to the middle of the huge arena. Clark could see thousands of people on the stands, from men who could easily fit down there amongst the warriors, to little babies being held by their mothers. Thor led them to the middle, as happy as someone could possibly be, fully clad in his armor but holding a common war hammer instead of Mjölnir. Sif, Fandral and Volstagg were there as well, also fully armored, each of them holding their usual weapons. Those were the people Clark knew, but they were not the only ones there, of course.

As he studied the place, he realized everybody was now looking up. Following their eyes, Clark saw Odin and Frigga approaching the edge of their stand, Jane a few steps behind them, a full company of Einherjar around. When Odin arrived to the edge, every single voice was quieted.

"5000 years ago, my father, Bor Burison, led Asgard to victory against the Dark Elves," Odin started, his voice carrying to every inch of the arena. "They fought during the Convergence, the alignment of all Nine Realms, to stop the destruction of our entire universe. And they won."

When he said that, there was a huge cheer from the crowd, but with a single gesture from his hand everybody got quiet again.

"Now, once again, the Convergence approaches," the King of Asgard continued. "But this time all we have to do is celebrate. Today we honor my father and all the warriors that fought with him. Today we drink and we eat and we FIGHT!"

Clark swallowed, nervous. The tournament had begun.
Chapter 23 – Night Falls

After Odin's speech, the crowd didn't stop cheering for a moment. The sound was deafening and Clark could feel the whole place trembling as the Asgardians celebrated. He felt as if he was inside the Coliseum, during the times when gladiators would face each other in ancient Rome; the difference was this place was actually way bigger and the crowd was made, mostly, of warriors who would feel just as comfortable fighting down in the arena as they were cheering.

The arena was a round stadium with rows encircling around them, the floor covered in sand. The rows were high up, separated from the arena by a tall stone wall covered in runes; if Clark were to make a guess, those runes were probably there as some kind of magical barrier, to protect the crowd from eventual attacks. That was good, of course, but it did worry Clark a little bit to know it was necessary at all.

He realized soon enough that he was probably the only one in silence down there. Thor, Volstagg, Fandral and even Sif were all yelling back at the crowd, raising their weapons and hands to make them even louder. The rest of the combatants were doing that too, all of them extremely excited for the coming fights. Sif had warned him they all loved to fight, but Clark didn't think it would be that much.

Thor, laughing like a kid in Disneyland, approached him and held his shoulder.

"They will begin soon enough," he said. "First, the new fighters will face each other and the winners will eventually face us."

"So I'll fight right now?" Clark asked, controlling his anxiety.

"What? No! You are an experienced fighter, like us!"

Clark just stared at Thor.

"I never fought before, Thor! Certainly never in a tournament!"

Thor, as usual, just shook his head and laughed.

"There is a ranking, Kal! The Asgardians take this very seriously. The scribes take all the participant's feats into consideration and position him or her in the appropriate rank. Which adversaries you have beaten, which wars you fought, how you fared in previous tournaments… All that is carefully studied and measured." He smiled at Clark. "We? We are at the top!"

Clark, again, just stared.

"But why?!” he exclaimed, knowing very well he had never participated in any war.

Thor looked at him strangely.

"You defeated Zod!" he answered, opening his arms, agitated. "You bested Nam-Ek and Faora-Ul! You repelled a Kryptonian attack! Any one of those feats individually is more than most here did in millennia." Thor stopped for a second, as if considering adding something else; eventually, he
muttered: "You might even be ranked higher than me…"

That was surprising, to say the least, but it was actually true, Clark thought, suddenly remembering that he had indeed defeated some powerful people not too long ago. He avoided thinking about that so much that the fact he had defeated Zod and his soldiers slipped his mind. In Clark's mind, even though he had won, the fight itself wasn't a victory, it was just him doing the right thing.

To battle loving Asgardians, however, he could see that those feats were truly impressive, even if he didn't consider them like that.

"Alright, so I'm high-ranked then," Clark began. "So the less ranked people will fight among themselves first and then eventually face us? Isn't that a little unjust? I mean, they'll get tired, maybe hurt, won't they?"

"No, no, do not worry about that!" Thor laughed. "Asgardians have a lot of stamina and we have medicine and drinks to get their energy restored. That is actually something I intended to tell you." He looked serious for a second. "Do not hold back, Kal. I know you are uncertain about fighting, but you will not cause anyone any serious injury. Asgardians are tough and we heal fast, keep that in mind. Besides, we have healers and magic that can fix anything, even dismemberment. As long as the fighter is not dead, he will be just fine and killing an Asgardian by accident is... Well, I do not think it has ever happened before."

He grabbed Clark's both shoulders.

"Do your best and let's face each other at the finals!"

As Thor had said, a few minutes later the competitors were asked to leave the middle of the arena. He followed his friends to the fighter's stands and sat down, watching as the referee – if he was really called that – opened a very long list. Still without saying anything, he walked to a small table and placed the list there.

There was a small glow and then the names of the fighters appeared flying in the arena, not differently than when Odin showed them the memory of the Dark Elves war. The holograms stayed in formation, the runes glowing in the air.

Odin got up again, the whole place becoming silent as he did that, and got closer from the arena. Without saying anything, he made a gesture with his hand; as if obeying him, the names of the contestants moved, like a cloud of angry bees, mixing themselves in the air. And with another gesture, the runes flew and hit the stone wall, burning its surface like a brand.

He finally understood what had happened: the fighters now knew their adversaries.

The referee yelled the names of the two first contestants and the crowd went crazy when the Asgardian warriors stepped in the arena, both of them holding swords and shields, both of them looking young and tense, but very much willing. Like Thor had explained, the inexperienced fought first.

Clark wondered, not for the first time, if he shouldn't be down there with them.

"Wow, that was awesome!" Volstagg yelled.

"Very well done indeed," Fandral agreed, impressed.

"He does seem to be a very skilled warrior," Sif mentioned.
"Incredible!" Thor exclaimed, punching the air.

Well, maybe they were right, but if Clark were to use a single word to describe that last fight, it would be "brutal". Maybe nauseating. The winner had struck his adversary so strongly with his mace that, instead of just breaking, the guy's leg had twisted back; the noise itself was enough to make Clark sick, but seeing the foot pointing behind was what truly shocked him.

Maybe noticing that, Thor slapped his back.

"Not to worry, Kal! Like I said, he should be fine in a moment."

Luckily, Thor was right about that. After a few piercing screams of pain, the healers managed to put his leg back in position and, a few minutes later after drinking some kind of medicine the guy was already walking again, looking glum that he had lost but nothing beyond that. He had to admit, that was pretty impressive.

Still, it was horrifying; looking up, he saw Jane by Frigga's side, pale as snow. Yep, it seemed he wasn't the only one with "Midgardian sensibilities" here.

Thor was correct about no one dying, but since the battles were fought until one of the combatants couldn't go on or until surrender, the level of injuries was high. Nothing as gruesome as what he had just seen, but more than enough to kill a human with ease. Even so, Clark had to admit that those people did know how to fight and supposedly they were the inexperienced fighters in the tournament.

"I think that was the last of them!" Sif said, so excited she actually punched Clark's leg. "Our fights shouldn't take long now."

And as soon as she said that, the referee – or better yet, because Sif corrected him with a laugh when he said that, the Arena Master – asked for silence. He allowed the silence to go on for a second, building the suspense, and then he pointed to the names of the fighters on the wall.

"The new blood has been tested," he began and the crowd was hanging on his every word. "But now it is the time to see how they fare against the true champions!"

The crowd couldn't resist anymore and went wild, making the whole place tremble once again. The Arena Master waited for they to calm down a bit, then continued.

"Next fight: Hakon VS Sif!"

"YES!" Sif yelled, getting up and jumping down in the arena almost immediately.

Sif landed in the arena and ran to the center, as everybody cheered her name, none louder than Thor. Her adversary, Hakon, approached from the opposite side. The contrast between the two contestants was amazing. While Sif was a slender woman, Hakon was a huge, round man, full of muscles and fat; like a weird cross between a Viking and a sumo wrestler. It was the same warrior that had just turned his previous adversary's leg to the wrong direction with his mace. Sif looked smaller at each step she approached Hakon, the difference in sizes becoming more and more evident.

And yet, Clark could see that only one of them was afraid; it wasn't Sif.

The Arena Master gave the signal for them to prepare. Sif drew her sword, a savage grin on her face, adopting her martial stance. Hakon, already holding his big mace, lifted his arm, his face showing nothing but apprehension. The crowd was in silence, holding their breath, and Clark
caught himself leaning forward in anticipation.

"FIGHT!"

Sif lunged forward. She moved so fast that Clark was sure a human wouldn't even notice, leaving behind just a cloud of dust. And in less than one second, she was already on the other side of the arena, before Hakon had the chance to even blink, much less attack. Clark could see the surprise in his eyes for a moment and then he turned, yelling, ready to raise his mace and fight.

Except there wasn't an arm to lift his weapon anymore. Hakon's arm, still gripping his mace, was being held by Sif, meters away from his rightful owner.

Clark couldn't believe in what he was seeing. Sif had just cut off the man's arm and she did it so fast that the man only noticed when he saw it being held by her. Clark didn't know if it was the shock or the pain, but he suddenly began to yell, falling to his knees, the blood finally beginning to pour.

Sif just looked at the Arena Master, one eyebrow raised.

"Victory belongs to SIF!" he finally yelled, probably too shocked to talk before.

Once again, the crowd went crazy, Thor, Fandral and Volstagg getting up to applaud her. Clark, however, was still frozen on his seat. He did not know Sif was capable of doing that and he was kind of surprised about how easily she just crippled her adversary. But then he remembered Thor's words: Asgardians were tough. And they could heal pretty much anything. Hakon would be alright.

So, like everyone, Clark began to applaud too. His teacher had just won her first battle, after all.

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Thor, Volstagg and Fandral fought after Sif, also against the "new bloods". Unsurprisingly, they also won and quite easily. Not that their adversaries weren't good; as far as Clark could see, they knew how to fight pretty well. Problem was, Thor, Volstagg and Fandral were just that good.

Like when Sif fought, it was like watching different beings battling and not two Asgardians facing each other. It wasn't just a matter of skill, it was a matter of power. Volstagg's strength was so above his adversary that Clark couldn't help but imagine he would probably have a lot of fun in a fist fight against Dr. Banner. Fandral's speed made his blade move so fast that even Clark had trouble keeping up with it sometimes. And Thor? Even without using Mjölnir, his adversaries were simply no match for him.

Thor truly was every bit the god of the legends Midgardians believed in.

How could there be so much difference between their power levels Clark didn't know. He supposed it had to do not only with training, but with their Asgardian heritage. Unlike Kryptonians, who got their powers from the sun, Asgardians had their own source of power, some kind of "Asgardian Force" that was born with them. Some had more than others, some learned to use what they had better than others and some lineages were just that blessed, like Odin's. Thor, probably, not only had been born with an amazing power, but had trained since childhood to hone it. No wonder he was one of the best warriors in all the Nine Realms.

But there were others. Like the Asgardian that was fighting right now.

Skurge, the Executioner, or so the Arena Master announced him, was a big man, even bigger than Clark. His face was impassive as he watched his much smaller adversary entering the arena,
appearing more and more frightened as he approached the huge Asgardian. It really wasn't that surprising; clad in a black armor, with a shaved head and a black beard, Skurge was an intimidating figure.

Especially when the axe he was carrying was even bigger than him.

Skurge remained still like a statue, following his younger adversary with his eyes as he got closer. There wasn't any question about who was the predator and who was the prey down in the arena. In fact, seeing how afraid Skurge's adversary was, the title "Executioner" suddenly made a lot of sense.

"People can't actually be killed in these fights, right?" Clark whispered to Sif.

Sif looked at him weirdly.

"Of course people die in these fights, Kal," she answered, as if stating the obvious. "It is not common, but it can happen. The Arena Master usually intervenes before any deadly injuries and even though everyone is fighting seriously we are not fighting enemies, but fellow Asgardians, so nobody is out to kill anyone." She stopped talking for a second, staring at the arena. "Still, it does happen sometimes."

Clark did not like that one bit, but nobody was here unwilling, he supposed. It was no different than boxing back on Earth or any other fighting sport. And at least here they had the magic and the technology to heal pretty much anything, which was a lot more than they had back home.

Even with all those reassurances, Clark still had a very bad feeling.

"FIGHT!" yelled the Arena Master.

Skurge remained still even after the beginning of the fight, quite differently than his opponent's reaction. Screaming like a madman, maybe to try to raise his own courage, he attacked, fast, closing the distance between them, his shield and sword raised. Still, Skurge did not move.

Not until he was in attacking distance from his axe.

The speed Skurge's axe moved was absurd. His adversary simply had no chance to dodge, all he could do was try to raise his shield, but it just made no difference. The metal from his shield was ripped apart together with his arm. The strength of the blow tossed him up like a ragdoll, the remains of his armor cracking like glass; for one moment, it was like he stopped in the air.

And then he fell back down, heavily, already unconscious.

It was over before it started. The fallen warrior whose name Clark couldn't even remember had lost that battle before he even stepped in the arena, that was how stronger Skurge was than him. One blow, that was all it took and it was over. Or so he thought.

With a name like "Executioner", however, was it any surprise that Skurge didn't think so?

Before anyone could react, Skurge kicked his opponent, facing him up. And without any hesitation, he brought his axe down.

"Enough!"

Odin didn't yell his order, his voice was barely raised actually, but it was enough to travel all the way down to the arena. And enough to, immediately, make Skurge stop his axe, the blade an inch
away from his opponent's neck.

Clark let out a breath he didn't even know he was holding.

Skurge kept his blade close from his adversary's neck for a second, then, very slowly, brought it back; an Executioner he might be, but not one crazy enough to challenge Odin. The King of Asgard kept his eye on Skurge for a few seconds, giving him a taste of how much he was displeased, then he looked at the Arena Master and nodded.

"Victory belongs to Skurge, the Executioner!"

The silence in the arena was shattered by the piercing cheer from the crowd, commemorating the brutal victory. This time, however, there were those who chose not to applaud. Clark, Thor, Sif, Fandral and Volstagg didn't even open their mouths. Odin and Frigga remained still as well. Most warriors fighting in the tournament chose not to applaud either; not because of the way Skurge had won his battle, but because of what followed.

Skurge, however, didn't seem to care one way or the other. He remained in the arena for a few seconds, not even bothering to thank the crowd or to look at his beaten adversary, as the healers carried him out. Until, suddenly, he looked up; right in Clark's direction.

He stared at the Kryptonian for a few seconds and raised his axe, pointing it at him. The crowd was in silence again.

"You are next," he promised.

Clark just raised his eyebrows, not knowing what to say, as the crowd once again began to cheer, the threat on his life somehow making the tournament even more enjoyable for them. He looked at his side, seeing Thor, Sif, Volstagg and Fandral looking at him, all of them serious.

"Kal?" Sif began, her eyes fixed on Skurge. "I will take it as a personal favor from you if you break this man in two."

"What?!"

"He is dishonorable," she continued, "and he threatened you. I am your master, so it was an indirect threat to me as well."

He could see Thor, Volstagg and Fandral rolling their eyes at the same time.

"Not everything that happens is about you, Sif," Fandral said, exasperated. "That said, I agree, do not hold your punches against that one."

"I agree!" Volstagg chortled, no doubt remembering how strong Clark could punch someone. "It will be nice to see that happening to someone else for a change!"

Thor just laughed.

"Well, you will fight him if you win your first fight," Thor finally said. "And if you want to meet me at the finals, you will have to beat him eventually. So do not dare to lose!"

Clark opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment the Arena Master yelled: "Next fight: Ogmund VS Kal-El, the Savior of Midgard!"

He was so surprised to be called that Clark actually froze for a second, just until Sif slapped his
head and Thor pushed him gently. Dazed with the idea he would soon be in the middle of an arena, fighting an Asgardian, Clark walked slowly, almost as if he was on autopilot mode.

"And Kal, remember: no brawling!" Sif warned. "Try to match your strength with his and do not move faster than he can. It is about technique!"

Right, technique. Torquasm-Rao, the Kryptonian martial art he had been training for a total of three days. Well, he supposed now was the time to see if he had indeed learned something. So, still a little shocked and still uncertain about everything going on, Clark flew down to the arena, hovering for a few seconds before touching the ground.

Clark was barely listening to the crowd cheering, but he knew they were louder than any moment before. This was something new to them, to have a Kryptonian fighting in the tournament, and all eyes would be following him, Thor and Sif had told him that much. To fight against a Kryptonian was a challenge worthy of the greatest Asgardians warriors. And to actually being able to defeat one? That would be enough to make any of them legends forever.

Of course, all that happened for a simple reason: Kryptonians were powerful. So it really was no wonder that Clark's adversary looked equal parts excited and scared, eyeing Clark as if he didn't know if he should attack or just run away. He probably couldn't even tell that Clark was probably as nervous as he was.

The Arena Master approached them, also looking at Clark warily. Both contestants were in the middle of the arena, facing each other, Ogmund holding a long spear and Clark just looking at him, unarmed; obviously, to a Kryptonian, his fists were more than dangerous enough against anyone, armed or not.

The noise continued to rise, making everything shake, and the Arena Master allowed the suspense to build all over again. Clark and Ogmund were both still, staring at each other. Ogmund raised his spear, pointing it at Clark; Clark simply looked back at him, taking note of how sharp the spear's blade was. Sif had warned him, that with enough strength, Asgardian blades could hurt him.

Torquasm-Rao, however, was all about not being hit.

Breathing deeply, Clark concentrated. He allowed himself to relax, to ignore everything around, to calm himself. And just as easily as when he was training, his body assumed the proper stance: legs parted, sustaining his body weight, and arms also opened, the left one to the front and the right one to the back, both palms up.

"FIGHT!" screamed the Arena Master.

Immediately after he gave them permission, Ogmund yelled almost as loudly as him, jumping forward, his spear in a straight line against Clark's chest. He moved fast and with precision, every bit of his martial training no doubt guiding his hand. It was an attack meant to end this fight in one blow.

Even then, Clark did not move.

He could've dodged. He could've held the spear with his hand. He could've done the exact same thing Ogmund did and reached him before he had the time to open his mouth and yell. But he had made a promise to Sif and he would keep his word, otherwise all his training wouldn't have meant a thing. So he waited.

And when the spear's tip was almost touching his skinsuit Clark's body turned.
His legs remained fixed on the ground and he didn't move from his spot. However, from the waist up, Clark's body gyrated, his left arm dropping at the same time his right moved forward, guarding his body, hitting the side of the spear and changing its trajectory. It wasn't a powerful blow and it wasn't meant to be one; just enough to deflect the weapon and open Ogmund's guard.

Clark wasn't thinking anymore, he was reacting. Sif had hammered that in his head eventually. In a fight, a true fight where both opponents are equally matched, there wasn't such thing as thinking. There was simply no time for that. When your adversary's sword is falling down upon you, you shouldn't be thinking about how to defend yourself; you should be reacting. That was what training was meant for. To make your body so used to it that fighting becomes as automatic as breathing.

There was time to be smart, to be one step ahead, to plan the fight. But in close quarters, trading blows with an opponent as strong and as fast as yourself? According to Sif, thinking too much in those cases only brought you one step closer to death. At those times, honed instinct was the way to go.

So when Clark deflected the blade to his left, allowing it to pass harmless by his side, it wasn't a consciously thought strategy; it was a reaction. With one touch he avoided his adversary's attack, made his weapon useless and opened his defenses. Right now, there wasn't anything between Clark and Ogmund. And then he did what he had trained to do.

Using Ogmund's momentum against him, Clark twisted his body again, in the opposite direction, bringing his right arm back, the back of his hand clashing directly against Ogmund's throat. It wasn't a hit strong enough to kill him, but it was most definitely strong enough to cut his breath short; Ogmund was suddenly deprived of air, losing his strength, and in that moment Clark attacked again, his left palm striking the Asgardian's stomach.

The attack was brutally strong and yet carefully measured so it wouldn't send Ogmund flying back; Torquasm-Rao worked best in close quarters, after all. Thus, instead of throwing him away, Clark's focused attack made sure that the shockwaves from the blast travelled all across his adversary's body. For a single moment, Ogmund felt the power of an earthquake in his muscles, organs and bones.

And then, before the Asgardian had the chance to even try to react, Clark's upper body twisted again, bringing his right elbow against Ogmund's temple.

He fell down like his brain had just been turned off; Ogmund simply blacked out completely, losing all and any control over his body, collapsing on the arena face first. There was a sudden silence in the place, as if someone had just pressed the "mute" button. Clark didn't move, couldn't move, still in the same position he had begun the fight. Despite what he just did, he was as surprised as the crowd by what happened. He felt like a bystander in his own body; like Sif said, action and reaction.

And the fight was over before he could even realize.

The noise gradually went up, like a tsunami building strength. And like a tsunami, when it collided, it simply couldn't be ignored. The cheers of the crowd filled the arena like an explosion, becoming louder and louder at each passing second, to the point Clark's Kryptonian hearing was completely taken by it. He could feel it in his bones, reverberating his skull, shaking his very blood. Clark simply didn't know what to do; so he did what Sif did and raised his arm.

If there was something to be said about Asgardian's lungs, was that they were powerful; Clark didn't know how exactly the noise doubled its intensity, but it did. He couldn't imagine how the whole arena didn't crash down right then and there.
"By Odin's beard!" Thor yelled, jumping from his seat. "Did you see that?"

Volstagg did the same, except he used a much more colorful vocabulary. Fandral remained sitting, frozen in place, too impressed to actually say anything. And Sif? Sif was proud. That was her student down there. She had taught him to do that and he had learned it to perfection.

All around her, people were watching Kal, immensely impressed with he had just did. Even Odin, she was happy to see, had approval etched in his usually impassive expression. For the first time in history, a Kryptonian was fighting in an Asgardian tournament and Kal was making his mark.

The applauses continued for longer than usual and Kal stayed in the arena, arms raised, until his opponent had been taken by the healers; he, of course, talked with them first, no doubt questioning if he would be alright. Sif almost rolled her eyes, but he did what he had trained to do and that was enough. When he had made sure Ogmund would be fine, Kal flew back to his seat, making the Asgardians start to cheer all over again.

"Good job, Kal!" Thor yelled, getting up to shake his hand. "I knew you had it in you!"

"Well, I had a good teacher," he answered, cleared embarrassed, but smiling. "Thanks, Sif."

Sif just smiled back, as Fandral and Volstagg and every other contestant around got up to congratulate him. She would take credit where it was due, but Kal's victory was his own. There was a very long road between teaching and learning and if he had absorbed all that knowledge, it was because he had the capacity to do so in the first place.

"Next fight: Volstagg VS THOR!" yelled the Arena Master, startling everybody.

Thor and Volstagg stared at each other for a second, before laughing like crazy men. Sif grinned; now the tournament would get fun. With one last slap to his back, Thor and Volstagg left Kal on his seat and jumped to the arena together, Thor holding his hammer and Volstagg his enormous war axe.

"Say, Sif, can't Thor use Mjölnir in the tournament?" Kal asked, as Thor and Volstagg took their places in the arena.

"Anybody can use whatever weapon they wish to, but he doesn't find it very fair," Sif answered. "He wants to test his own strength and he cannot do that if he is using such a powerful weapon."

Satisfied with answer, Kal sat back to watch the start of what promised to be an incredible fight, as did Sif. It wouldn't be anything new to her – Thor and Volstagg practiced every time they could --, but this time they would be fighting with extra motivation. Still, Sif was betting it would be a quick fight; they knew each other's moves too well.

Maybe they would surprise her.

"He is going to fight again!" muttered Jane, clearly tense, as she watched Thor and his big friend, Volstagg, facing each other in the arena.

Frigga, sitting by her side, just smiled at her.

"Do not worry, neither of them are going to hurt themselves," she said and Jane knew it was true, but that didn't do anything to low her anxiousness.
She had just watched Superman fighting an Asgardian – and wouldn't Darcy love to hear that she missed that? – and that already made her edgy. Jane didn't like to see people fighting, not even back on Earth, but clearly Asgardian culture put a lot of value on that. And seeing people she cared about fighting was even worse.

Watching Clark, looking as nervous as she was, walk in the arena was already a difficult thing to do. She had come to like him very much during these days, finding in him a good friend, and seeing that friend face a god unarmed made her extremely ill; especially after seeing some of the injuries other warriors suffered.

Of course, if she told that to Darcy, she would never understand. What did the Man of Steel had to fear? But it turned out "Superman" was just a good guy after you got to know him, certainly not the unbeatable god some people on Earth thought he was. Oh, he was powerful, there was no doubt about that. But at the same time, even being bullet proof and capable of flying, Clark was normal. A journalist who happened to be a super powered alien. And from all people in Asgard at that moment, he was clearly the only one who understood just how crazy this tournament was.

And if she was feeling that anxious seeing Clark fighting, seeing Thor walk into the arena again was just plain torture.

"FIGHT!" yelled the Arena Master, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Jane watched as Thor and Volstagg ran against each other, hammer and axe raised, as the crowd cheered. Their weapons clashed with a thundering noise when they reached the middle of the arena, the power behind the blows echoing, but neither of them showed any sign of giving up.

Instead, their weapons remained joined, as the two Asgardians measured they strength, pushing each other. Jane didn't know much about fighting, but it seemed both of them had other options instead of simply doing that.

"I knew this would happen if those two fought," sighed Frigga, rolling her eyes, confirming Jane's suspicion. Odin seemed just as unamused as his wife.

"What are they doing?" Jane asked.

"They are playing," answered Odin, to her surprise.

With a loud yell, Thor pushed Volstagg with all his strength, actually moving him back on the sand, before forcing his hammer up. He did that with such power that both weapons were thrown to the sky, flying out of reach, and before they could fall back Thor punched Volstagg in the face.

Jane flinched when the noise of Thor's fist hitting Volstagg face reached her, the power behind it more than enough to kill a human several times over, but Volstagg didn't even blink; he grinned. And returned the punch in kind, the noise even louder than before.

Neither of them stepped back, defended themselves or tried to dodge. They simply… punched each other. Over and over and over again, not moving, not retreating. It was brutal and savage. And the Asgardian crowd was loving every second of it.

"Why the heck are they doing that?!" exclaimed Jane, not wanting to see that crazy punching contest, but unable to look away.

Frigga sighed again. "My son has an unusual sense of what fun is."

That explained the situation pretty well, Jane thought, seeing the smiles on their faces.
Clark watched the fight unable to close his dropped jaw.

"So, to be clear, only I can't brawl today?" he managed to finally ask.

Sif turned to look at him. "Do you actually want to do that?"

"Well, no," Clark admitted. "But it would be easier."

"Yes, 'easier', that is one way to classify that," Fandral muttered, barely holding his laugh.

Before they had the chance to continue, Thor threw an uppercut so powerful in Volstagg's chin that the big Asgardian actually left the ground. Clark flinched when he heard the noise, not wanting to imagine how painful that must've been. Volstagg was thrown to the sky, clearly dazed, but before he could fall back, Thor held his legs.

And with a move that wouldn't be out of character for the Hulk, Thor pulled Volstagg back with all his strength and smashed him in the ground.

It was ruthless. And very, very effective. Volstagg did not get up.

Thor raised his two arms and yelled to the crowd, making all of them go wild. They clearly loved their Prince and Clark could see why, if fighting skills were taken that serious on Asgard.

"Idiots," muttered Sif. "No finesse whatsoever. Like a pair of bilgesnipes."

"That may be true," Fandral answered, "but I still would not like to be trampled by either of them." Clark could agree with that sentiment.

It took the Arena Master a long time to calm the crowd and Thor wasn't helping in the least by yelling back at them, but eventually he could make himself heard, announcing, unnecessarily, that the winner was Thor; it took him so long to do that, however, that Volstagg actually woke up before Thor left the arena, banged up and a little dizzy.

None too kindly, he refused the healers help and left the arena alongside Thor, back to where they were. There was another round of applause, something Thor seemed quite happy with, as the contestants congratulated them. And finally they sat back down.

The Arena Master took advantage of the silence and quickly called the other fighters to the arena, but Clark wasn't actually paying attention; he wasn't the only one. After a fight like the one they just watched, any other would seem uninteresting.

"Do neither of you have any shame?!" Sif exclaimed. "Do you call that-that thing a fight?!!"

"They loved it!" Thor argued.

"Sure, "Fandral chuckled, "but none of them would have to come to the Convergence Tournament to see something you do every night at the tavern."

Thor and Volstagg just laughed; that told Clark who was right in the conversation.

"Ah, I almost had you!" lamented Volstagg, pressing a cold mead mug to his face. "One misstep! One! And you won!"

"We all have our dreams, my friend!" Thor answered, snickering. "We all have our dreams."
Volstagg looked at him seriously for a few seconds and Clark truly wondered if he was offended; then they both began to laugh even harder. Sif rolled her eyes for the hundredth time.

"I can't believe that!" Jane exclaimed, looking at Frigga. "They are drinking! Look!"

Frigga seemed to find that extremely funny; Jane couldn't see why. How could Thor and Volstagg just sit down and drink after a fight like that?! They should've been in the hospital or the Asgardian equivalent of it!"

"We heal fast, Jane," Frigga explained, still smiling. "Neither of them is truly hurt, you do not have to worry."

Maybe, but she was worried. Jesus Christ, how she was worried! Jane found out that she did not enjoy seeing Thor fighting. God of Thunder or not, she did not like to see him in harm's way.

Something on her expression made Frigga's mirth fade, turning into a warm smile. She grabbed Jane's hand.

"Jane, trust me. Thor will be fine."

Somehow, that made Jane relax a bit.

"Next fight: Fandral VS Sif!" yelled the Arena Master.

"A-ha!" exclaimed Fandral, getting up as quickly as Sif, who was also grinning.

Like in the first time they fought, they quickly ran to jump into the arena, but this time Clark stopped Sif. She turned, confused.

"Good luck," he said, knowing well that this fight would be her hardest.

Fandral turned to him, frowning. "Hey!"

"Good luck to you too, Fandral," Clark added, smirking. "After everything she made me go through while training, you're going to need it."

He rolled his eyes as Sif laughed and they both jumped together.

"Now, this is going to be a sight to see," Thor said, slapping Clark's shoulder. "You saw how fast Sif is, right?"

"Yeah," Clark agreed.

"Fandral is the only one who can keep up with her."

"FIGHT!"

Clark saw soon enough what Thor meant. Sif and Fandral blurred as they moved, their blades connecting in a split second. And then the true display of their speed began; it was unbelievable.

His Kryptonian eyes could barely follow their blades as they clashed against one another, so fast that he could actually see their trail, forming a cage around them of afterimages. The sand covering the arena was sucked into a vortex around them, making an artificial sandstorm, and Clark could see their shadows through it, moving faster at each second.
He knew he could move faster than them, but he was absolutely sure he couldn't mirror their moves with the same skill. What they were doing wasn't simply raw speed; it was what almost a thousand years of martial training could achieve. Clark was watching two masters crossing swords and he was amazed.

Of course, a duel that fast couldn't last a long time.

The number of people who actually saw what happened was small, simply because it happened too fast for their eyes to catch. Clark, however, saw everything. He saw Sif, his teacher, managing to move even faster than before, her blade scratching Fandral's hand; he saw blood flying and the Asgardian warrior flinching.

That was all it took; Sif's blade stopped, touching Fandral's neck.

The movements stopped suddenly. The sandstorm ended as abruptly as it had started. And when the crowd finally saw what had happened, their yells echoed. Still, Sif kept the sword pointed at Fandral's, until he sighed and dropped his.

"Fine, you win this time," he admitted.

"This time?" she joked, as the Arena Master announced her as the winner.

Clark didn't even realize he was clapping, so impressed with the fight he saw that he hardly could believe. Sif certainly had not told him she could do that. He laughed; she was keeping her tricks in case they had to face each other. Smart.

Luckily, it wouldn't happen. Sif would face Thor in the semifinals. And Clark? He would face Skurge.

"I almost had you!" Fandral complained. "You did that same feint you always do!"

"And you fell for it. Again!" Sif laughed. "You are so gullible!"

"Now, that is true!" Thor needled, good-natured, as Volstagg cackled.

"It really was an impressive fight," Clark said.

The Arena Master had announced a break before the last fights, so the contestants could regain their bearings. To Sif and Thor that meant drinking mead and joking. To Clark, that meant waiting, getting tenser at each second. And to Skurge, the Executioner, that apparently meant staring at said Kryptonian with all malice he could muster.

Clark couldn't count the number of fights he had watched that day, warrior after warrior testing themselves against each other. And somehow, after all that, he was in the semifinals. After one fight. Thor had told him he was at the top of Asgard's rank, but it wasn't until he saw himself one fight away from the big final that he realized how high up he truly was.

The Asgardians had to earn the privilege of facing him, Thor had explained. That didn't make much sense to Clark, but it was what it was.

So now he was waiting to finally face his last adversary. And then, either Thor or Sif. He really didn't know what to think of that, to be honest. He could see dozens of warriors around him that would give anything to be in his position. Recognition in this tournament, overseen by the best warriors of Asgard and even Thor and Odin themselves, was worth everything to them. A lot more
than was worth to Clark.

But he came to understand that it wasn't about how much you wanted, it was about deserving. You either carved a path to glory using your own hands, fighting and beating adversaries along the way, or you didn't. Clark, wanting or not, had already done that. Thus, by Asgardian rules, he "deserved" to be where he was.

It didn't matter to them that Clark really didn't care one way or the other.

"What goes inside your mind, my friend?" Thor asked.

"Just thinking," Clark answered, looking to all other contestants. "Any of them would value my place in the semifinal more than me. Now don't get me wrong, I know it's an honor, but--"

"But you were not raised to see it as 'honor'," Thor finished, drinking his mead. "I understand, Kal. But you have to understand something too: they have to earn their position. You earned yours. Even if you offered your place to any of them, they would not accept it. Because it has no value if they did not arrive there by their own merits."

He slapped Clark's back and held his shoulder.

"So do not feel that you stole someone's place today," Thor continued. "You won this position. And if they wanted they should have fought harder. That is the Asgardian way."

Well, that settled it. It didn't exactly make Clark feel better, but at least it put his mind at ease about not deserving to be there. He looked back at Thor and nodded, receiving a bright smile and a mug of mead in return; he drank a little bit, very carefully.

At the moment he put the mug down, the Arena Master reappeared. All the talking eventually died down, as every single person turned to look at him. So, as theatrically as possible, he raised his hands.

"And now, to the first fight of the semifinal: Skurge, the Executioner VS Kal-El, the Savior of Midgard!"

Skurge got up immediately and went to the arena, his enormous axe in his hand. Clark looked back at his friends for a moment, before downing the last of his mead. Somehow, the fact that he was fighting a man without any qualms about killing an already defeated adversary, made it easier.

This wasn't an innocent Asgardian, it was just a bad guy.

"Kal!" called Sif, making him look at her. "Remember what I asked: break him in two!"

"Yes!" agreed Thor, punching his arm. "Show him what happens to dishonorable warriors in Asgard! And then we will fight at the final!"

"I will be at the final!" Sif countered. "But I agree with the first part. Destroy him!"

"Good luck, lad," said Fandral, nodding at him.

"Good slaughter!" screamed Volstagg, clearly a little bit inebriated.

"Thanks, guys," Clark said, smiling.

And then he took off, cutting the sky as he flew up, landing in the arena right in front of Skurge so strongly that the ground shook. Predictably, the crowd loved that.
"He clearly learned to show off from you, Thor. You always manage to spoil my students—" he heard Sif's voice beginning to rant, before he concentrated, ignoring everything around him.

Clark got up, eyeing Skurge with barely concealed anger. The Executioner stared back.

"I will kill you, Kryptonian," he stated. "And I will enjoy it."

"You are not killing anybody today, Skurge," Clark talked back. "And I will make you pay for what you almost did to that man, that I promise you."

Skurge only stared back, ignoring the Arena Master attempts to silence them.

"You are not a warrior," Skurge said, finally. "Not if death offends you that much."

"I am a warrior," Clark answered, with a certainty he did not know he had before. "That's exactly why death offends me that much. And why I fight people like you."

And with that, Clark assumed his martial stance, the practiced moves fluid. His eyes never left Skurge when he channeled his energy; the sand around him was blown away for a moment, alongside his red cape, and began to float.

"FIGHT!"

Skurge roared like a lion, his axe moving fast in Clark's direction. The Kryptonian watched the huge blade coming down and, turning his body, he evaded it, letting it crash against the ground. It should have simply hit the sand, maybe even get stuck, or so Clark thought; he didn't think the ground would simply explode under him, the sheer strength of the blow cracking the arena open.

To everybody else fighting in that tournament, that would have been the end. With no ground to step on, any Asgardian would have fallen down and then be quickly disposed of; Clark, however, was a Kryptonian under a yellow sun. He didn't need a ground to step on. Ignoring the debris flying everywhere, Clark floated a few inches above the arena, dashing forward against Skurge. The Asgardian pulled his axe back to defend himself in time; it just didn't matter. Clark's palm hit the middle of the axe and broke it in two in one blow, colliding after against Skurge's chest. The impact was lessened, but Kryptonians were just too strong; he felt the black armor bending, the form of Clark's hand forever etched on its surface.

Usually, Clark would have stopped now. Given his adversary a little time to catch his breath, maybe give him a chance to try again. Skurge, however, didn't deserve that. And he had made Sif a promise.

So he attacked again, both his hands clashing against Skurge's ears, the powerful hit destabilizing him completely. Skurge was dizzy, out of breath and unarmed. Torquasm-Rao, however, dictated that an adversary was not beaten until he simply couldn't fight anymore.

Clark's fist crashed against Skurge's right knee, forcing him down with a yell; the back of his same hand went up, hitting his throat; his right leg kicked Skurge still working leg, making him fall; and finally, Clark's knee collided against Skurge's face.

The hit was incredibly strong. He felt Skurge's nose breaking on impact and saw the Asgardian flying up. It was over, Clark knew that. Even if he somehow wasn't unconscious yet, the Arena Master would surely end the fight. Clark watched as Skurge flew, his Kryptonian reflexes seeing things almost in slow motion.
And in a split-second decision, Clark decided that simply wasn't enough.

Against Sif's orders, he used all his speed to catch up to Skurge flying body; and then, using all his strength, Clark delivered the most powerful punch he could in Skurge's face, the powerful blow throwing him against the ground.

The entire middle of the arena became a crater as Skurge collided against it, all the sand rising like a wave. The stadium trembled, like if a massive earthquake had just happened.

Now it was over.

"Unbelievable!" yelled Sif, breaking the absolute silence that had fallen over the arena. "Did you see that?!

Thor had seen that and he still couldn't believe it. If this was what a Kryptonian could do after three days of training, what would Kal be capable of after training for centuries, like he had? He was excited just by thinking about it. He had to fight Kal in the final!

"That was… I have no words," Fandral said, still too shocked to move. Volstagg just stared, jaw agape, his mug of mead forgotten.

Even his father was watching Kal with his eye wide, Thor noticed. Skurge wasn't just a common warrior. Dishonorable or not, he was powerful and skilled. And Kal just dealt with him as if he was barely a nuisance. It was amazing.

The Arena Master was getting up after being tossed back by the rising sand, looking disheveled and a bit dizzy, but not hurt. Skurge, on the other hand, was practically under the ground now. Kal's punch had literally buried him in the arena.

Somehow, the reappearance of the Arena Master broke the spell and suddenly there was the loudest cheering in the history of Asgard in the arena. If Thor, that had seen what Kal could do before, was impressed beyond words, he couldn't imagine what all the people there were thinking.

He wanted to face Kal more than ever now!

"Holy crap!" Jane finally exclaimed, seeing Clark fly from the arena.

She didn't even care she just cursed in front of her boyfriend's mother, because she too looked ready to say something similar. That… That was Superman in all his glory! Jane couldn't find the words to say how shocked she was by witnessing that.

The healers had dug up Skurge from the arena and after a few incantations from the sorcerers down there the sand had covered the crater again. Jane, however, couldn't help but to watch as Clark was swarmed by every contestant around him, each one of them trying to congratulate him.

"Did you know he could do that?" Frigga finally asked, eyes wide.

Jane laughed nervously. "He is Superman, isn't he?"

"Kal, I am so proud of you!" Sif announced, making Clark blush; what, after basically destroying Skurge, seemed ridiculous, he was well aware. "You are, without a doubt, my best apprentice."

"Thanks, Sif," Clark said, smiling.
"Ah, stop this nonsense!" Fandral exclaimed. "He won by himself, Sif! Stop trying to hog all the glory!"

Sif just shook her head.

"People who are actually still in the tournament are talking, Fandral. Please be silent."

There was a round of laughs after Sif said that, even though none of them but Thor and Clark were actually in the tournament.

"And now, Thor, it is our turn," Sif continued. "Are you ready to lose?"

"Ha! You wish!" Thor countered, as they both jumped in the arena.

Now, that was a fight Clark wanted to see. He knew Thor was stronger than Sif, there was no question about that. But would her skill make her able to balance things? Would it be enough?

"FIGHT!" yelled the Arena Master; Clark would soon find out.

Sif didn't give Thor any time, closing the distance between them as quickly as she did in her other fights. She was, clearly, faster than him; Thor, however, was also very fast. Dodging her attack, he used his hammer, making a broad movement, trying to catch her. Sif turned and jumped, evading it skillfully.

What she didn't anticipate was Thor releasing the hammer.

His weapon didn't hit her, but it forced her to use her small shield to defend herself. It was a heavy hit and it actually dislocated her in the air. And it gave Thor enough time to jump closer. Sif landed, already attacking, but not fast enough; Thor's hand closed around her wrist, making her drop the sword with a twist.

Clark wondered for a second if that was the end for Sif; right until she turned her whole body and clashed her knee against Thor's head. Thor grunted, releasing her for a second, which gave her the chance to unleash a flurry of attacks against him, using her shield as a bashing weapon.

Thor, while being slower, was also incredibly skilled, deflecting most of the attacks and attacking her back. Both of them traded blows for almost a minute, dancing in the arena, until they disengaged, jumping apart; Thor rolled on the ground, grabbing Sif's sword at the same time she got his hammer.

And a second after, they were attacking again, this time using each other's weapons to do so. Clark really couldn't see a difference in skill as they used completely different weapons; he guessed that after centuries training, they would learn to use every kind of weapon in existence.

It was amazing to watch both of them fighting. They moved with a certainty Clark didn't think he would ever had, their attacks so well executed that it was almost as if their bodies did that automatically. Both of them were equally skilled.

But Thor was called the God of Thunder for a reason.

Kicking Sif back, he raised his sword to the sky. As if the weather responded to him, clouds formed on top of the arena. And unleashed a pillar of thunder on the tip of the sword. Clark could barely believe in what he was seeing, as the electricity flowed from the sword to Thor and from Thor to the arena.
It didn't matter that the ground was made of sand, because the ground all around Thor simply exploded, hitting Sif with all its power. She was electrocuted so badly that there was smoke and she was tossed on her back.

Thor touched her neck with the sword.

"So? Who is the best again?" he asked.

Sif just groaned and released her hammer, her body still having spasms.

"Victory belongs to THOR!" the Arena Master announced, making the crowd cheer.

"You cheated!" Sif complained, her muscles still shaking.

"Sif, Sif, Sif… We all have our gifts. Mine is winning!" Thor bragged.

"Cheating is easy!" she complained again, turning to Kal. "Kal, do me a favor and break him in half!"

He rolled his eyes. "I will do my best," he answered, but Sif didn't feel that much sincerity.

Fandral and Volstagg were too busy laughing to be able to say something; Sif would get them back for this, there was no question about that. Still, losing against Thor wasn't something to be ashamed of. He was, after Odin, the strongest Asgardian warrior. Even if she did not like to lose, she knew that if Thor fought with all his strength against her, she wouldn't have lasted a second.

She did wonder, however, if Clark could beat him.

"Now, we prepare for the final battle! The one that will elect our new champion!" the Arena Master began, making everybody look back at the arena. "Thor, the God of Thunder VS Kal-El, the Kryptonian!"

Kal and Thor looked at each other and smiled.

"Good fight," Kal wished him. "But not that good."

"Ha!" Thor laughed. "The same to you, my friend!"

And both of them jumped down in the arena, already facing each other. Sif could feel the anticipation building, every single person in the stadium on their feet, anxious to see the big final. And what a final it was: Thor VS Kal. Kryptonian VS Asgardian. Even Sif could barely wait.

"FIGHT!"

Thor decided to attack as fast as he could, maybe trying to overwhelm Kal, his war hammer descending upon the Kryptonian. That was a mistake; Torquasm-Rao was too good for counter-attacks. But Thor wouldn't be Thor if he wasn't taking risks.

Kal deflected Thor's hammer to the side, but before he could actually counter-attack Thor used his other hand to attack as well. Both of them traded blows, too close to each other to try to dodge, fists and hammer blows raining upon them.

As he did against her, Thor released his hammer hoping to catch Kal by surprise. And, in a certain way he did. Managing to distract Kal, Thor held his arms. Then, he attacked the only way he had left; he headbutted him with all his strength.
The blow echoed throughout the arena, dry, short and most definitely painful; Sif could see, however, that the one who suffered the most with this attack was Thor himself. She could only watch as Thor's eyes became glassy for a second. And then, Kal held Thor's arms and headbutted him back.

Sif actually flinched when she heard the noise.

Thor flew back, bouncing in the arena, his head hurting as if Kal had just split it open. How exactly could someone have such a hard head?! He had no idea, but as he rolled in the sand he had no time to think about it.

Digging his hands in the ground, Thor managed to stop himself, just at the moment he saw his own hammer flying against him. He had no chance to defend himself, as he felt his own weapon clash against his chest, sending him back a few meters. Coughing, his ribs hurting, Thor got back up, his hammer back into his hand.

Kal was just too strong. For the second time in his life Thor had encountered someone stronger than him; the Hulk, however, he could outmaneuver by being smart. The Kryptonian had all that strength and a thinking head. That would be hard to trick.

But maybe he wouldn't have to.

Raising his hammer to the sky, Thor summoned a storm again, feeling the thunderbolts descending upon him. And then, holding all their strength inside himself, he unleashed it against Kal.

He had no time to dodge, as the thunderbolts swallowed him whole, turning the whole arena blue. Even still, Thor didn't stop, screaming as he channeled his power without the aid of Mjölnir until there was nothing left.

There was one second of suspense, since nobody could see through the smoke; and then a pair of red eyes glowed.

"Oh, shit–"

Thor could only raise his hammer as a pair of red beams split the air in his direction. He could feel the metal getting hot as the unbelievable power behind that attack was poured into the hammer and he wondered if it would melt in his hands. Before it could, however, Kal was upon him.

He had to hand it to Sif, she as a good teacher. Kal's stance and attacks were perfect. Thor barely had the chance to defend himself as a flurry of attacks was unleashed upon him. Face, stomach, neck, knee, chest and then a powerful headbutt all over again. Thor was tossed on his back, his entire body hurting, but Odin didn't raise a quitter.

So while he was falling, still in the air, he tossed his hammer at Kal with all his strength.

Clark raised his hand and grabbed the hammer before it could hit him. It was heavy and Thor tossed it with incredibly strength, but he took it. He looked at Thor as he got up, panting, and with all his power he began to close his hand.

The hammer was being crushed into dust under his fingers.

He saw Thor's jaw drop and he heard the crowd gasping in surprise, but he didn't stop. Despite all he thought about himself and this tournament, Clark was actually having fun. For the first time he
could fight using all his strength, without having to be afraid of killing someone. For the first time he didn't have to worry about bystanders. For the first time he didn't feel like a bull in a china shop.

Clark wanted to see what he could really do.

Tossing the crushed hammer to the side, Clark looked at Thor.

"Call your real hammer," he said, seeing Thor's eyes widen. "Let's see what you can really do."

Thor grinned and opened his hand. Soon enough, Clark listened to something parting the sky and Mjölnir appeared, flying right at Thor's opened hand. He held it with practiced ease, beginning to swing it fast. And without saying anything, he flew against Clark, at the same moment Clark flew against him.

Fist and hammer clashed against each other.

Algrim looked around his cell, full of prisoners from the raids against Vanaheim. It had been his idea to hide between them, so the Asgardians would take him inside their palace without the need to force their way through. They could do it, of course, but they did not have the numbers they once had.

They hadn't even taken his mask from him; not that would make any difference, since Malekith had hidden his form under an illusion, but the fact that they barely searched him made hide the Kurse Stone inside his healed wound that much easier.

The cell was surrounded by a yellow barrier, too strong to be broken by his strength alone. The strength of a Kursed one, however, was unstoppable. Soon he would retrieve the stone, undergo the transformation and take their defenses from the inside. That would allow Malekith and his soldiers to invade the palace with their ships.

It was lucky for them that most Asgardians were busy fighting or watching the tournament. A tournament, he learned, made to celebrate the Dark Elves defeat. How ironic was that?

There was a shockwave of wind, debris and thunderbolts when Kal's fist clashed against Mjölnir, so strong that the barriers around the arena ignited in an orange blaze to protect the bystanders. That wasn't much of a surprise, they were there for that exact reason. What shocked Sif was the amount of damage they took, cracking like a window in the verge of breaking.

"This is insane!" Sif exclaimed, barely believing her eyes. "If they continue like this they will bring the whole place down!"

Volstagg and Fandral agreed in silence, too impressed to say anything. Sif, to be honest, had almost lost her voice too. Kal and Thor were fighting with all their power down in the arena and it was simply unbelievable.

After clashing against each other, the Kryptonian and the Asgardian were tossed back, the shockwaves throwing them away, but it stopped the fight for mere seconds. Swinging Mjölnir, Thor summoned the winds around them, conjuring a hurricane so big it took almost the entire arena, carrying the sand and filling itself with electricity.

And without waiting for Kal, he took off, flying in the middle of it.

Kal flew against him soon enough, ignoring the strong winds as if they weren't there, and Thor
pointed Mjölnir at him; there was a blast of thunder, several times stronger than the ones he conjured without Mjölnir. Kal, instead of dodging or defending himself, unleashed his heat vision.

Red and blue clashed, the electricity and the read beams fighting against each other, powering up as the two attacks collided. For a few seconds both Kal and Thor unleashed all their power.

Until everything exploded.

Sif actually flinched when the barriers cracked a bit more, but she didn't have the time to think about it because Kal launched himself upon Thor, both of them trading blows as they flew. There wasn't technique anymore, no more Torquasm-Rao, just full blown brawling.

It didn't mean it wasn't impressive though.

Algrim crushed the Kurse Stone in his hand. There was no going back now. He felt his body burning, pain like he had never experienced before taking his very being, as the stone changed him from inside out. He would become living darkness, the very avatar of his people, as unbeatable as the night.

He could hear the despair of his cellmates as he trashed around, too afraid of his transformation to get any closer. They began to call the guards, yelling in fear, but it would hardly matter. And with one last scream, Algrim became one of the Kurse.

There was an explosion of pure darkness, taking everything in its path, being barely contained by the barriers. His cellmates were thrown behind, but he didn't pay attention to that, looking at himself.

He wasn't a Dark Elf anymore, but a living weapon. His body was as hard as stone, his claws were sharper than the sharpest blade and his appearance, with horns and tusks, would put fear in the heart of his adversaries. No one could defeat a Kurse.

Grabbing one of his cellmates, Algrim used him to force the barrier, rejoicing in the screams of pain as the barrier burned him. The Asgardian guards, alerted by the yells, arrived fast. But it wouldn't matter.

With a single punch, Algrim broke the barrier, the shockwaves making the Asgardians fall down. They got up again quickly, clearly terrified, but to their credit they attacked. It made no difference. Their swords hit him, but couldn't cut his skin. So, using his incredible new strength, Algrim held them by their necks and lifted them.

And willing the fiery darkness inside himself out, he burned them to husks.

It was power like he couldn't imagine. Algrim had never, in all his life, felt so strong. There was nothing in this universe that could stop him, he was sure of that, as he walked the dungeons, ignoring the alarm sounding. The other prisoners were yelling, not able to tell what was happening. They were clearly useless, but Algrim thought they could serve as a distraction at least.

So he punched the barrier of the closest cell, destroying it. And when the prisoners realized he wasn't going to just kill them, they got out, attacking the guards arriving. Algrim followed his path, breaking the barriers and realizing the prisoners, until he got to the last one.

There was only one man inside. It was a bigger cell and the man was dressed in finer clothing, but he was a prisoner nonetheless. He was, however, different from the others, of that Algrim had no doubt.
Instead of fearing him, the prisoner stared at his eyes, almost challenging to let him out. And for the first time since Algrim had become a Kurse he felt that little warning in the back of his mind: danger.

Roaring, pulling back his hand, Algrim retreated; it just wasn't worth the trouble.

"You might want to take the stairs to the left," he heard the advice from the prisoner.

Algrim looked back at him, considering his words. The path was blocked by dozens of Asgardians. They weren't a challenge, but they would take time to kill. Maybe the prisoner was right.

Clark punched Thor's face, tossing him all the way down from the sky, but he just shrugged it off and tossed Mjölnir against him. This time, unlike the cheap imitation, Clark felt the metal hit him like a meteor, actually dropping him from the air too. Falling by Thor's side, Clark got up quickly, using his superior speed to attack before he could summon his hammer back.

His fist collided against Thor with all his power, but he actually held his ground, landing his own fist in his stomach. Again, Clark felt the hit, much stronger than before, the hammer clearly powering up Thor; still, not stronger than his own punches. Clark hit him again, before jumping to the side to evade Mjölnir flying back to Thor.

The last time he had fought like that was against Zod. Things were different now, of course; Thor was a friend and they were fighting for fun. And that made all the difference. Clark found out, to his surprise, that he actually liked to fight.

Both of them were laughing, more than happy to test their strength against each other, like a couple of children playing. But unfortunately, neither of them could play for much longer.

They heard the alarms at the same time, stopping to attack immediately. Clark didn't know what was happening, but all around him the Asgardians were taking their eyes from the arena to look somewhere else.

"The prisons," Thor said, eyes widening. "Loki!"

Clark understood enough. All Asgardians were leaving the arena, their weapons ready, led by Fandral and Volstagg, but Sif jumped in the arena with them. The hurricane Thor had summoned was gone now.

Thor looked up, to his father.

"Go!" Odin ordered.

And swinging his hammer, Thor took off. Clark considered following him, but Sif stopped him.

"Wait, if they need you, you go," she said. "Let's not divide our strength more than necessary for now."

Saying this, she jumped all the way to where Odin, Frigga and Jane were.

"Frigga, go back to the palace and take Jane. Sif, go with them," Odin said. "You will be safe there, until we deal with this skirmish."

Frigga nodded and opened a fiery portal so she and Sif could take Jane back to safety, all the way to the palace. Clark turned to look there, seeing a golden dome beginning to take form around it,
not that different from the barrier they had in the arena. Whatever was happening, the palace would be able to guard itself.

That was when he heard an explosion coming from the Bifrost.

Heimdall stood guard at the Bifrost, as he always had, his eyes being able to see everything happening in the Nine Realms. He smiled, listening to the laughs of Thor and the Kryptonian Kal-El, as they battled in the tournament, both obviously happy. It was good to see and hear happiness in Asgard.

His hearing was picking up a different kind of sound, however.

He heard the alarms of the palace and the roars of some beast. He heard Asgardians fighting and dying. He heard the sound of the guards marching to the prisons, ready to battle whatever monstrosity was doing all that. And he also heard the faint sound of ships approaching.

Yet, he could not see them.

Running as fast as he could, Heimdall left his post and followed the sounds, his steps lighting up the Bifrost. Forcing his eyes, he could see the shape of a ship flying by the side of the Rainbow Bridge, using some kind of cloaking device to hide itself from him. So he did what a guardian had to do: he attacked it.

Heimdall jumped from the bridge, his knives cutting the hull of the ship easily, as he used them to remain stuck to it. There was fire when the weird metal was cut, but the ship continued to fly normally; he doubted it would when he destroyed its engine, though. Allowing the knives to cut even more of the hull, Heimdall got closer from the engine and launched one of his knives there, jumping back to the Bifrost.

The result was instantaneous, as the ship lost its power and exploded, falling on top of the Bifrost in a blaze of fire.

That was when a much bigger ship made itself known, releasing a fleet of smaller ones in the palace's direction.

Malekith could barely contain his excitement. He had waited too long for this and now he would take back what was rightfully his. Soon, the Aether would be back in his possession and when the Convergence reached its peak he would be able to save his people from extinction.

But first he needed to win a battle.

His ship flew over Asgard's oceans, dodging the fire from the defense towers, and soon he could see the golden palace in the horizon. And around it, taking form, was a yellow barrier. Malekith knew his ship wouldn't be able to destroy it, but that would not be necessary.

Not when Algrim was already inside, his sole purpose right now to bring that barrier down.

His trust that Algrim would bring the barrier down never wavered, as he flew at full speed in the palace's direction. If he couldn't bring it down in time, he would crash against it or be forced to maneuver back, passing again in the middle of the defense towers. But Malekith knew his trust was well placed.

And just like he planned, at the exact moment his ship would hit the barrier, Algrim destroyed the
source of its power.

His ship entered the palace destroying every pillar in its way, the hull simply too strong to be stopped. He and his soldiers held down as the ship lost speed, touching the very halls of the Asgardian palace, until if finally stopped.

Right in the middle of the throne room.

A full battalion of Einherjar approached the ship, their swords, spears and shields raised. Malekith observed them through the cameras, his soldiers ready to attack. So he opened the doors of the ship, drawing all their attention to it.

At the same time he activated the turrets.

The guns fired their red laser, catching the Asgardians by surprise and killing several. And at that moment his soldiers left the ship, shooting. They managed to kill the closest ones, but eventually the Einherjar made a shield wall and defended themselves from their guns. So they used a black hole grenade.

One of his soldiers tossed it right at their shield wall; when it detonated, a singularity was opened, its gravitational field dragging every Asgardian in its reach and shoving them through a black hole, sending them to any other place in the universe, most likely the void of space.

The disorganized shield wall turned the Einherjar into targets all over again and his soldiers began to shoot, killing several. But reinforcements eventually arrived. Using their blades to fight in close quarters, his soldiers met the Asgardians head on.

That was when Malekith left the ship, walking in the middle of the battlefield alongside a few trusted soldiers. He completely ignored the fight, following the call of the Aether; that is, until he passed through the Asgardian throne. The throne of the same people that had defeated him before.

Grabbing a belt full of grenades from a fallen soldier, he tossed one against the throne, seeing the powerful singularity breaking it stone by stone and throwing it inside the black hole. Now it was time to get the Aether.

Clark saw a scene of total destruction in the throne room as Odin opened a portal, not unlike Frigga. Dozens of Asgardians were dead on the floor, one of the ships that had invaded had somehow destroyed everything and landed there and there were other beings there as well.

Pointing their weapons at them.

Before they could fire, Odin unleashed a golden beam of energy from his spear, completely disintegrating them. He was surprised however, Clark could see that.

"Dark Elves!" he exclaimed and Clark had to make sure he heard it right.

Kneeling, Clark turned the closest one to face him, gasping when he saw the same beings from the book Odin had showed them. But how was that possible? Looking at Odin, however, he saw something resembling fear.

"Frigga!"

The Aether, they were here for it, Clark suddenly realized. And right now, the Aether was inside Jane. Odin raised his hand and began to open another portal, no doubt to his and Frigga's quarters,
where he could defend them. Nothing was happening however.

"Someone is blocking me," he said, looking at Clark.

Clark concentrated, trying to hear their voices, to find where they were. It wasn't long until he did; Odin nodded to him. So faster than ever, Clark took off, breaking the floors of the palace to get there quickly.

Frigga watched as the doors of her quarters were broken and two Dark Elves came in. One she knew, it was Malekith, the leader of the Dark Elves. The other, slender, carrying a staff and using a mask she did not know.

It hardly mattered.

"Stand down, creatures," she ordered, a sword in hand, as Jane remained behind her, scared, "and you may still survive this."

"I have survived worse, woman," Malekith answered, not stopping. "And I would have what is mine."

He looked at Jane as he said that. But as he did, he frowned for a second. Before he could do anything, Frigga slashed his face with her sword. He grunted in pain, attacking her with his own sword. Frigga grinned as she defended herself, moving with incredible grace as they fought.

All Asgardians knew how to fight and as a Queen, married to Odin, Frigga made sure to be an expert.

She and Malekith danced in the room, their blades clashing against each other, the fight getting faster by the second. But while she fought him, the other Dark Elf advanced towards Jane, close enough to grab her by the neck.

Or try to, because at the moment the hand touched Jane the illusion dispelled and Sif took her place; it was by a miracle that the Dark Elf managed to use the staff to defend from Sif.

"Witch!" yelled Malekith, as he saw Jane's form disappearing.

He was so enraged that Frigga managed to surprise him, disarming him with a powerful blow and pressing the sword against his neck. At the moment she would kill him, however, the entire wall of the room exploded, the debris flying against her.

Frigga managed to summon a barrier to protect her and Sif, but as she did it the beast that had destroyed the wall advanced upon her, breaking her barrier with a flick of its claws. And before she could do anything, it grabbed her by the neck, taking the sword from her hand and pointing its claws at her back; it was just too strong for her to do anything.

Sif stopped to fight immediately, seeing that she was being held hostage.

"Where is the Aether?" Malekith asked.

Frigga smiled, challenging him.

"I will never tell you."

Malekith looked inside her eyes for a moment.
"I believe you," he said.

Frigga felt the creature's claws piercing her skin and she knew she would die. But before she could even feel the pain, there was a sound, like the very sky was being split open. There was a blue and red blur.

And then Kal-El's fist collided against the creature with such power that Frigga listened to it breaking the walls of the palace nonstop for minutes.

Clark flew as fast as he could, breaking the floors of the palace instead of going around them, following the sound of fighting coming from Frigga's room. And when he finally arrived, he saw a huge horned monster a second away from killing her.

He saw the claws of the beast piercing Frigga's back and he moved, faster than he ever did, not about to let her die under his watch. Before he could even think, he was already reacting, his hand making a fist to punch the creature with all his strength, throwing it away from Frigga.

"Frigga, are you okay?!" Clark asked, holding her before she could drop, seeing the blood on her back.

Before she could answer, however, Malekith screamed.

"ABOMINATION!"

It took Clark one second to understand that he was talking to him. Odin had told him, after all, that Dark Elves despised Kryptonians. One was darkness itself, the other was light. They were opposites; and they were both enemies.

He did not have the chance to answer, because before he could do anything, Malekith took a belt full of weird looking grenades and pulled their pins, tossing all of them at the middle of the room, between Clark and Frigga and Sif and the other Dark Elf.

None of them had time to react, as all the grenades detonated, not with an explosion, but with a gigantic black hole. Clark felt himself being pushed towards it, doing his best to try and shield Frigga from the gravitational pull as his muscles battled against the overwhelming force.

Sif and the unnamed Dark Elf were pulled as well, both of them trying to hold themselves desperately. Sif pierced the ground with her sword, but it was just too strong, and the Dark Elf grasped her leg, trying at all costs to not be pulled towards the black hole.

Still holding Frigga, Clark reached and grasped Sif, pulling her and the Dark Elf holding her closer, his entire body burning with the effort, just like when he battled the World Engine. He tried to make sure the gravitational pull was only dragging him, knowing his body could probably get out of this in one piece, but at each passing second the black hole got closer and even stronger. Clark didn't even notice he was yelling, all his will focused in fighting against it; and he managed to stop being pulled.

That was when Malekith tossed another grenade.

Frigga knew they would get pulled into the black hole now, there was no escape. Kal-El had managed to hold them until now, but the last grenade was just too much. She could feel him holding her and Sif, and consequently the Dark Elf holding Sif's leg, but sooner rather than later it would be too much.
She had to do something.

Focusing, ignoring the pain and the gravitational pull as best as she could, Frigga began to open a portal behind them. It was, however, impossible to do it. The singularity was disrupting her magic and there wasn't anything she could do about it. Frigga could, however, try something different.

Closing her eyes, she began to craft a barrier around them. The orange energy surrounded them, like a ball, protecting them from the brunt of its power; she knew, though, it wouldn't be enough to avoid the black hole.

But maybe it would be enough to make them survive.

Clark felt the entire world shifting around them as the black hole finally absorbed them, the orange barrier Frigga summoned protecting his body from the truly powerful gravitational force. For one moment, he was confused, not knowing what was happening.

That's when he realized they were in the middle of space.

That grenade had opened a wormhole and tossed them… Somewhere. He had absolutely no idea where, but it didn't matter right now. He could survive in vacuum, but he wasn't sure if Asgardians could.

Looking around as fast as he could, Clark's eyes fixed themselves on what could be their salvation: a big planet nearby.

Making sure he was grabbing everybody, Clark began to fly as fast as he could, the orange barrier still around them. It didn't take long until they began to descend on the planet, its atmosphere starting to burn the orange dome around them. He looked around, seeing Sif, Frigga and the Dark Elf barely managing to understand what was going on, maybe to exhausted and hurt to care.

So he pushed down, trusting Frigga's magic to hold its own. And surprisingly, it did. For a time.

Until it exploded. It was like they collided against something, except there was nothing to collide against. Clark didn't understand what happened, but it was too late to care, because they were all freefalling now and there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Clark crashed against the ground heavily, breaking everything in his path, feeling his body apparently hitting everything it could. But soon, he managed to stop; he breathed, deeply, and spat the dirt from his mouth. Getting up, Clark looked around, trying to find Frigga, Sif and the Dark Elf, maybe try to identify where he was. What he saw, however, was less rewarding and much more worrying.

Because high up in the sky, glowing amongst the clouds, was a red sun.
Chapter 24 – Red Sun

Thor was flying through the corridors of the palace, holding Mjölnir in front of him, going so fast that everything in his path was thrown against the walls, as if a supersonic jet reached top speed in a closed room. He and the prison guards had already dealt with the situation in the dungeons, but they realized too late that what happened down there was only a distraction.

The palace was under attack.

Without waiting for any sort of backup, Thor took off and flew as fast as he could, hearing as he flew the sounds of combat. Jane and his mother were in the palace, sent there because supposedly the place was safe; except the barrier that kept the palace guarded was down and Dark Elves had invaded it.

How the Dark Elves were even alive Thor didn't know or care right now; the only thing in his mind as he flew was the fact that the Aether was inside Jane, the Convergence was closing upon them and the Dark Elves were here. It wasn't difficult to guess what they were after.

Thor heard loud sounds as the neared his mother's chambers, walls breaking, yelling, swords clashing. And when he finally arrived, not losing speed when his feet touched the floor, the sight that greeted him was enough to make his insides fill with dread.

He couldn't do anything as he saw Kal, his mother, Sif and a Dark Elf being dragged through a black hole, disappearing in it.

There was an ominous silence as the black hole closed, shutting the only way back. His mother, Sif and Kal were not there anymore and Thor didn't have any clue where they were or if they were even alive. He had no idea how to follow them, how to help, what in the Nine Realms he could do.

That was when his eyes fell upon the one responsible: Malekith.

Thor recognized him from the memories of his people, the leader of the Dark Elves defeated by his grandfather 5000 years ago. But he did not care about how he was here, how he was alive and how the Dark Elves were back. Thor saw only fury.

Screaming in rage, Thor unleashed all his power, Mjölnir summoning a thunderstorm so big that the entire room was filled with electricity. The floor, walls and ceiling cracked, the lightning bolts leaving a trail of utter destruction as they flew towards Malekith. The Dark Elf only had the chance to widen his eyes.

Malekith was completely enveloped by the thunderstorm, the electricity burning his skin so badly that a tower of smoke rose from him. He couldn't do anything, his muscles completely unresponsive as he was shocked, the spasms keeping him immobilized, capable only of yelling in pain.

Thor focused even more power through Mjölnir.

That thing attacked Asgard. It killed who knows how many Asgardians, made a path of complete destruction through his home with the intention of killing the woman he loved and ripping the
Aether from her body. And it probably succeeded in killing his mother, Sif and Kal. There were many thoughts passing through Thor's mind, but none of them were mercy.

In his rage, however, Thor forgot that Malekith didn't do all that alone.

When the wall by his side broke it was already too late for him to defend himself. A horned creature appeared unleashing a powerful blow against his face and Thor felt as if he was punched by Kal, being thrown to the other side of the room, the distraction making the thunderstorm end.

Shaking his head, Thor got up fast, only to see the huge creature grabbing an injured Malekith and jumping from the balcony, falling on top of their ship. Snarling, Thor twisted and tossed Mjölnir, the hammer traveling fast, pursuing the ship as it flew away from the palace. And when it was about to make contact, the ship simply disappeared, as if it never been there in the first place.

Thor looked from the empty space where the ship had been to the empty space where his mother and friends also had been. The only thing that could top his anger was how unworthy he was feeling at that moment.

"Thor!"

He turned fast, recognizing Jane's voice. His mother managed to keep her safe, Thor realized, relieved; that was the only good news he had since the beginning of all this. His girlfriend was entering the destroyed room, her expression filled with fear, but also courage.

"Frigga, Sif and Clark—"

"I know," he interrupted, pushing her closer. "I saw it."

"Are they… Are they dead?" Jane asked, almost whispering.

"No," Thor answered with a certainty he didn't feel. "Just gone. Malekith opened a black hole and they were pulled into it. But I am certain they survived."

"So that means they are somewhere else," Jane concluded. "But where?"

Thor didn't know, but he knew someone who probably could find out.

Clark had absolutely no idea where he was. The planet seemed extremely alien; of course, that particular description was beyond obvious, but he didn't exactly know how else to say it. Its surface was rocky, the ground uneven and full of weird formations. There were deep fissures and cave entrances and the whole place was covered in a thick fog. Geysers exploded from time to time from the fissures, sending jets of water high up in the air.

The most distinctive characteristic of the place, however, one that Clark couldn't help but to stare at every 10 seconds, was the red sun glowing in the sky, coloring the whole horizon crimson.

That was bad news. Like all Kryptonians, Clark constantly absorbed sunlight. It was an evolutionary trait his kind developed to make up for the lack of resources in Krypton. But, obviously, the amount of energy he could absorb from the sun depended on the sun itself. A powerful sun, a yellow sun, like they had on Earth was enough to overcharge his body with so much energy that he became incredibly powerful, capable of using the full extent of his gifts.

But a red sun? Under that kind of sun, Clark was a normal Kryptonian. Stronger than a human, since his body adapted to survive a stronger gravity, but not nearly close of what he could do on
Earth. He couldn't feel that familiar tingle on his skin under the red sun, indicating that his body was recharging its energy; on Earth, even at night or on clouded days he could feel that.

That meant a simple thing: once he used the energy he had stored during his time on Asgard, he was done. No more flying, no more out of the charts strength, no more "Man of Steel". And in a place that could turn out to be dangerous, that was worrying to say the least.

Sighing, Clark looked around again, trying to see where Frigga, Sif and the Dark Elf had fallen, but without success. So he stopped for a bit and raised his left arm.

"Kelex, where are we?" Clark asked, his voice betraying his nervousness.

There were a few seconds of silence, then Kelex, in the form of his skin suit's bracelet, answered: "Unknown."

Clark did a double take.

"What do you mean you don't know?" he asked.

Kelex was in silence for a moment again: "Unknow."

"Did the fall damage you?" Clark asked. "And while we are at that, what was that thing we crashed against?"

"I have not sustained any damage," Kelex answered.

"And that thing we crashed?"

"Unknow."

Clark was a patient man, but Kelex was testing him.

"Tell me what you do know, Kelex," he ordered, starting to get annoyed.

"Something is interfering with my systems," Kelex explained. "I can't pinpoint our location or send any kind of message to anyone. I cannot contact your ship back on Earth as well, even taking into consideration the fact that with the Phantom Drive still not properly installed it would take a long time before the ship arrived, depending of the distance of the two planets. We are, for all intents and purposes, stranded here."

Before Clark could add anything, Kelex continued: "We crashed against some kind of barrier of magical origin. I do not know anything about it, but it is possible that it's the barrier that is generating the interference on my systems."

That was useful news, at least. If they could find what was powering up that barrier, Kelex would be able to tell where they were. With luck, Asgard would be able to send help. All he had to do now, then, was find Frigga, Sif and the Dark Elf so they could regroup and start looking. If they did things carefully, the red sun wouldn't even be a problem.

At the moment he thought that, a fireball as big as a mountain appeared out of nothing in the sky, flying directly against him; well, so much for not getting into any problems.

"HEIMDALL!" yelled Sif, looking at the sky. "Open the Bifrost!"

That had to be the thousandth time she called for Heimdall and yet no Bifrost appeared. Maybe Sif was stubborn for trying so many times, but there was always the chance Heimdall would listen eventually or so she hoped. She didn't want to consider the gravity of their situation if they were in
a place not even Heimdall could see them.

"There is something cloaking us," Frigga said, her voice so tired Sif couldn't help but become even more worried. "That barrier we crashed when we arrived… It's surrounding the planet. Heimdall cannot see us."

Which meant Frigga wouldn't be able to open a portal as well. So there would be no help from the outside, no help from Frigga's magic and no way of even warning anybody of where they were, which they also didn't know. The only good thing that Sif could think about this situation is that they were still alive even after being shoved through a black hole and spat out in the middle of space.

If it weren't for Kal, Sif wasn't sure they would have survived. Frigga, most definitely, wouldn't have.

"We have to find Kal," Sif said, suddenly, looking at her queen. "He can help."

Frigga nodded, getting up slowly with Sif's help. That hideous creature had pierced her with its claws before Kal could stop it. It wasn't a deep wound, no organ had been harmed, and yet it refused to heal; that was the work of some kind of poison, she had no doubt.

"Is there anything I can do for you, my Queen?" Sif asked, truly lost. This situation was beyond anything she had experienced before. "Are you in too much pain?"

The Queen just smiled kindly.

"There is nothing you can do, child. I will either overcome this or I won't." She got up and they started moving. "And call me Frigga, Sif. I held you as a baby, we are beyond all this 'my Queen' nonsense."

Sif couldn't help but smile at Frigga. She knew the queen since always, to the point that she considered her family. And that wasn't making things any easier. It wasn't just her queen that was getting weaker by the minute, it was someone she cared about very much. She didn't know how she could face Thor again if something were to happen to Frigga.

Trying to suppress these unhelpful thoughts, Sif looked around, assessing the planet they were on. It seemed to be a pretty inhospitable place, she considered, seeing the rocky ground and no signs of life. Certainly different from Asgard. That didn't mean much, tough, since she was seeing a very small part of the place; for all she knew, there could be an entire civilization close by, hiding behind that fog.

As if following her line of thought, there was a strong wind and the fog in front of them was blown away. And behind it, a big city took form.

Both of them stopped walking as the tall buildings of the city appeared, gazing at the vast collection of towers and structures, every last one of them made of stone. There were houses as big as strongholds, buildings that reminded Sif of temples and smaller houses as well, all built together without any semblance of order. All that, however, didn't change Sif's conclusion about the planet.

There was a city, but it was empty.

It took them a few minutes to reach the city, because Frigga was moving slowly, but soon they were walking through its streets. But no matter how hard Sif tried, she couldn't see anyone or hear a single voice. There might have been a civilization living there once, but it was a long time ago. Now there were only ruins left and no one to tell its story.
"Do you know where are we?" Sif asked, her voice low; for some reason, talking loud in this empty place felt uncomfortable.

Frigga looked around for a while. "I have some ideas, but I am not certain."

Wherever they were, that place had been empty for a long time. The buildings were made to last and the city was still standing, but there were clear signs that little by little time was consuming it. Cracks were beginning to appear on the buildings, dust was piling up in the closed places and there were some structures that were already fallen.

The question in Sif's mind, however, wasn't how long the city was empty; it was what had happened to its people.

"The source of the magical barrier is that way," Frigga said, pointing at a far side of the city, a long way from where they were. "We should find Kal and head that way. If we can figure it out how to bring it down, Heimdall will be able to see us."

Sif nodded, agreeing with her queen. She just hoped Kal was close by.

**BOOOOM!**

She turned fast, the sword already in her hands, to see a huge explosion on the edge of the city, the flames going as far as the clouds. Somehow, Sif thought, she was sure that had something to do with her newest apprentice.

Clark had no time to dodge the falling fireball. Not because he wasn't fast enough, but because the thing was just too big. The fireball took the entire area he was on, expanding in a flash when it touched the ground, the flames consuming everything in its path; he happened to be there too.

He felt the high temperature of the fire touching him, but it wasn't enough to harm his skin, thankfully. It was enough, however, to completely surround him with a wall of flames, making the world around a mix of different shades of red; the noise was almost unbearable. Clark didn't know what was happening, but he knew he needed to leave the fire, fast. Each second he spent inside of it was a second spending his so valuable sunlight storage.

Gathering strength in his legs, Clark jumped, going up so fast that the fire actually opened a path for him. In less than a second he was out of the explosion, up high in the sky, able to look down and see the ground completely taken by fire; that was his mistake. The sight of the fire spreading through the land was so impressive that Clark failed to notice something important: a massive block of stone approaching fast.

A huge chunk of the ground was ripped from the planet's surface and tossed against Clark, colliding against him with a thunderous noise. His body was still stronger, though; the block broke against him, tearing into smaller pieces that fell back to the fiery ground, but the hit was powerful enough to send Clark flying.

He didn't know what was happening exactly, but even while he fell back to the ground Clark couldn't help but notice the obvious fact that someone was attacking him. He didn't know who or how, but what just happened didn't leave much room for interpretation, that was for sure.

Turning in the air, Clark landed on his feet, several meters away from the burning ground. He was looking around, fast, searching for his opponent, thinking about how much longer the energy he had stored would last if he kept using it like that. He needed to be smart, to end the fight quickly and without waste. But first he had to find his attacker.
Concentrating, ignoring the roar of the fire, Clark tried to listen. The fact that he hadn't seen his attacker yet was enough to make him understand that something was wrong; if he couldn't trust his vision, his other senses would have to do. Clark closed his eyes and focused, holding his breath. The noise of the burning ground took most of his hearing, but past that was a faint noise; a tap against the earth.

Clark turned his body fast, Sif's training giving him the reaction time needed to avoid an invisible attack against his head. He couldn't see what had just missed him, but he sure felt the wind of the object passing close; that meant his attacker was within reach. Moving quickly, Clark attacked, feeling his fist making contact.

The form of a cloaked Dark Elf appeared out of thin air when he touched it.

His fist clashed against the Dark Elf's stomach, interrupting the attack and somehow disrupting whatever magic or technology protecting the elf from Clark's eyes. The masked Dark Elf grunted in pain, sliding back, and Clark was already moving to strike again, trying to end the fight as fast as he could.

He didn't exactly take into account the fact that the Dark Elf didn't need to touch him to fight.

Without missing a movement, the Dark Elf raised a hand; a blast of telekinetic force hit Clark with the strength of a moving train, forcing him to raise his arms to defend himself. It was a strong attack, more than enough to completely destroy a human body, but against a Kryptonian it wasn't that much.

But apparently, against the ground he was standing on, it was enough.

Clark wasn't expecting the ground to just cave in. The sudden lack of ground to stand on and the force pushing him down was enough to send him into the earth, the red light of the sun disappearing alongside the surface. Clark felt himself falling into some hidden cave, with barely any time to float and land safely before the Dark Elf jumped behind him, the staff pointed against him like a spear.

He ignored the lack of light and the falling debris, grabbing the staff with both hands just as his feet touched the ground, avoiding the hit. The Dark Elf touched the ground a second after, still applying strength, trying to force the staff down against Clark's chest. It was useless, because as much as Clark was holding himself back, his strength was just too superior.

Until he took a breath from the underground air.

Clark's body recognized the familiar air even if his mind didn't at the time. Almost immediately, he felt his lungs burning, his blood seemingly turning into fire as it carried this new air through his body. His eyes widened for a moment, his mind finally catching up with what his body had already realized.

Krypton's atmosphere.

He didn't know how or why Krypton's air was under the ground of that unknown planet. He didn't have any idea what that meant or how that could possibly happen. At that moment, however, Clark didn't really care. His already limited amount of energy had been flushed out from his body when he breathed.

And without energy, his muscles couldn't hold the Dark Elf's staff anymore.

The weapon hit his chest and Clark felt his skin splitting as the metal touched him. His ribs
cracked instantly with the powerful attack and his legs lost strength, forcing him to kneel. Clark groaned in pain, still trying to hold the staff, even if he knew deep down he didn't have the power to do it anymore.

The Dark Elf glanced at him through the mask, almost gloating for a second. And then, with a twitch, an orange glow appeared around the staff, like a collection of weird runes and symbols made of fire, arranging themselves in the shape of a blade. Clark was helpless to stop when the staff suddenly became a spear, its blade sinking into his chest.

Clark let out a muffled yell when the magic blade pierced him, his previously invulnerable skin being ripped apart alongside muscles and bones. Blood splashed when the spear sank in, flowing to the ground, the magic fiery blade continuing its path through his chest until Clark felt another wound opening on his back.

It only stopped when the staff touched the ground.

For a moment, there was absolute silence, only the faint sounds of the drops of blood hitting the floor being heard. Clark was still in shock, his eyes wide, his hands still firmly grasped around the staff. He was feeling pain like he never felt before in his life, his strength leaving him fast, each drop of blood getting him closer to his death.

His eyes closed. He didn't know how to get away from this. He had no way of saving himself. But maybe, just maybe, he could prevent this from happening to Sif and Frigga.

Opening his eyes again, Clark stared at the masked face of the Dark Elf, feeling his blood boil. Ignoring the pain, ignoring the fear, Clark focused on the last remnants of energy still inside himself, gathering every single bit of it.

And then, before the Dark Elf could even react, he unleashed the most powerful punch he could against his opponent.

Clark's fist clashed against the Dark Elf mask with such strength that it broke into pieces, launching his adversary against the wall so brutally that the whole place shook. Pieces of rock from the ceiling began to fall down, dropping heavily against the ground, as Clark struggled to pull the staff from his chest, surrendering to unconsciousness together with the Dark Elf.

None of them was awake to see a dark blue goo dripping from the hole in the ceiling.

It had been a long time since it sensed other life forms. It didn't count days, months or years, but it could sense the pass of time, the changes in the planet itself, the environment shifting. It didn't remember how it got there and it didn't care about it one bit. It was someplace else and then it was there and that was all that mattered.

The arrival of new life forms was a surprise or the closest thing it could feel of surprise. It wasn't expecting something like that to happen. The planet had been dead for a very long time, only its fellow brethren left to roam the rocky landscapes. Everything else had been consumed a long, long time ago.

That wasn't true anymore. It wasn't alone now. Maybe it wouldn't have to be alone again.

The loud sounds and the high temperature were uncomfortable, but it ventured in its direction because it sensed the life forms there. Slowly, quietly, secretly, until it was close. Until it could approach without being in danger.
There were two of them, different from each other as they could possibly be. One reminded it of the hot orb in the sky and the other of the cold periods when the orb hid itself. Both were hurt. One of them was dying.

Its choice was obvious. One of them was clearly unsuitable, the life force quickly fading. The other, even hurt, was still alive and would remain alive. Logically there was only one possible choice.

The Symbiote wasn't sure why it chose to bond itself to the dying life form, but it felt right to do so.

"We need to do something, Father!" Thor exclaimed at his father, Jane, Volstagg and Fandral by his side. "Mother, Sif and Kal could be anywhere in the universe and Heimdall cannot see them!"

Odin gazed at Thor with his one eye, still sitting on his chair in his private library.

"And what do you suggest we do, son?" Odin finally said back. "Send all Asgardian forces to search blindly? Leave Asgard and the Aether unprotected?"

Thor clenched his hands, furious.

"I suggest we do something!" he almost yelled, angered by his father apparent lack of care. "We were just attacked, our people were killed, Malekith's forces could be standing on top of our palace right now and we wouldn't even notice!" Small blue sparks started clacking on his skin as he became more and more enraged. "Your wife could be dead and you do not even care--"

The whole room shook before he could finish his sentence. Books fell down, the floor, ceiling and walls cracked, the candles were extinguished. Thor felt his breath stuck in his throat and a cold traveling his spine. Odin got up, slowly, and everybody in the room unconsciously took a step back.

They were looking at Odin Borson, the Allfather, King of Asgard, and at that moment Thor suddenly understood why his father was feared across the Nine Realms and beyond.

"Do not presume to tell me how I feel," Odin said, his voice very low, making the hair on the back of his head stand. "My home was attacked by enemies I considered long dead. My people was killed. My best warrior, my guest and my wife are lost somewhere in the universe. But panicking, like a fool, will not solve anything. You are my son, the Prince of Asgard, ACT LIKE IT!"

He screamed the last words and Thor felt himself tremble like a scared child. He might be Thor, the God of Thunder, wielder of Mjölnir, but in front of Odin he suddenly felt small. It wasn't only a matter of power; it was always incredible to witness, of course, but he always knew his father was much stronger than him. No, it was about what he said.

Thor was supposed to become the King of Asgard, to succeed his father and lead the Nine Realms, but every time he compared himself to Odin he found himself lacking. His father was right, panicking wouldn't help anybody. Not Frigga, not Sif, not Kal and not Jane.

More than that, he felt ashamed to even insinuate that his father didn't care about their fate.

"I am... I apologize for my words, Father, I spoke without thinking," Thor said, looking down. Odin simply stared at him for a long while. Then, slowly, he sat down again; everybody breathed, as if they suddenly had permission to do so. "My point stands, though. We need to do something. If Heimdall cannot see them--"
"Heimdall sees a lot, but not all," Odin interrupted. "We can use that."

Thor and everybody around him frowned. "I do not understand."

"There are few places across the universe that Heimdall cannot see, if he wishes to," Odin explained. "If he cannot see where your mother is, then…"

"Then they are in one of those few places," Jane finished for him, turning to look at Thor.

Odin gave her an imperceptible smile. "If I know Frigga, she will send us some kind of signal as soon as she is able to. If we are paying attention to the right places, we will see it."

Thor opened a big smile; finally they had a plan.

Clark opened his eyes slowly. For a moment, he just stared up at the rocky ceiling, his mind blissfully empty; until everything that happened came rushing through his mind in a flash. Their crash against an unknown planet, he getting separated from Sif and Frigga, his fight against the Dark Elf…

He quickly took his hands to his chest, searching for his wound, his deadly wound; it wasn't there. He wasn't feeling any pain, he wasn't bleeding, he wasn't dying. That didn't make any sense. He should be dead, he was sure of it. Without a yellow sun or a very advanced treatment there wasn't any way for him to survive that kind of injury.

"What the--" Clark whispered, sitting down, still looking for the inexistent wound on his chest.

Not only he wasn't hurt, he wasn't feeling weak anymore. He wasn't, by any means, feeling like he felt under a yellow sun, but he wasn't sick like he felt when he breathed Krypton's air. And, of course, that realization brought another list of unanswered questions, the first one being what the hell was Krypton's atmosphere doing there.

Unfortunately for Clark, no matter how much he thought, he couldn't reach any conclusion. So he decided to just get up and deal with his other pressing concern: the unconscious Dark Elf on the other side of the place.

Still touching his chest, trying to find a clue about how he could be healed, Clark stopped by the Dark Elf's side, surrounded by the fragments of the broken mask. His punch had done the trick, apparently, but this Dark Elf had gotten pretty close of ending his life; closer than anyone before. Carefully, Clark leaned over and pushed the cloak covering the Dark Elf.

His eyes widened in surprise when he saw a woman.

In the end, of course, it made no difference, but Clark didn't know or expect the Dark Elf he fought to be a woman… A she-elf… He didn't know exactly the term. Regardless, that certainly was a surprise, but he had more to worry about than his would-be killer's gender. Like how to restrain someone strong, fast and capable of casting magic.

It was a difficult thing to do even when he had his powers, but now?

"Kelex, can you give me any ideas about how to restrain her?" he asked, wondering if there was some kind of weakness Dark Elves had that he could explore.

Instead of answering, Kelex reshaped a good part of its liquid geo body into a handcuff around the Dark Elf's wrists.
"I can't hold her forever," Kelex said, "but I can electrocute her if she tries to free herself."

Clark's eyebrows shot up; well, that wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but it could work. Nodding, he grabbed the Dark Elf so he could lift her, but at the exact moment he did so a foot collided against his head, sending him tumbling on the ground. Groaning, he rolled and got up, ready to fight, as the Dark Elf jumped up too.

But before things could escalate, Kelex did what she said she would.

"ARGHH!" yelled the Dark Elf, as Kelex unleashed a powerful electric discharge, dropping her on the ground again; Clark winced, but he was relieved it had worked.

"Okay, Kelex, stop," he said and Kelex did as ordered. The Dark Elf stood up again, panting, looking at him with furious eyes.

His first thought when he looked at her face was that she truly hated him. For some reason, that woman would like nothing else than to eviscerate him, he had no doubt about that. He didn't know why, maybe it was like Odin had said and all Dark Elves hated Kryptonians, maybe she was pissed because they were in that planet, Clark didn't know.

The second thought he had was that she was beautiful.

Stupid thought to have about someone that wanted to kill him, but Clark couldn't help himself. The Dark Elf in front of him was incredibly beautiful, even when her face showed nothing but rage and even with the marks of burning on her left cheek, left no doubt by this universe's light. Still, Clark wasn't about to get distracted by her beauty; he knew quite well that beautiful women could be very deadly. Faora, Natasha and Sif were proof of that.

"Look, I don't know why you want to kill me," Clark started, looking at the Dark Elf's face. "But right now we have to stop this. I don't know where we are, but we need to get away from this planet. If you help me, if you don't try to kill me again, I promise I will take you somewhere safe."

The Dark Elf scoffed.

"The words of a Kryptonian means nothing to me," she said. "Kill me and be done with it."

Clark was a little offended.

"I don't know about other Kryptonians, but my word means quite a lot," he countered. "And no, I won't kill you, regardless of your answer. I wouldn't have bothered to restrain you if I planned to kill you, would I?"

That logic seemed to make sense to the woman, because she looked at Kelex on her wrists for a second.

"What do you want, Kryptonian?" she asked.

"First, my name is Clark or Kal-El, whatever you prefer. But not 'Kryptonian'. Second, I want to find my two companions and then get out of this planet, as fast as I can. Help me, and I will take you with us and keep you safe, you have my word."

The Dark Elf stared a long time at him.

"We have a deal," she finally said.
Clark wasn't sure she really meant that.

"There!" Sif exclaimed, pointing at the scorched marks of land in front of them, no doubt the result of that explosion.

She and Frigga had moved as fast as they could in that direction, crossing the ghost city quickly so they could find what had caused that commotion. Sif, of course, was sure it was Kal and if she was right he was in trouble. However, she knew he could take care of himself; Frigga, as she was, couldn't.

The toxin poisoning her was taking a toll on her body. She was tired, slow, weak and clearly in pain. Sif wasn't sure what to do, but she knew that they needed to get away from this planet fast. But first they needed to find Kal.

The big hole in the ground seemed like a good trail.

"So, what's your name?" Clark asked, after a long uncomfortable silence.

There was no answer; he sighed. Both of them were walking for a while, trailing the underground corridors of the place they had fallen into. The ground hadn't just caved in, throwing them in a hole somewhere, as Clark first thought; it had caved in and thrown them into what seemed to be an underground city.

Usually, starting to walk deep into the ground was the last thing Clark would do, but Kelex said she had detected some sort of signal coming from that direction. According to her, there were computers in the underground and if she was right, then they would finally find some information about where they were. From there, he could form some kind of plan.

That the signal had a Kryptonian signature was a big bonus; maybe it would explain the Kryptonian air in those corridors, something that made Clark very curious.

The search for answers had motivated Clark, but his eagerness was fading fast as they walked, being replaced by boredom. The Dark Elf woman was in complete silence, there wasn't anything to see down there and they weren't making progress fast enough for his liking. A little chit chat could help, but without a willing participant it was useless.

That lasted until they finally crossed an entrance arc and the lights suddenly turned on.

Any boredom Clark was feeling evaporated when a huge circular room appeared, full of computers and strange machinery. He could see liquid geo screens, exactly like the ones he had in his Kryptonian ship, skinsuits displayed with several different crests, weird equipment he couldn't recognize… What took his attention, however, weren't any of those things.

It was the huge statue of a Kryptonian in the center of the room.

Almost as tall as the ceiling, made from a metal Clark didn't recognize, the statue of the Kryptonian man stood proud, wearing a skinsuit and a swaying cape, his arms opened. In one of the hands he held what looked to be the representation of a sun, a metal orb seemingly irradiating light. His expression was serene and yet austere, a face Clark had seen in several representations of divinities on Earth.

And, most importantly, proudly displayed on his chest was the symbol of the House of El.
"Rao," whispered the Dark Elf, staring at the statue with burning rage; Clark turned fast to look at her.

"Rao? How can you tell?" he asked, fast.

The Dark Elf scoffed. "I've seen him plenty of times, obliterating entire planets with that purple orb of his. I've lost count of the number of Dark Elves he slaughtered."

Clark's eyes widened and he honestly didn't know what to say. He looked again at the statue, his eyes lingering on the big "S" on his chest and then on the orb he was holding.

"What do you mean by purple orb?"

It was Kelex who answered. "Kryptonians often thought that Krypton's sun was named after Rao himself, but that is a misconception. Krypton's sun was not named after Rao, but after Rao's Orb. It was an allusion to its power."

How an orb of the size of his hand could have so much power to be compared to a sun, Clark didn't know, but right now it didn't matter, because there was another important question Clark had.

"The 'S' on his chest… Was Rao part of the House of El?" Clark asked.

Kelex didn't disappoint. "Rao was the founder of the House of El."

This time, it wasn't only Clark that was looking at the 'S', but the Dark Elf too; except she wasn't looking at the symbol on the statue, but at Clark's chest.

"Just my luck… After all this time and I meet a descendent of his," she muttered.

Clark looked at her. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I'm the last one you'll have to meet. Krypton is gone. I'm all there is left."

She grinned. "Good."

He kept staring at her, imagining what exactly happened between Kryptonians and Dark Elves that made her so glad to see an entire race gone. Clark could understand hate as well as anybody, but he couldn't see himself feeling glad about something like this.

"Did Rao really kill that much people?" he asked her, not really expecting an answer. "Did the Kryptonians?"

She remained in silence for so long that Clark was already turning his back at her, but then she said: "When our universe ended, the Dark Elves were stranded across this new universe, lost, confused… In pain. We slept, we woke up, we tried to understand what was going on. It took us a long, long time to pull ourselves back together, to come to terms with the fact that our whole world had ended and this new one was killing us."

The Dark Elf woman pointed at Rao's statue. "Eventually, new races began to appear. At first we cared little about them, still too young to be of any interest to us, but before we realized they evolved. And soon enough we met the young races."

"In war," Clark guessed.

"Not always," she answered, shrugging. "The Dark Elves spread throughout the universe searching ways to keep us alive, planets where we could survive better, a mean to avoid the extinction."
Sometimes our interests clashed against others."

That was an understatement. According to the Asgardians, the huge war fought by Bor was only
the last collection of conflicts in a series of battles that took ages. The Dark Elves were amongst the
oldest races in the universe – older than the universe itself actually –, so it made sense that the
Asgardians weren't the only race to go to war against them. They had met, defeated and sometimes
were defeated by countless others before Bor's last battle; Rao and the Kryptonians, apparently,
were one of them.

"Svartalfheim was the first planet we lived on in this universe, but our race had countless others
once upon a time," the Dark Elf continued. "Our search for a way to save our people eventually put
us against other races. Your race was one of them." She had a far away look on her eyes. "I can still
remember Rao decimating our colonies… Just a flash of purple light and then… Death."

Having met Zod and even defeated a World Engine, Clark wasn't surprised to find out that
Kryptonians were ruthless in battle. Still, it wasn't a good feeling. He knew it was war, but even
then it didn't make him feel any better, so he tried to think about the Dark Elves situation instead.

The Dark Elves weren't at war against other races only, but against the Light itself. It wasn't
difficult to imagine why they were so few right now. They faced heavy losses in battle, yes, but out
of it as well. And something told Clark they couldn't replenish their numbers as well as they
needed to.

"Malekith was the one who found out about the Infinity Stones and he had the idea to use one of
them," she said, almost as if she didn't want to give him the credit. "We sought it out, acquired it
and in time he learned how to forge it into the Aether. So we could, finally, restore the universe to
what it was."

"And kill everyone else while doing it," Clark added, accusingly.

The Dark Elf woman looked into his eyes.

"What would you do, I wonder, if one day you woke up and the very air you breathed had become
poison?" she said. "Not a kind that killed you right away, no, but one that seeped through your
veins, made you slowly weak, burned your skin little by little until one day you would look at the
mirror and see just a shadow of what you once were."

She got closer, still gazing unblinking at him.

"I wonder what you would do if you saw the children gasping for air, unable to adapt to these new
circumstances, little babies dying one by one as you watched, unable to do a single thing. Mothers
losing their sons and daughters, the elderly fading away, family members being ripped from you as
you watched unable to do a single thing!"

Clark couldn't stop staring at her eyes, paralyzed by her words.

"I wonder, Kryptonian, if you would just watch your entire people die if you could do something to
save them." She gave him a mirthless smile. "Once you are faced with circumstances such as these,
feel free to judge us all you want. Until then, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!"

He really thought she would attack him then, but before he could even prepare himself to defend
against her, she turned her back at him. Clark didn't have any words to offer her, so he stayed in
silence, moving closer to one of the liquid geo monitors.

It was easier when the Dark Elves were just monsters in the night.
"Kelex, what can you tell us about this planet?" Clark asked, trying to steer back at what they needed to do.

The Kryptonian robot interacted with the computers for a minute, the liquid geo monitors changing shapes fast as she did it. He waited by the Dark Elf's side as Kelex acquired the information they needed.

"The files are corrupted," Kelex started and Clark closed his eyes in frustration," but I could extract some information."

"Anything about why there were Kryptonians here? Or where 'here' is?"

"I couldn't get a date for when the Kryptonians arrived here, but according to the geographic data in these computers, the planet changed a lot since those days, so my calculations put their arrival thousands of years ago."

Clark raised his eyebrows. "Was it a colony?" he asked, thinking about the Kryptonian air there and about what the World Engines could do.

"No, the Kryptonians didn't colonize the planet, there were other intelligent life forms already living here."

An ominous cold went shot through Clark's spine.

"Did they kill them?" he asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"No," Kelex answered, to his relief. "The Kryptonian crew that arrived here didn't harm the planet's inhabitants, they saved them. The planet was going through a severe climatic change, the ocean's level rose and almost ended their civilization. The Kryptonians managed to terraform enough of the planet to stop this, thus saving them."

Well, that was a nice surprise, considering recent information he got about his fellow Kryptonians; even the Dark Elf woman seemed reluctantly impressed.

"In return, the planet's inhabitants worshiped the Kryptonian as gods. They learned from them how to enhance their technology and thrived. This entire city was built together with the Kryptonians."

"But why?" Clark asked, trying to understand this. Usually he would just say it was a good deed, but as much as he wanted to believe in that, he couldn't get past the feeling that the Kryptonians wanted something.

Kelex took a while to answer, digging through the information she could.

"To protect something. The Kryptonians left something here, in secret, and entrusted them to guard it. The barrier we hit was part of that protection."

"But it was a magical barrier," Clark argued.

"Kryptonians were very proficient in magic in the past," Kelex explained.

Clark was hooked. The story Kelex was telling him was full of mystery, something that he, as a journalist, always enjoyed. And, of course, it was about his people, so he couldn't help but become extra curious. He wanted nothing more than find out what this Kryptonian crew hid here and why did they go through such lengths to do so. Did they disagree with the Council? Were they criminals? He had no idea.
Sadly, finding out how to get out of this planet was still their number one priority.

"Do they have any functional ships we can use?" Clark asked.

"With the barrier on, it is unlikely any ship will be able to leave the planet undamaged. And there isn't any information about ships here."

"So we have to destroy whatever is powering this barrier."

"That would be my advice," Kelex said. "With the barrier down, we can even ask for help on Asgard. Heimdall will be able to see us then."

That particular idea hadn't crossed his mind, but it was obvious. If Heimdall was able to see them, they would already be back on Asgard, especially with their Queen stranded here with them.

"Can you get us the location of whatever is powering this barrier?" Clark asked, hoping it wasn't far.

"It is in this very city," Kelex answered immediately. "A place called Tower of a Thousand Bells. There is a train linking this room directly to the Tower. I can power it up."

That was great news! Clark was starting to feel happy for the first time since crashing there. Sure, they had a rough start, but things were beginning to get better. He already had a plan. Now he just had to find Frigga and Sif and soon they would be able to get away from this planet.

A planet, he realized, he still didn't know the name or what happened to its inhabitants.

Frowning, Clark asked: "Kelex, what is the name of this planet?"

"This planet was named Morag by the Kryptonians."

He nodded. "And what happened to the inhabitants of Morag after the Kryptonians left?"

There was a long silence, as Kelex looked through the data.

"Unknown."

At the moment she said that, there was a piercing, inhuman screech; Clark's good mood was gone in a flash.

Sif froze when a powerful screech echoed in the underground. And then another. And another. And another. A symphony of roars and screams, as if a thousand creatures decided to make themselves known. And there was only one reason for predators to reveal themselves.

They believed there was no way for their prey to escape.

"Frigga, we have to hurry," Sif said, starting to walk faster, allowing her queen to lean over her almost entirely as they moved through the corridor.

"I agree," Frigga said, eyes full of certainty even with the clear pain she was feeling.

Clark and the Dark Elf looked around the room, trying to pinpoint the location of the screeches, trying to find what manner of creature was making them; whatever it was, it had him on edge. It was like the sound was able to scratch his insides, soul, guts and bones. He knew, for certain, that
whatever creature was making those sounds, it wasn't anything he wanted to meet, especially when he was under a red sun.

It wasn't up to him, though.

Before they could even fully understand the situation, a clawed hand ripped apart the metal from one of the room many doors, the sound so loud that both of them jumped back. In a matter of seconds the door was made into scraps and a huge monster jumped inside, roaring; a big, dark green monster with claws as sharp as swords.

The creature was the stuff of nightmares. It hunched on all fours, the muscled body tense and ready to attack, the green and white skin that covered it seemingly possessing freewill, moving on its own, expanding and retracting its slimy tendrils. The hands were clawed and very sharp, digging in the metal ground with ease.

Nothing, however, was capable of beating the nightmarish look of its head.

Its jaw opened far beyond what seemed possible, making its face a gigantic mouth filled with white teeth bigger than Clark's own hands. It had white markings where its eyes were supposed to be, big and wide, making it look like it had the unblinking eyes of a spider. And a long and slithering red tongue, too big for its mouth, seemingly incapable of stop moving as the creature drooled nonstop on the floor.

"Klyntar!" yelled the Dark Elf, snapping Clark back to reality; right at the moment the creature attacked.

Clark pushed the Dark Elf out of its way in an automatic gesture, knowing she wouldn't be able to defend herself with her hands cuffed; of course, that meant he was the one incapable of defending himself in time. The creature clashed against him with a heavy THUD, throwing them both on the ground, the roars and screeches even louder now.

The claws made a huge dent by Clark's head when he dodged at the last second, using all the limited strength he had under a red sun to try and hold the creature; things weren't going so well. The monster was strong and it was fighting with all it had to try and kill him, its claws swinging madly as Clark tried to hold them. The long tongue was touching his face and he was already covered in drool, the sharp teeth growing closer and closer.

Its mouth opened wide, almost dividing its head in two as the creature prepared to bite him.

Screaming, using every last ounce of his strength, Clark pushed it and unleashed a powerful punch against the side of its head, throwing the creature to the side. He got up fast, preparing to fight, knowing that his punch had only delayed the creature; like he thought, the monster roared and shook its head, getting ready to tackle.

And it would have, if a burst of flames hadn't swallowed it completely.

Clark flinched when the heat wave from the fire hit him, raising his arms to protect his face at the same time he looked at the Dark Elf woman; more specifically, at the fire she was summoning from her empty hands. Clark knew she could do that, she had done the same against him not too long ago, but watching it happen was impressive all the same. The creature had no chance. The fire completely incinerated it, melting its green skin as it yelled in agony until there was only burned remains in its place.

The Dark Elf turned to Clark. Still wide eyed, Clark nodded in thanks; he was extremely surprised
when she nodded back.

"Tell your robot to close the doors and take the handcuffs off, Kryptonian," she demanded. "More are coming."

Clark wasn't entirely convinced the part about the handcuffs was a good idea, but it was a worse idea to leave her cuffed as more monsters approached the room, that was for certain. Calling Kelex back, Clark prepared himself to fight, the Dark Elf woman by his side, as Kelex used the computers to close the doors of the room. The screeches and roars got louder and louder.

"You know what they are," Clark said, as the creatures began to hit the other doors. "Any advices?"

The Dark Elf didn't look at him, but said: "High noises and high temperatures. If that fails, hit the head."

He couldn't help but remember Jessica when she gave that advice.

They could hear the clacks of the claws touching the walls, the loud hits against the numerous entrances of the room, the roars. They were surrounded. The creature that got in was just the first of many and its friends would be there at any minute now. Breathing fast, Clark looked around, his eyes trying to pinpoint the places that would give in first. The door in front of them? The vents? The very walls? He didn't know from where they would come.

He was definitely surprised when a door behind him was almost ripped apart by an incredibly powerful hit, stronger than any other these creatures had unleashed to this moment.

Clark and the Dark Elf turned fast, eyes fixed on the dented metal, ready to meet in battle whatever crossed those doors. There was a second hit, even stronger, and the door bent even further; he raised his fists.

And then a sword pierced the door; that he wasn't expecting.

The sword came down, cutting the metal door as if it was made of paper, and then a powerful kick finished destroying it, throwing its pieces violently inside the room; instead of monsters, Clark's eyes fell upon Sif and Frigga; for the first time since the whole thing began, he smiled, relieved.

"I was beginning to think you would leave all the fight to us," Clark joked, truly thankful that Sif and Frigga were there.

Sif grinned, walking to him. "Did you not have your fill of fighting in the tournament?"

Still smiling, she touched his shoulder, and Clark turned to Frigga. "It's really good to see you safe, Frigga."

Except that, paying close attention, she wasn't exactly safe, not if her paleness and apparent pain were any indication.

"Are you--"

"I am alright, Kal. It is just a scratch," the Queen said, but he wasn't sure he believed her.

"A scratch from a Kurse," the Dark Elf mentioned, watching Frigga. "I am surprised you are still alive."
Even if that was true, it really wasn't the smart thing to say; at least not in front of Sif. Sif's sword moved to fast that Clark saw only a blur and then the blade was against the Dark Elf's neck.

"Let us see how you fare against an Asgardian 'scratch'," Sif threatened. The Dark Elf seemed amused by it.

"Sif, stop!" Clark said, entering between both women before they started to fight. "She is on our side."

Sif raised her eyebrows. "They have a strange way of showing it! Attacking our home, killing our people, throwing us here! They–"

"I didn't say 'they'," Clark interrupted. "She is on our side, at least for now." He looked around, deliberately showing her the creatures knocking on the doors. "We have bigger problems right now."

"Kal is right, Sif," Frigga said, her voice tired and low. "We can solve our differences later."

He had no doubt Sif would like to just decapitate the Dark Elf right then and there and be done with it; her hand was even shaking a little. But slowly, she put the sword down. Her eyes were still fixed on the Dark Elf.

"Give me one reason – by Odin, give me half a reason! – and I will end you!"

The Dark Elf woman just smiled at her; Clark almost sighed in frustration. Turning around, he looked at the doors again, assessing the damages. Each hit the creatures dealt them took them one step closer to entering the room. It wouldn't take long for the weakest point to give in and then… Then they would have to fight an unknown number of attackers for an unknown amount of time. They needed a way out.

And they had one, according to Kelex, Clark suddenly remembered.

"Kelex, you said there was a train linking this base to the location of what is powering the barrier. Can you activate it?"

Everybody looked expectantly to the Kryptonian robot.

"I can, but the corridor that lead there show signs of multiple hostiles," Kelex answered.

"We can take them!" Sif exclaimed and, by God, she actually looked eager.

"I don't doubt your fighting prowess, Lady Sif, but I cannot open that door without opening the others. If you choose to do this, you will meet resistance at your front and at your backs."

That was bad news. Clark looked at his hands, cursing the fact that they were under a red sun. He had faced such weakness before, when he was inside Black Zero for example, but at that time he wasn't surrounded by monsters.

Well, actually he was, but they weren't trying to kill him at that moment.

"We have no choice," said Frigga. "We either try to make our path quickly to the train or we wait here to be completely surrounded. At least one option has a chance of success."

"I agree," said the Dark Elf, surprising them.

Well, it seemed the decision was made. "Kelex, activate the train and open the door when I say."
They saw an image of the train on the liquid geo monitors as Kelex began to activate it and they moved closer to the big door that would take them there. All of them were tense, preparing themselves as best they could. Sif checked her sword as the Dark Elf breathed slowly, no doubt concentrating to cast magic; Frigga, too, looked as if she was meditating, but Clark supposed that had more to do with her injury than anything else.

And Clark? Clark was trying to calm himself and remember to use everything Sif had taught him. Without his sheer raw power he would have to rely on the technique he had; Torquasm-Rao would prove itself invaluable now.

"The train is activated," Kelex announced. "It is located at exactly one kilometer from this entrance."

Clark looked around, seeing the faces of his companions. "Are we ready?"

There was a second of silence; then all of them nodded.

"Kelex, open the door."

His order was obeyed immediately. The door in front of them began to open, slowly, going up. As did all the other doors in the circular room. The action seemed to puzzle the monsters, because for a moment there was only the sound of the doors opening; no screeches, no hits against the metal, no roars. The beasts were confused.

They used that to their advantage.

Before the door was completely opened, when it was less than a half a meter from the ground, both Frigga and the Dark Elf unleashed hell through it. The Asgardian Queen and the Dark Elf summoned a blast of fire from their hands and the piercing screams from the other side of the door told Clark that they had hit their targets.

Hard not to, when the fire streams probably took the entire corridor.

And as soon as they stopped, Sif threw herself under the door, sword and shield in hand, beginning to slash with quick precision; Clark was right after her, trying his best to ignore the roars and screeches behind him, indicating that the creatures were already in pursue.

The corridor was narrow, cylindrical, covered in metal plates all over; and all its area was taken by the weird monsters. They were on the floor, sticking to the ceiling, glued to the walls. Monsters similar to the one that he had fought, some bigger, some smaller, some in different colors, but all deadly looking.

It hardly mattered anyway.

Dodging a clawed attack, Clark put himself by Sif's side as he punched the head of the creature with his full strength. He might not have his usual "yellow sun strength", but a punch like that couldn't simply be ignored. The creature fell to the ground, maybe not unconscious, but dizzy enough to allow Frigga and the Dark Elf to follow.

He and Sif were moving as if they were one, battling the hordes of creatures as they approached, defending and attacking in synchrony, guarding each other's backs from bites and claws while giving the other a chance to retaliate. Frigga and the Dark Elf followed closely, looking behind, releasing bursts of magical fire in regular intervals to keep the ones pursuing them back.

There was no time to think, no time to hesitate; luckily, no time to even be afraid. The monsters
didn't stop coming, jumping against them, only to be repelled either by Sif's sword or Clark's punches. A red creature fell from the ceiling right on top of them, clashing against Sif's shield and then being grabbed by the legs by Clark; he wasted no time in smashing the ground with it.

And little by little, ignoring the loud sounds of battle, the body parts flying and the heat from the fire bursts they advanced. Until Clark could finally see the train, all the lights on, ready to move.

"Let's go!" he yelled, punching one of the creatures in the neck as Sif kicked it forward, so strongly that it smashed three other monsters aside opening a path.

They didn't break their formation, but they ran fast to the train's door, knocking aside any creature unlucky enough to stand in their way. Behind them, a truly massive army of creatures was coming, pouring like water out of a pipe when they left the cylindrical corridor, their numbers so great that it would be impossible to count them.

Of course, they didn't stop to try, eyes fixed on the train's open door. The four of them almost jumped inside.

"Close the door and go, Kelex!" Clark yelled, seeing the horde of monsters approaching.

He heard the engines starting and the door started to close; right when the first of the creatures threw itself against the train's door. The door closed at that exact second, trapping it, leaving half of the monster inside, swinging its clawed arm like a feral beast. The train finally started to move, slowly, when they began hearing the creatures jumping on top of the train, bashing against its walls, crack the windows. Could they get in, he wondered, adrenalin high?

Maybe they could, if the train didn't gain speed fast and if it didn't go through a very narrow tunnel; as it was, however, Clark flinched when he heard the noises of the monsters hitting the walls. He didn't even want to look at the monster still trapped at the door.

*Half* monster, to be specific.

For almost a minute, there was just silence in the train, everybody still to stunned to talk. And then, against all odds, there was a laugh. Clark turned to see the Dark Elf woman watching him and the remains of the creature.

"Well, Kryptonian, you wanted to know what happened to the inhabitants of this planet? Look no further."

That made Clark face the creature, despite really not wanting to see its remains. Were these the inhabitants his people had saved? The ones they taught to develop technology? The ones they trusted to protect something?

"Well, what's left of them," the Dark Elf continued, touching the severed creature with a single finger. "The Klyntar really are a disease."

Wait, what?

"What do you mean?" Clark asked.

Without answering, the Dark Elf passed her hand over the creature's black skin. There was a fiery glow, as if she was using the heat of the flames instead of fire itself. And against all odds, the skin began to move. Clark did a double take, not trusting his mind not to be imagining things, as the black skin began to slid off, like a puddle of goo.
And under it, instead of a monster with huge teeth, there were the remains of a relatively normal looking alien; basically a human with a different skin tone.

"What the–"

"The Klyntar are parasites," the Dark Elf explained, burning the puddle of black goo without even looking at it. "They are like a virus, contaminating everything in their path. A single one of them can destroy an entire planet if left unchecked."

"They actually are symbiotes," Frigga corrected her, "not parasites. When they bind themselves to a host, they do it so both of them can become stronger. They strengthen their hosts and in turn the Klyntar absorbs energy and helpful traits from them, passing them on to their descendants."

"Does that look like a good deal for this poor bastard here?" the Dark Elf asked, eyebrows raised; Sif almost intervened, taking offense as to how she was talking to her Queen.

"No," Frigga admitted, "but that is not the norm. The Klyntar are remarkably innocent. They do not see the world as we do, they cannot understand hate or deception. So when they bind to a host not exactly pure of mind, they sometimes become corrupted by them."

"All these people weren't pure?" Clark asked, imagining what kind of society they had on this planet.

"Not necessarily," Frigga answered. "It takes one. They get corrupted, grow stronger and multiply themselves. The new Klyntar search new hosts and the cycle start all over again."

"And before you know it, you have this situation," the Dark Elf gladly finished. "Total apocalypse. What a sight to see!"

"How would they even get here?" Clark asked.

"Someone infected, it stuck to a ship or an asteroid… Hard to know," the Dark Elf answered. "Maybe someone used it as a weapon of war. That's actually something to think about…" She said, looking at Sif and then Frigga. "Oh, relax, we don't care for the filthy little slimy things either. You can lighten up, Frigga."

"You will speak to my Queen with respect!" Sif thundered, reaching the end of her patience.

Frigga, the very picture of calm, just waved her hand.

"There is no need for this, Sif," Frigga said, looking first at the Asgardian then at the Dark Elf; she smiled. "After all, we are both Queens, are we not, Queen Alflyse?"

Clark looked at the Dark Elf woman as if he was seeing her for the first time. The day just kept getting weirder and weirder.

"Nothing yet, my friend?" Thor asked Heimdall, looking at the endless sky full of stars from the Bifrost.

To him, of course, it wasn't nothing more than a beautiful sight. To Heimdall, however, it was like a window to the universe. His golden eyes could see almost everything there was to see from there.

Except, apparently, the very people they wanted to find.

"The answer did not change in the last five minutes, my Prince," Heimdall answered, without
taking his eyes from his search.

Thor groaned. He could understand his father's new plan, but it wasn't bearing fruit with the speed he wanted it to. Wherever his mother, Sif and Kal were, he hoped they were still alive.

"I would not worry too much, Thor," Heimdall said in his calm voice. "We will hear from them sooner or later."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I know what your mother's magic can accomplish when she wants to," he answered. "And I know how headstrong Sif is. And for what I saw in Midgard recently, Kal-El is anything but subtle when he needs to fight."

Heimdall looked at Thor for a second.

"Have a little patience."

It wasn't like he had any choice. But he did hope Heimdall was right.

"Queen?" Clark asked, looking at the Dark Elf woman.


There was a long silence, the only sounds coming from the moving train.

"So you are like, married to Malekith?" Clark asked, trying to find some sense in all this.

The outraged look he received was enough answer.

"The Accursed is not and will never be anything of mine!" she snarled.

"Except your boss, no?" Sif pointed out, clearly needling her. "Your overlord, your master."

Clark had no doubt that Alflyse would have hit Sif if Clark and Frigga weren't between them. She took a long breath, trying to calm herself.

"Malekith took leadership of the Dark Elves when he crafted the Aether," she said, looking at the floor. "Hard to keep your people of following a crazy leader when he is the one offering an alternative to extinction."

"You don't agree with him?" Clark asked, surprised. "About using the Aether, I mean."

She was quiet for a while and then looked at him. "The only thing we agree on is that something needs to be done to save our race. Since I do not have a mean to accomplish that, well…"

"But if you did?" Clark insisted, not really sure why he was so adamant about this.

Alflyse raised her eyebrows. "I do not. It is useless to deal with hypotheticals when my people is dying right now. "She looked at Frigga and Sif. "And it is not like we have a choice now, do we? Even if we find a way to stop the Light from killing us, the enemies we made would."
"You are right about that," Sif muttered under her breath.

"Oh, please, as if I am worried about Asgardians!" Alflyse exclaimed, clearly hearing Sif. "If you were our only problems, I would sleep soundly at night!" Clark held Sif's arm just as a precaution. "Unfortunately, Malekith’s quest for the Reality Stone involved war on many fronts. The Asgardians and Kryptonians, obviously, but also the Kree Empire, the Nova Empire, the Thanagarians, the Skrulls, the Tamaraneans, the Shi’ar, Almerac… Malekith unleashed war against all of them while he searched the Infinity Stone and my people bled because of it."

She gazed at them, her eyes furious.

"The Aether might as well be our only salvation right now and not only because of the Light."

Clark met her eyes, equally serious. By his sides, the train's windows showed the city well under them, the train leaving the underground to move amongst the high buildings of the town.

"I can see you don't agree with what happened," Clark said, "even if you won't admit it. And yet you still would kill every single life form in the universe to save the Dark Elves? Can you truly do such a thing?"

"They have no honor," Sif said, staring at Alflyse with barely concealed disdain. "There is nothing they would not do to save themselves, even if it meant sacrificing every shred of good they once possessed."

Alflyse's eyes moved to meet Sif's.

"Stand in the ashes of a trillion dead souls and ask the ghosts if honor matters."

Clark also met her eyes.

"I think honor would matter more than anything if that was the case," he finally said, thinking about his own dead race. "We all die eventually, but the good we do stays behind. So does the evil."

Frigga approached them, wincing in pain. "We are born, we live, we die," she said. "Everything must end one day."

The Dark Elf gave her an ironic smile.

"So I hear. Let us see if the Asgardians will behave with such… honor during your Ragnarok." She looked at Frigga and Sif. "But until then, like I said to the Kryptonian, be quiet."

Instead of arguing, Sif pointed to Clark.

"His people's Ragnarok already happened," she said. "I would listen to his words if I were you."

This seemed to make Alflyse remember Clark's previous words to her; she looked at him.

"And how did you behave, Kryptonian?" she asked. "Did you simply watch it happen, resigned to your fate, as you are advising me to do?"

"No, I killed and trapped in another dimension the last Kryptonians," he answered and Alflyse widened her eyes in surprise. "To stop them from wiping out all life in Midgard in their quest to create a New Krypton."

There was a long silence.
"You—you killed your own race?" she asked, her voice laced with shock.

Clark looked down. "If I didn't, they would have killed another. An innocent one. I couldn't allow that to happen."

This time the Dark Elf Queen didn't say anything in response. She just stayed quiet, looking through the windows of the train, thinking about Clark's words. He wasn't proud of what he did, but he would do it again if he needed to. People like Zod and Malekith were quick to announce that they would do anything to save their race, but truth was they weren't saving anything.

They were simply dooming their people to share the atrocities they committed against others. It was never about Krypton and it was never about the Dark Elves, it was all about what Zod and Malekith wanted.

He was distracted from his thoughts when Frigga walked to Alflyse.

"Alflyse, you watched Malekith creating the Aether," she began, "you saw it being used with your own eyes. I need to know how to remove it from a host."

That question managed to completely snap Clark out of his memories. How could he have forgotten about Jane?! If someone knew something about the Aether, it would be a Dark Elf.

The Dark Elf Queen raised a single eyebrow. "And why, pray tell, would I tell you?"

"Because the Aether is killing the woman my son loves," Frigga answered, immediately. "And because it was not a request. I would prefer you told me willingly, but I am not beyond forcing the answer out of you."

Frigga's hand glowed with red runes and suddenly Clark remembered that as kind and motherly as she was, Frigga also was the Queen of Asgard, Odin's wife and definitely not someone to be trifled with. He saw Sif touching the hilt of her sword from behind Alflyse, a clear sign that she would use it if she needed to. Clark held his breath, his muscles tensing as well.

And then, against all odds, Alflyse laughed.

"There is no need to threaten me, Frigga," she said, without a trace of fear. "You want to know how to get the Aether out of the Midgardian? You cannot."

Sif's hand closed around her sword, the metallic sound unmistakable; Alflyse didn't even glance in her direction.

"The Aether needs something to contain it," Alflyse continued. "Even if I knew exactly how to pull the Aether from someone, without a living host or the Aether Chamber it will just latch on the next person. And after it finishes draining that host, it will move to another, and another, and another…"

"The Chamber is lost," Frigga said, more to herself than anyone else. Clark remembered the big stone block used to contain the Aether he saw in the memories Odin showed them, but that was probably still in the same unknown place Jane found it.

Alflyse shrugged. "Then you are out of options."

"Not necessarily," Frigga retorted. "We both know there is another Chamber, a smaller one. In the bowels of Svartalfheim."

This time Alflyse looked at her with utmost interest. "And how would you know that?"
Frigga grinned. "Let's just say I enjoyed traveling during my youth."

The Dark Elf laughed again. "I always knew Asgardians were brave to the point of stubbornness, but actually traveling through Svartalfheim? That requires skills. You have my compliments, Witch-Queen."

"Well, you were supposed to be all dead, so it was not that much bravery as it was sheer curiosity," Frigga said.

"Not dead, as you can see. Just sleeping. We did that a lot over the ages, it helped us to resist the years that went by, until we could finally try our luck with the Aether." She sighed. "Things did not work as we planned."

Unless Clark was seeing things, it seemed Frigga and Alflyse were bonding; by Sif's astounded face, he wasn't the only one thinking that. Slowly getting back, he approached Sif and sat by her side, giving the two queens some space. Sif looked at him.

"So, how is the red sun treating you?" she asked, also sitting down.

Clark chuckled. "This planet actually has two suns, if you can believe it. Kelex told me that we can see only one of them at this time of year, but this solar system has two red ones," he said, wondering if the unseen red sun would make a difference if it appeared together with the other in the sky; probably too little to matter. "I'm exhausted. My muscles are actually burning up. And I'm so hungry! I think I could eat a bilgesnipe."

Sif laughed. "Volstagg always wanted to eat one too. Maybe we can cook that one you and Thor managed to capture once we get back to Asgard."

"Nah, Thor likes him, he would be devastated if we did that."

She laughed again and they stayed in silence for a while, looking the city pass by under them. It was mostly abandoned, but here and there they could see the Symbiotes running, maybe alerted by the noise of the train.

"I can't imagine what happened to this place," Clark said, suddenly. "Kelex told me the Kryptonians came here a long time ago and helped the inhabitants to avoid some kind of cataclysm. And then this happens."

"We are born, we live and we die," Sif quoted. "Odin always said that. Even the mightiest amongst us will fall one day."

"That's true," Clark agreed, thinking about Krypton. "Still, I just wished to know what exactly the Kryptonians were doing here. It got me curious."

Hearing him, Frigga said: "It was no coincidence we found ourselves here of all places, Kal. Fate sure has a sense of humor."

"What do you mean?" Clark asked, not understanding.

"This planet," Frigga explained, "is famous, at least in legends. Not many knew it was Morag, of course, they managed to keep it a secret from all, but the planet Rao was buried is legendary indeed."

Clark widened his eyes. "The Tomb of Rao is here?!!"
"I am almost certain it is," Frigga answered. "I searched its location for a long time. Lots of people did, without success."

"But why? Why was he buried here and not in Krypton?"

"Because of what he was holding when he died: the Orb of Rao," Frigga said. "Something so powerful he preferred to hide forever, even from his own people."

That was the second time he heard about this Orb and he still knew nothing about it.

"Why would he hide it from his own race?" Clark asked.

"For the same reason a smart person would hide the Aether from Malekith," Frigga said, looking at Alflyse for a moment as she did it. "Too much power in the hands of mad people is something the universe does not need. Maybe he did not trust some people, even amongst the Kryptonians, with that much power."

Clark wanted to argue, but truth was, he would probably have done the same. Who knows if there was another Zod back then? Sometimes it was better not to tempt fate. Still, would the Tomb of Rao remain undetected if they destroyed the barrier surrounding the planet?

Maybe he would have to come back to Morag later, if they actually managed to get out in the first place.

The train continued to travel, crossing the huge city uninterrupted, until they finally could look at the first time to the Tower of a Thousand Bells, the place powering the barrier surrounding Morag; it was breathtaking.

For one, it was huge, taller than anything they had back on Earth; not surprising, if the Kryptonians really helped them to build it. It pierced the clouds in the sky, reflecting the red light of the sun with its mirror like structure. And close at the top were strapped the thousand bells.

Bigger than church bells, held in a chaotic formation all around the top, were the golden bells that gave the tower its name, all motionless at that moment, probably too heavy to be moved by the wind. He wished he could use his perfect vision to take a closer look.

"That's the place," Clark said, seeing the beam of energy leaving the top of the tower and disappearing in the sky. "Do you think we are going to have to bring the whole thing down?"

"Hope not," said Sif. "It looks sturdy."

"That is not what I would worry about," Alflyse said. "I wonder how many Klyntar are there."

Well, there was that too, Clark remembered, sighing.

A few minutes later, the train stopped, more or less at the middle of the tower. Kelex hacked the systems, downloading its blueprints, informing them the good news that there was an elevator to take them all the way up; he couldn't imagine how tired he would be climbing all those stairs under a red sun.

So far, they haven't met any resistance and Clark began to feel hopeful. Maybe, just maybe, the tower was built to keep everyone out. Still, they moved carefully, using the formation they used back in the base, advancing slowly until they got to the elevator.
Kelex quickly activated it and they began to go up. Clark looked around, seeing their concentrated faces, thinking about all they went through to get there; he was tired only from thinking about it. But finally they were close of getting out of that accursed place.

The elevator stopped; they all took a deep breath and the door opened. They had arrived at the top.

It was an impressive place. Looking up they could see the open sky, feel the powerful wind and witness up close the clouds moving. The top of the tower was ample and empty, in the form of a perfect circle, with nothing around the edge to keep people from falling. Aside from the elevator they arrived in, there was another passage down, a huge stair going around the tower, seemingly sculpted directly on its surface; a set of stairs Clark would never use if he had any say in it.

And in the exact center of the tower was the reason they were there: the blinding violet beam of energy powering the barrier around Morag. It was like it was coming directly from the inside of the tower, from a deep hole carved in its center, all the way down.

"There it is," Sif whispered, eyes glued to it. "But how do we turn it off?"

They all looked around, searching for any controls, any "off button", any form to drop the barrier; there was none. It was dawning on them what they would have to do. They just didn't know exactly how to do it.

"I have an idea," Frigga finally announced, a grimace on her face. "But we will need to weaken the barrier at least for a moment for me to do it."

"How?" Alflyse asked. "This thing seems pretty strong."

"It does," Frigga agreed. "So we need something stronger. Or someone."

They all looked at Clark; he raised a single eyebrow.

"Um, I don't know if you noticed, but I'm not exactly at the top of my game right now."

"Not a problem when one can summon the power of a yellow sun," Frigga said.

Of course! She did it before, to weaken the Aether in Jane. But could she do it until he was fully recharged? It would take a lot of power to damage that tower.

"Frigga, you are not healthy enough for this," Sif said, approaching her. She turned to Alflyse.
"Can you--"

"Sorry, light and Dark Elves don't mix that well," she said.

"Do not worry, Sif, I can--"

"You will die!" Sif interrupted. "You can pretend all you want, but I can see how much this injury is costing you. If you push it, you will not recover!"

"There is no other way, Sif!" Frigga exclaimed. "Soon enough the Klyntar will find their way here, you saw them following the train just as I did. We have no other means to destroy the barrier's power source so Heimdall can see us. I must try!"

Sif opened her mouth to counter her, but no sound came of it. She didn't know what to say and it was painful to see how worried she was for Frigga. Clark, despite knowing her for far less time, wasn't fairing that much better. Frigga received him with open arms when he got to Asgard, offered
him a place to live there, treated him like family and she was the mother of a good friend of his. Knowing this could kill her wasn't a good feeling at all.

Frigga looked at him.

"How much energy do you need?" she asked.

Clark looked down. "I need a lot of it. Nothing else will make a dent in this tower."

Instead of answering, she just nodded, getting closer. "Prepare yourself then, this is going to feel a little weird."

And she touched his forehead. There was a blinding golden glow and Clark suddenly felt as if he was literally touching the surface of a yellow sun. He felt his body recharging at an amazing rate, the power building up inside him in a way he had never experienced before. His tiredness vanished, his sore muscles were back at being steel like, his chest was just bursting with energy.

Clark felt like Superman now.

Suddenly, the light from Frigga's hands began to fade; her eyes closed. Clark caught her before she could fall.

"Frigga, can you hear me?" he asked, as Sif kneeled by her side, a desperate expression on her face. "Frigga!"

"I am fine, Kal, just… tired." She looked at him, her eyes struggling to remain opened. "Was it enough?"

Clark had no idea, but he nodded nevertheless. "More than enough. Don't worry, I will take this thing down in a second. Sif, take her an go away from the center. You too, Alflyse."

Both did as he told and Clark looked up, preparing himself. He had no illusions about how hard this was going to be, maybe even harder than taking down the World Engine. But difficult or not, he had no option but succeeding.

He took off, the stone ground cracking under his feet as he flew fast, piercing the air. The violet beam of energy was by his side, remembering him from the blue beam of the World Engine, pouring its power in the barrier. Looking up, he could see the beam unmaking itself around the planet, the barrier eating the energy continuously.

Looking down, he could see Sif holding Frigga, Alflyse by their side, all of them watching him fly. More than that, he could see a truly humongous army approaching the tower, Klyntar of all colors running to where they were, beginning to climb the tower. He needed to work fast.

Clark couldn't just destroy the tower, but he could stop the energy beam.

And without thinking twice, he threw himself against it. The energy beam hit him with so much power that he was sent flying up, unable to resist its strength. The heat was almost unbearable, beginning to burn his skin, the pain increasing quickly. His red cape was whipping the air as he crossed both of his arms in front of his face, trying to resist the energy beam. Using all his strength, groaning with the effort, Clark managed to stop in air, completely engulfed in the violet beam.

His eyes burned red; and he unleashed his heat vision down, against the violet beam.

"AAAAAHHHHHHH!" he yelled, letting out the most powerful heat vision beam of his life.
The pair of red beams grew wide, hitting the violet one, actually managing to stop it from going up. Clark was suddenly not inside the violet beam anymore, as his heat vision began to push it down, little by little throwing it back to the inside of the tower. But it was not enough.

No matter how much he tried he just couldn't beat the violet beam. He stopped it, but couldn't force it back. His eyes were burning with the effort and he felt his energy fading fast; the energy Frigga risked her life to give him.

That thought made him furious.

Clark didn't know how, but he needed to get them away from this planet. Frigga, Sif, Alflyse were counting on him. And he would not disappoint, even if killed him. Not even realizing he was screaming, Clark used all his power in his heat vision, allowing his rage to feed the heat beams.

The twin heat beams grew in size until they were as wide as the violet beam, glowing so bright that Sif, Frigga and especially Alflyse had to turn their eyes from it. The heat they were generating was beginning to harm even Clark, as he felt his own face burning a bit. And even then, he did not stop.

Not even when his heat beams finally pushed the violet beam down the circular entrance, melting the stones around it; no, when that happened, Clark finally unleashed everything he had left.

"AAAAAHHHHHHH!"

He felt the violet beam's resistance fade completely and them a huge noise when all three beams finally hit the bottom of the tower. There was a huge tremor, shaking the whole tower. Clark closed his eyes, too tired to continue; the violet beam powering the barrier stayed down.

Clark allowed himself to smile before he began to fall.

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Sif ran quickly when she saw Kal losing altitude, reaching her hand to hold him before he could fall into the hole; she breathed relieved when her fingers managed to grasp him and pulled him back, to where Frigga was.

"I cannot believe he did it," Alflyse whispered, shock on her face. "That was… I have no words to describe it."

"Kal is one of a kind," Sif said, smiling kindly at him, moving the hair from his drenched face.

"Why does someone with so much power is content with so little?" Alflyse asked. "He could be ruling the universe. He could bring his people back and conquer everything!"

Sif looked at the confused Dark Elf. "Is that why you followed Malekith?"

"No! Malekith deserves no respect! He sacrificed the lives of our people during the last battle against Bor and in the countless other battles before. He--"

"He has no honor and cares nothing for others, least of all his people," Sif said. "Kal, if anything, cares too much about everyone. That is the difference."

Alflyse looked at Kal's face for a long time; and then she turned to Sif, her expression pained. "But what does it matter if he is the last one of his race?"

"He may be the last Kryptonian, but he is not the last living being in the universe. He chose to uphold the honor of his race instead of sacrificing it to bring them back. He is a protector and a
hero and I am proud to call him a friend."

Before Alflyse could answer, there was a loud screech that made them freeze; the Klyntar were here and the barrier still wasn't down.

"Frigga, what is happening?" Sif asked, looking at her Queen lying down. "Kal stopped the power source, why is the barrier not down?"

Frigga opened her eyes slowly, looking up. "It will, eventually. But I suppose we do not have the luxury to wait, do we?"

Without waiting for an answer, Frigga began to get up, slowly, ignoring Sif's cries that she should lie down again. Breathing deeply, Frigga gazed at the sky one more time, raising her hands.

"I can force it down, but it will take some time and every bit of energy I have left," she announced. "You will have to hold the Klyntar until then. I suggest you wake up Kal, we will need his help again."

Saying that, her hands started to glow and she unleashed some sort of magic to the sky. Grimacing, wanting nothing more than to let Frigga and Kal rest, Sif shook the Kryptonian hard until his eyes opened.

"I'm up, I'm up!" he said, his voice almost unintelligible.

"Kal, the Klyntar are coming, we need to gain time!" Sif said.

That did the trick.

Clark jumped up when he heard the word "Klyntar" followed by one of those soul piercing screeches; something about them just curdled his blood. Even so, he was well aware that the adrenalin was the only thing keeping him up right now. All his energy went in stopping that violet beam.

He would be no help in a fight. But looking around, Clark thought that maybe they wouldn't need to.

"Alflyse! You said the Klyntar don't like heat and loud noises, right? What do you think they would feel if a thousand bells rang together?"

The only answer he had was the savage smile on her face.

"Kelex, can you ring them?" Clark asked, not knowing how the bells worked; hopefully, they wouldn't have to do it manually.

"I can, sir, but I advise you to prepare yourself," Kelex answered.

"Why do you say that?" Clark asked, distracted, as he looked around.

"Because there is a Klyntar bound to you."

"WHAT?!"

Everybody turned to look at Clark, even Frigga who was deeply concentrated in using her magic. Sif's and Alflyse's eyes were completely wide with surprise and Clark was far beyond that point. He looked down at his own body, trying to see any signs of the Klyntar, but there was none.
"It saved your life," Kelex explained. "After Queen Alflyse stabbed you."

"WHAT?!" exclaimed Sif, looking from Clark to Alflyse.

"So that was how you survived..." Alflyse said, deliberately ignoring Sif's murderous look.

Clark wondered how he had healed his wounds, but he didn't think, even for a second, that a Symbiote was responsible. He thought, maybe, his body had some energy still in storage and he had healed when he passed out. Except Kelex saw everything happen; he had a Klyntar bound to him.

And apparently it was the only reason he was still alive.

"It saved my life," he repeated, almost whispering, remembering what Frigga told him about them. They were innocent, good, only corrupted by the wrong hosts. They weren't to blame for this chaos, they probably couldn't even understand what happened as well.

"Do not even think about it, Kal! You cannot take it to Asgard!" Sif exclaimed.

"It saved my life!"

"And thank Odin for that, but we cannot trust it! Get rid of it!"

Clark sighed. He wasn't sure he wanted to keep the Symbiote, but he at least owed it some gratitude. Sif was right, it was dangerous to take it to Asgard, but to just rip it off like a tumor was unkind, to say the least; murder, if he actually thought about it.

But he had no real choice. Once the bells started to ring, he couldn't just not hear them.

"Start to ring them, Kelex," Clark ordered, resigned.

The order was answered immediately. The thousand bells rang at the same time, echoing throughout the city. The Klyntar climbing up by the outside of the tower were thrown down immediately, suddenly feeling too much pain to continue to hold. The sound was so loud that Clark had no doubt he would feel dizzy if he had his super-hearing at that moment.

What he was feeling right now was even worse.

He felt something moving inside him, a skull splitting pain that threw him to his knees, his blood boiling. It was as bad as he felt when he was breathing Krypton's air, but instead of growing weakness he felt only pain and more pain. Clark didn't notice he was screaming, but he did notice his skin beginning to feel like knives were coming out of it.

Except it weren't knives, but a dark blue goo that seemed to be seeping through his skin and skinsuit, forced out by the loud noise.

Clark didn't know what was happening, a little delirious because of the pain, but his instincts told him the pain would stop if he could remove that second skin from his. He grabbed the blue goo as firmly as he could and began to pull, trying to ignore the desperate movements under his fingers.

Trying to ignore the desperate thoughts going through his mind.

The Klyntar didn't want to leave. It would die if it was removed. It was begging to stay with everything it got. But Clark still was pulling it, trying to shut down the feelings of betrayal the Klyntar was sending him.
And as soon as it began, it was over.

The dark blue goo was ripped from his skin and the pain, the thoughts, the aversion to the truly loud sound disappeared. The Symbiote was out and so were its weaknesses. Clark looked down, seeing the Klyntar still shivering in pain because of the noise.

"I'm sorry," he said, almost touching it again. "I'm really sorry."

Without being able to look anymore, he got up and went by Sif's side, watching as Frigga brought the barrier down. Her face was deeply focused, even when sweat was dripping from her cheeks. Clark couldn't imagine the level of effort she was making right now and he couldn't be more worried for her.

But at least it would be over soon and they would get back to Asgard.

That was when the bells emitted a loud, weird, wrong noise. Clark, Sif and Alflyse looked up to the bells, fast, trying to understand what was going on. It was clear as day it was something it shouldn't be happening.

They were falling down.

Time had cost the bells more than they could withstand; it made Clark wonder if they were added after the Kryptonians left, by the inhabitants of Morag, as a defense against the first Klyntar. In the end, it didn't matter, as the pieces began to give in and break, causing a domino effect.

The ones on top clashed against the ones under them and the whole thing began to fall apart.

They were fucked now.

Alflyse saw the bells dropping from the tower like meteors, some colliding close to where they were standing, some falling all the way down. Regardless of where they fell, the noise they were making stopped and so, the only defense they had against the Klyntar was gone.

They would have to fight.

Except there was no way to fight. The Asgardian Queen was almost dead, too busy with the magic to bring down the barrier, and the Kryptonian was completely spent, having used all his energy to destroy the tower's power supply. That left her and the other Asgardian to fight a horde she knew they couldn't defeat even with all of them fighting together.

"I will hold them," the Kryptonian said and Alflyse almost scoffed; they were always arrogant like that.

But looking at him she didn't see arrogance. She didn't see a man walking towards something he knew he would win. She saw a resigned person, someone who knew he was walking to certain death. And even then, there wasn't any sign of hesitation on his face.

"No, you are too tired, I will hold them," answered the Asgardian. "Frigga needs more time than you can give her."

There it was again, another selfless act from a people she considered for a very long time beneath her. Not that the Dark Elves didn't see the Asgardians as threats, but being amongst the oldest races in the universe they tended to see everyone as primitives. Not really on their level. Something less than they were.
Maybe that was their mistake all along.

Asgardians, Kryptonians, Dark Elves… They weren't that different in the end. All living beings, all thinking beings, all deserving of the life they were granted. Sure, they were here first, but in the end why did that matter anyway?

Alflyse fought for so long to protect her people, to grant them a future, that she stopped looking at anything else. Everything and everyone became means to an end so that they could save themselves. Even their own people, in the end, had become means to an end in the hands of Malekith.

What a far cry from the proud people they once were. From the beautiful race the Dark Elves bragged to be. From the honorable people they were one day. They were willing to kill every single life form in the universe so that a few Dark Elves could survive.

She couldn't even say it was a few children; no, the children were long gone, too weak to survive in this universe for too long. A few thousand soldiers. Warriors more than willing to die for their cause, but not to accept that their time had come.

We're born, we live, we die… Maybe there was wisdom in these words.

"I will hold them," Alflyse announced, walking forward.

Sif and Kal stopped to argue, turning to look at her, eyes wide. She met their eyes and then looked at Frigga, seeing the tired Asgardian Queen looking at her proudly.

"You-you will?" Kal asked, uncertain.

She looked at him again, suddenly, for the first time in ages, feeling free. Alflyse smiled.

"You were right, Kal-El," she said. "My people should rest with the honor they have left. I should rest with the honor I have left."

Saying this, she opened a big smile, feeling the person she once were again. Feeling proud to be the Queen of the Dark Elves.

Before she could advance any more step, Sif threw her something; without noticing, she grabbed it in air. It was an Asgardian sword.

"Make them pay," Sif said, looking at her for the first time with respect; for some reason, Alflyse felt good because of it.

"Oh, I will!"

And with that, Alflyse, the Witch-Queen of the Dark World, walked to her end; she was smiling the whole time.

Clark felt his chest hurt when Alflyse disappeared down the stairs, no doubt advancing towards her death.

"She is happy," Sif said, "She will regain her honor. There is no better way to go."

Sif was right, of course. It didn't make things easier, though. Trying to suppress the sadness he was feeling, Clark looked at Frigga, imagining if she would be okay. He had no idea how dangerous the injury she suffered was, but her appearance wasn't good. Clark hoped he was wrong.
Not too long after that, they began hearing sounds of battle, yelling, roars. Alflyse was fighting and that meant the Klyntar weren't far. Frigga needed to end whatever she was doing fast, before Alflyse's sacrifice was in vain.

He got his wish when Frigga did one last movement and fell behind.

Clark and Sif ran to her, holding the Thor's mother before she fell to the ground. She looked terrible.

"Frigga, are you–"

"Let me speak while I can," Frigga interrupted, her eyes almost closed. "The barrier will be down in a few seconds, but I used more energy than I could. Soon, I will not have any to sustain my body."

Sif and Clark looked at her with horror etched on their faces.

"I do have a last trick, though," Frigga said, smiling. "My own version of Odinsleep. It will keep me alive and heal me. I just do not know how long it will take."

"But–"

"No, do not interrupt me! I have no time. You must go to Svartalfheim after you leave this planet. You must look for the Aether Chamber they have there and you must take Jane with you."

"If Jane steps there, Malekith will know!" Sif exclaimed.

"Precisely," Frigga said. "And he will come to get it back. Allow him to do so, it is the only way to remove the Aether from Jane before it kills her. And then use the Aether Chamber to trap it." The Queen looked at them. "Do not let the Aether falls into the hands of Malekith. He will destroy the entire universe with its power."

She stopped talking, taking a long breath.

"I showed my son the memories of my travels through Svartalfheim," she continued, her voice even lower. "He will be able to guide you there."

Clark smiled. "That's great! With Thor guiding us–"

"My other son."

Oh, shit.

Before he could speak anything else, Frigga touched his face.

"I do not know when we will see each other again, but it has been a pleasure knowing you, Kal. I hope you and Thor remain great friends even millennia from now." She removed the hand from his face and touched Sif's, drying a single tear falling down her cheek. "And Sif… I wished I had a daughter like you. I wished… I wished you were the daughter I had…"

Frigga's eyes closed. Clark felt his vision blur while he held her, pretending not to hear Sif crying.

It was time to go back to Asgard.

"HEIMDALL!"
Alflyse was breathing hard, feeling the cuts and broken bones all across her body. The ground around her was filled with pieces of her enemies and an even bigger part of the tower was filled with burned remains.

She lost count of how long she fought, too lost in her frenzy to care anymore. This was a last blaze of glory, a way to regain her honor and finally rest with her people. Maybe even see some of them she missed so much.

The Dark Elf fell to her knees, too weak to move, smiling at the approaching Klyntar; the Asgardian sword was still in her hands, but too heavy to be lifted anymore. It was time. She had fought enough.

Alflyse closed her eyes, waiting for the final blow.

She was not waiting for the attack that came from her back; instead of a clawed slash, there was something enveloping her, trapping her, bonding with her. She understood what was happening almost immediately and for the first time since the whole fight began she felt afraid.

This wasn't death, it wasn't redemption. It was slavery.

Alflyse fought with all the strength she had left, but soon the dark blue goo completely took her. She felt her mind giving in, the pain, the rage, the betrayal ringing loud inside her brain. The dark blue skin took her, enveloping her, making her muscles stronger; somehow, she could feel the weak light of the sun now and instead of hurting her it gave her even more power.

Her head was surrounded by the blue goo, almost as if a huge jaw was biting it whole, but the white teeth growing didn't harm her. Instead, it closed over her head like a helm, like second mouth, a long, red tongue slithering out soon enough. Several red tendrils began to form from her shoulders and back, growing long until they almost reached the floor, a mockery of a cape.

A red "S" appeared on the middle of her blue chest.

Slowly, still getting used to her new body, she got up. Small rocks all over her were trembling as she began to float slightly, almost as if by instinct. Her mind was filled with images of him, the betrayer, the one who had casted them out.

They would find him. They would make him pay.

"We are SOLAR!" they roared to the sky.

The army of Symbiotes responded from all over the city.
Guilt was a terrible thing. Rationally, Clark knew that he couldn't have done anything to prevent what happened. He did the best he could in a terrible situation. It could even be considered arrogant of him to presume he could've solved things if he just applied himself more, when he was accompanied by warriors much more experienced than he was with situations like that.

Then again, guilt didn't really have much to do with rationality in most cases.

Alflyse sacrificed herself to give them time to escape and Frigga was in her own version of Odinsleep, trying to heal her body from the damage caused by the Kursed's claws and the magical exhaustion. Two lives. The Queen of the Dark Elves, that willingly gave her life for them, and the Queen of Asgard, his friend's mother and someone that treated him like family. That was the cost of his and Sif's lives; Clark was having trouble dealing with that.

The sound of stone cracking snapped him out of his dark thoughts.

"Damn it!" Clark muttered, quickly opening his hands; the walls of the stone bowl turned to dust under his fingers.

Clark closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Wallowing in it wouldn't change a thing and the situation was far from solved. The Aether still was in Jane, Malekith still was out there and they would no doubt attack before the Convergence ended. If there was ever a time he needed to be there for Asgard, for Thor, that was it.

Sighing, Clark shook the dust out of his hands and sank them in the water, washing his face and torso. He felt as if he were awake for a whole month, tired, even after Asgard's sun recharged all the energy he lost in Morag. He was filled to the brim with yellow sunlight, healed of all big and small injuries, but his mind was still sluggish. Well, there was no time to sleep now, even if he thought he was capable of it.

He looked around his room for a moment, unable to miss the contrast between the heavenly view with the apprehension he was feeling, and grabbed his skinsuit from the bed. Asgard and Morag? Those were just the first battles in this war and their losses were already piling up. The only good news they had was that the Aether was still in their possession; if it wasn't, Malekith would've already have in his hands the weapon he needed to unmake the universe.

The bad news? It was an Infinity Stone and Jane simply wasn't strong enough to sustain it for much longer. Sooner rather than later it would kill her and then the Aether would seek another host, since they had no way to contain it; that would be a problem even if Odin managed to find a way to take the Aether from Jane.

There was only one thing they could do: follow Frigga's plan. Go to Svartalfheim, taking Jane with them, find the Aether Chamber and then allow Malekith to remove the Aether out of her. Once the Aether was out, they would have the window they needed to trap it in the Aether Chamber before Malekith managed to take it back.

To make things even better, the only one who knew his way through Svartalfheim was Loki, the
God of Mischief.

To say things could go wrong was an understatement. In fact, the chances of things go right were slim. They would be in hostile territory, taking a human with an Infinity Stone inside of her, being hounded each step of the way by an army of Dark Elves zealots. If anything unplanned happened, well, Clark didn't even know what they would do.

Regardless, no matter the risks, he wouldn't dream of being anywhere else. His friends, the entire universe, needed him and he would be there for them.

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Thor looked at his mother's face, looking through the golden energy dome surrounding her, feeling the magic in the air was resonating with power. She looked so peaceful, not a worry in her expression, as if the recent battles that had costed them so much never happened.

Frigga was inside her and his father's chambers, in the golden bed where he stayed during the periods of time he went through Odinsleep. The same one he was recently, when the king of the Frost Giants, Laufey, tried to kill him.

It was odd seeing Frigga there. He had seen his father during Odinsleep before, it was how Odin managed to live well past an Asgardian lifespan and how he could keep all his power intact even with old age, but he had never seen Frigga like this. It felt out of place. Weird. Wrong.

More than anything, it made him afraid; it was a feeling all too familiar to him these days.

Asgardians were not gods. They were born, they lived, they died. Thor already lost warriors in battles before, he understood that. But he never imagined, not even in his worst nightmares, that Death would claim someone from his family, especially his mother. In his mind, Odin and Frigga were almost eternal, too powerful to fall in battle and too tied to Asgard to simply… go away.

This was certainly humbling.

"Thor," Jane whispered, touching his shoulder. For a second, he almost startled, forgetting she was there. "Look at me."

Still shocked to his core, Thor turned to her, his face a mirror of what he was feeling: lost.

"She is not going to die," Jane said, forcefully. "Frigga came back, she is a fighter. Like you."

Thor wanted to believe her, he did believe her, but that didn't make things any easier. Jane opened her mouth to add something else, but instead of talking, she turned, hearing the sound of steps approaching.

"Clark!" Jane greeted, smiling. "I'm so relieved you are alright."

Kal approached slowly, no doubt out of respect for his mother. Thor was also relieved that he and Sif came back unharmed; he did not know what he would do if he had lost two of his friends too. And by the stories they told, Kal was a big responsible for them even being able to get out of that accursed planet.

He owed him again.

"Thanks, Jane, it means a lot hearing that," Kal said, smiling at Jane kindly. He looked at Thor, a somber expression coloring his face. "Thor, I'm so sorry. I-I tried to—"
Thor interrupted the unneeded apology almost immediately.

"You and Sif are the only reason my mother even has a chance to survive," Thor said, grabbing Kal by the shoulders. "Thank you."

Kal looked down for a second, probably not really believing in what Thor said, but he didn't insist.

"I'll leave you two to talk," Jane said, touching Thor's face one last time. "I need to lie down a little bit."

Both of them nodded as Jane left the room, walking slowly; too slowly. The Aether was eating her alive and there was nothing Thor could do. He felt his hand tremble with rage. Two people he loved were slipping through his fingers like water and he couldn't do a single thing.

"Have you ever lost someone close, Kal?" Thor caught himself asking when Jane was no longer close. "I… I understand the concept of death, I have seen it, but--"

"But you never had someone truly close from you dying," Kal finished, looking at him. "Thor, Frigga is not dead and she will not die. If you don't believe me, or Jane, then believe in her. I've seen what she could do on Morag, I'm sure she won't let something like this beat her."

Thor didn't relax at his words, but they were at least soothing. Maybe it wasn't true, maybe not even Kal believed in what he said, but at least he gave Thor a bit of hope. It was more than he had a few moments ago.

"I lost my father," Kal said, almost in a whisper. He was looking at Frigga right now, an unreadable expression on his face. "It was a few years ago, but sometimes it feels like yesterday."

They were in silence for a minute, then Thor asked: "Does it get… easier?"

Kal chuckled, humorless. "It won't hurt any less, if that's what you're asking. You don't heal like it's some sort of physical wound." He turned to Thor. "But you do get used to it. You learn to live with the pain and move on. To remember the good times and try to be the person they raised you to be." Kal shrugged. "That helps."

Without meaning to, Thor looked from Kal to Frigga, his mind conjuring images as his Kryptonian friend spoke. He saw himself in Kal's place, trying to move on after his mother passed; he shook his head, forcing himself to stop thinking about it.

"Your father, how did he…?"

"Heart attack," Kal answered.

Thor frowned.

"Someone… attacked his heart?" he asked, not sure he understood it correctly.

Kal turned to look at him, his face a mix of surprised and amused.

"No, a heart attack is a human condition," Kal explained. "When an artery is blocked, keeping blood from reaching the heart, which eventually fails."

Thor realized he had a stunned look on his face, but he couldn't help himself.

"Does that really happen with humans?" he exclaimed. "Their hearts just… stop working?"
"Sometimes. It's quite common, actually. Not always fatal, but never good for one's health."

Something terrible occurred to him; his eyes were wide. "Do you think Jane—"

"No!" Kal interrupted, fast. "No, of course not. Jane is still young and she is in terrific shape." He stopped, looking embarrassed. "I-I mean that with respect, of course!"

Thor was truly lost in this conversation. Something must've showed on his face, because Kal sighed and explained again.

"It usually happens to older people, people who don't exercise as often as they should and have an unbalanced diet." Kal said. "My father was an older man and, truth be told, he liked my mother's food a bit too much."

Could humans truly be this fragile? To the point that eating too much or not eating "right" could kill them just like that? How was Thor supposed to protect Jane from something like this? How could Kal?

He couldn't. And that was exactly the point, apparently.

"When it is time, it is time," Thor whispered, looking at his mother.

"But hopefully it's not her time," Kal added, holding Thor's shoulder.

They stood in silence for a while, watching over Frigga as if their presence could somehow help her get better. It was nonsense, of course, but being there was important to Thor and it meant a lot that Kal understood that. Eventually, however, he felt Kal looking at him.

"Thor, we need to talk." The way he said that left no doubt it was important; he looked at Kal.
"Your mother suggested a plan so we can help Jane."

Kal looked down and sighed.

"But you are not going to like it."

"Klyntar?!" exclaimed Fandral, filling Sif's mug with mead. "Must have been centuries since I even heard about them."

"Unpleasant beings," Volstagg added, shivering for a moment, before going back to eating.

"Oh, yes, they always bothered you quite a lot, didn't they?" Fandral needled. "Afraid of the goo people?"

Volstagg growled as best as he could without stop eating.

"Not afraid, just… Deeply disturbed," he said, after swallowing. He stopped for a moment, looking down at his plate. "And apparently not without reason."

His words dispelled the distraction they tried so hard to create in less than a second, bringing forth all their worry about Frigga and the fate of Asgard. What started as a celebration of the Convergence, with a tournament that would've been remembered for ages to come, had derailed in an all out conflict against a supposedly extinct race. A conflict that had ended with Sif, Frigga, Kal and the Queen of the Dark Elves thrown on a planet infested with Klyntar.

A conflict that claimed the life of Alfylese and left Frigga in a coma.
Hard to believe not even five hours ago they were still on Morag, fighting for their lives, trying to escape that accursed place. Hard to believe that, at that moment, they had hope all of them would get to Asgard safe.

"Well, when you put it like that," Fandral sighed, breaking the silence. "Still, as unpleasant as the symbiotes are, the true guilty ones are the Dark Elves."

"That they are," Volstagg promptly agreed, punching the table. "If I could, I would twist their necks! Every last one of them!"

"Finish what Bor started," Fandral added. "And we will, we certainly will--"

"Enough!" Sif snarled, startling both of them. "That is enough! We are Asgardians! We will fight and we will kill, but we will not stain our honor by becoming the very monsters we believe the Dark Elves to be!"

Sif's outburst surprised Fandral and Volstagg, certainly, but it surprised most of all herself. Maybe because not too long ago, if faced with the same situation, Sif knew her answer wouldn't be so different from theirs. Before Morag. Before Alflyse's sacrifice. Before she learned exactly what the Dark Elves were going through.

They were still enemies and she would fight them, but Sif could honestly say she no longer hated them, not even now with Frigga's life in danger. No, she did not hate the Dark Elves, she hated Malekith.

"We will not become monsters," Sif repeated, remembering Alflyse walking away from them with her sword, prepared to die to buy them a little time.

Asgard was mourning. And at the same time was furious. But if Sif had anything to say about it, they would focus all those emotions into stopping Malekith, not destroying the Dark Elves.

It was a small distinction, but an important one.

"We need to speak with Thor," Sif said, suddenly, getting up and pulling Fandral and Volstagg with her.

"So your plan is to ask Loki to take us and Jane to Svartalfheim," Thor repeated, incredulous, "find the Aether Chamber we know it's there, trick Malekith or some other Dark Elf there to remove the Aether from Jane and then, while he is doing it, trap the Infinity Stone." Thor looked down and then back at Clark again. "And after all that we fight our way out of Svartalfheim, through Malekith himself and whatever forces he has. That is your plan?"

Well, Clark didn't have much to add to that, so he looked at Frigga.

"It's more of your mother's plan, actually," he said, truthfully, but feeling a little embarrassed even so. "I'm just the messenger."

Thor turned again and gazed at Frigga, the shocked look still on his face. Clark couldn't actually blame him; it wasn't the most brilliant plan in the universe, he had to admit. Unfortunately, it was all they had and Thor realized that.

"We can do it," Thor said, his voice low. He looked at Clark and smiled. "We can do it! We will go right now!"
"Absolutely not!" Odin's voice boomed from the room's entrance.

Clark and Thor stopped in their tracks and he couldn't help but feel like a little kid caught doing something wrong. It was a very weird feeling, especially when he noticed Thor felt the same; Superman and the one thousand year old God of Thunder looked like two misbehaved kids at that moment. Clark was there and even he could barely believe that was happening.

Odin entered the room, his one eye severe.

"Loki is not leaving his cell. Jane Foster is not setting foot on Svartalfheim while she has the Aether inside her. And you two are not leaving Asgard."

The King of Asgard walked to the middle of the room, stopping right in front of them, almost as if challenging them to disagree. Thor, of course, did just that.

"We are still unable to restore the palace's shields, our artillery cannot detect their ships, even Heimdall cannot see them!" Thor began, stepping forward. "Each second we stay here, doing nothing, is a second they have to gather their forces to attack. And all the while Jane is being consumed by the Aether."

"You overestimate the power of these creatures," Odin dismissed. "Gone was the time when they were a threat to us. We possess the Aether. All we have to do is defend Asgard until the Convergence is over."

"Jane will not survive that long!" Thor snapped. "You have not found a way to take the Aether from her and even if you did we do not have a way to contain it, unless we are willing to let it kill another in Jane's stead!"

"And if you fail?" Odin asked, as incensed as his son. "If you cannot do as you planned, then you are handing over the Aether to Malekith during the Convergence! Can you comprehend what that means, my son? The end of the universe! Is the life of one mortal worth the lives of the entire universe?"

"She is not just any mortal!" Thor yelled back.

Odin's face was almost touching Thor's.

"All this time and you learned nothing!" Odin thundered. "You are the future King of Asgard, act like it! No life is worth more than the lives of the Realms. Not mine, not yours, not your mother's, not Jane's! You want to be King, Thor? Then learn to make sacrifices for the greater good!"

Thor's face was full of anger, his hand actually shaking, but he didn't say anything in response. Clark also didn't know that to say. Truth was, Odin was right, both of them knew it. If they failed to prevent Malekith from taking the Aether the universe was over. Not only Asgard and the rest of the Nine Realms, everything. Was Jane's life worth more than all lives? Clark was pretty sure if they asked Jane, her answer would be "no".

But it didn't mean they could just watch Jane die and do nothing.

"Can't you help?" Clark asked Odin; the King looked at him. "Give us a few troops of Einherjar?"

"Send an army to the Dark World?" Odin answered. "What use will they be? When Malekith senses the Aether he will go towards Jane. The Einherjar can defend her here, but not in the middle of Svartalfheim." He turned to Thor, his face losing the severity it held just moments ago. "Son, believe me when I say that, despite what I think about your choice, I do not wish any harm to fall
upon Jane. I am looking for a way to help her. But I cannot, in good conscience, send her to Svartalfheim when the price of failure is that high."

Thor seemed to lose any will to fight too, even if his face was full of pain. Odin touched his shoulder and walked to Frigga's bed.

"Now I want some time alone with my wife. Leave me, please."

The conversation was over, so they did what Odin asked and left the room. Of course, Clark should've known Thor wouldn't just give up like that.

"What I'm about to ask of you is treason of the highest order," Thor announced, looking at the people sitting at the table. "Success will bring us exile and failure shall mean our death."

Clark, Sif, Fandral and Volstagg looked back at Thor, not knowing exactly what to say in response to that; Sif rolled her eyes.

"You always know exactly what to say to convince us to follow you, Thor," she said, sarcastically.

The slight joke made Thor grin a bit, but it did little to alleviate the heaviness of the moment.

"I want you all to know, in no uncertain terms, the consequences that shall befall upon us if you agree to this," Thor explained, looking at his friends. "There will be no honor, no reward, no tales of bravery to tell in the taverns. If we do this, we may very well be banished, or worse, share a cell with Loki."

That particular thought made all Asgardians shiver a little bit, but it did not convince any of them to leave. Soon after their discussion with Odin, Thor had brought all of them to a tiny tavern in the city, under cover of darkness, to discuss the very plan the King had forbade them to follow.

Clark still didn't know if disobeying Odin was very brave or very, very stupid.

"Jane is dying," Thor said, with no warning; his eyes seemed devoid of light. "Her body is not strong enough to sustain the Aether and it will not take long for her to be consumed by it. I do not believe she will even resist until after the Convergence is over."

"So we need to take her to Svartalfheim," Clark said, all eyes on him now. "We have no way to take the Aether out of her, but the Dark Elves do. Malekith does."

"And if we can trick him to do that, we can use the Aether Chamber to trap the Aether," Thor continued. "It will be the end of Malekith's ambition, Jane will be safe and the Dark Elves will not have a reason to attack Asgard again." Thor looked down and sighed. "That is what we need to do. The problem is 'how' to do it."

Fandral tapped the table.

"Question: how do we get to the Dark World?" the handsome Asgardian asked. "The Bifrost is closed and the Tesseract is locked away in the vault. It would take too long to reach Svartalfheim with a ship."

"There are other paths off Asgard," Thor answered, seriously. "Ways through the branches of Yggdrasil known to only a few."

"One, actually," Sif corrected, having already heard the plan from Frigga back on Morag.
There was a brief silence as Fandral and Volstagg imagined who was this person; it was easy to see when they reached the obvious conclusion when their eyes got wide.

"No!" Volstagg exclaimed.

Fandral looked at Thor. "He will betray you."

Thor didn't even try to argue. "He will try."

"And what about your lovely mortal?" Sif asked, turning to Thor with one eyebrow raised. "Assuming you can convince Loki to help us, there is still the matter of getting to her when she is being guarded by a legion of Einherjar who will see you coming from miles away."

Guards put there by Odin to protect Jane from the Dark Elves. And, most likely, Clark thought, to prevent Thor from doing something rash; which was exactly what he was planning to do.

"I can take her," Clark said, suddenly. "I can fly her down the windows. If it all works well, they won't even know she is missing until we are too far for they to try anything."

Thor smiled and nodded, thanking him.

"You are forgetting a very important detail," Volstagg interjected. "The Einherjar may not see Kal flying with Jane, but there is someone who can see everything."

Heimdall, the Guardian of the Bifrost and the only person Clark knew who had a better vision than he had; that would be a problem.

"There is no way around that," Sif finally said, after a long silence when they were all trying to think of a solution. "Heimdall will see us. We will just have to be fast enough to leave before he can warn the Allfather."

"It is my sworn duty to notify him of crimes against the throne," said a deep voice behind them. Clark and the four Asgardians were up in a flash, ready to fight; at least Clark, Sif, Fandral and Volstagg were. Thor wasn't even holding his hammer as he looked to the cloaked stranger approaching.

"Took you long enough, my friend," Thor said as Heimdall removed his cloak and pulled a chair in the almost empty tavern, completely ignoring the four people ready to battle around him. "Did you listen to what we said or do we need to repeat it?"

"I can listen grass growing on the ground and wool growing on the sheep." Heimdall answered, ignoring the apprehension around the table as he sat. "I think you, of all people, would know that, my Prince."

Thor laughed. "Yes, the number of times Mother was warned just in time to prevent me and Loki to do something stupid was a very clear evidence someone was watching us."

Heimdall gazed at Thor with his golden, unblinking eyes. "And yet, here we are."

The God of Thunder didn't shy away from his gaze.

"The only person I know who could hide from you is Loki," Thor shrugged, "and even if I knew how to do it, it is not my way."

"You can say that again," Sif sighed.
There was a moment of silence. "You wanted me here," Heimdall concluded.

Thor nodded, still staring at Heimdall. "We will do this, Heimdall, no matter what. Jane's life depends on it and with her off-world Malekith has no reason to kill any more innocent Asgardians, which will happen, since our defenses are meaningless against them. But it would be easier if you helped us."

Heimdall was in silence for so long that Clark was beginning to think he wouldn't answer; then, closing his eyes for the first time since he arrived, the Guardian of the Bifrost sighed.

"What do you require of me?"

"Thor! After all this time and now you come to visit me," greeted Loki, approaching the golden barrier of his cell with his hands behind his back.

Thor stopped in front of Loki's cell, looking at him in silence, the fire illuminating the place clacking. The prison hallway was empty, every Einherjar available guarding the palace now, trusting the restored barriers to keep the prisoners under control. While that may be risky, right now Thor could only see it as good luck.

Loki leaned closer, his unblinking eyes staring at Thor's.

"Why?" Loki snarled. "Have you come to gloat? To mock?"

"Loki, enough!" Thor interrupted what he knew would be a long speech. He looked around Loki's cell for a moment. "No more illusions."

As he said that, Loki closed his eyes; and started to disappear, like reality itself was being unmade right before his eyes. The pristine jail cell that stood in front of him, with bottles of wine, fruits, books, tables and chairs was no more; in its place was complete destruction. The walls were broken, as was the floor, the furniture was reduced to splinters and the very barrier holding Loki was damaged, like a cracked window glass.

Loki himself was far from the composed, well dressed figure standing in the cell a few seconds ago. His dressing was still impeccable, of course, like always, but his demeanor was not. Gone was the calm and calculating God of Lies and in his place was the personification of wrath.

That was weird. Loki, like Thor, was quick to anger, but their responses weren't the same. While Thor's fury was like a thunderstorm, destructive and impossible to miss, Loki's was like a dagger in the dark. Thor would punch someone who angered him and after a brawl he might even end up drinking with a new friend; Loki would smile, seem as nonthreatening as possible, convince the one who angered him that they were close as best friends, and then, when the whole thing was already forgotten, Loki would slit his throat.

Dealing with his brother usually brought very final consequences.

It was rare for Loki to lose his cool like that, but then again he and Frigga were always very close, no matter how much he denied that. Thor just couldn't possibly tell if that was a good thing or not.

"How is Frigga?" Loki asked, abandoning the pretense that everything was fine.

Thor sighed and approached the cell by the other side, getting closer.

"She is still in her own version of Odinsleep. I do not know when and if she will wake up." His
expression grew hard. "But I am not here to share our grief. Instead, I offer you the chance of a far richer sacrament."

Loki tilted his head slightly. "Go on."

"I know you seek vengeance as much as I do," Thor started, looking at the destroyed cell. "Help me escape Asgard and guide me through Svartalfheim and I will grant it to you." He looked directly at Loki's eyes. "Vengeance. And afterwards, this cell."

The God of Mischief held his stare for a second and then laughed.

"You must be truly desperate to come to me for help."

Well, he was not wrong, but Thor wouldn't admit it.

"I need to--" Thor began, but was promptly interrupted.

"No, don't tell me, let me guess," Loki said, making a big show of pretending to think. "Your little mortal is being eaten alive by the Aether she so foolishly absorbed and now you need to go to Svartalfheim to force Malekith to take it out of her. But to do that you need to find the Aether Chamber first, that is hidden in an old Elven temple. And the only person that knew the way and was willing to help was Mother. Odin, obviously, disagree and you have no way out of Asgard. Am I correct?"

Thor just sighed again, nodding.

"What makes you think you can trust me?" Loki asked, raising both eyebrows.

"I don't," Thor answer immediately. "Mother does." He approached the barrier again, getting as close as possible from Loki. "But you should know that when we fought each other in the past, I did so with a glimmer of hope that my brother was still in there somewhere. That hope no longer exists to protect you. You betray me and I will kill you."

They stared at each other for what seemed to be hours; then Loki smiled.

"When do we start?"

Jane was pissed. Bored too, a little cold and feeling sick as a dog, but mostly she was pissed. What gave Odin the right to basically put her under house arrest? So he was the King of Asgard and Protector of the Nine Realms and one of the most powerful beings in the universe, but there were rules about that kind of thing!

The only reason she didn't put more of a fight when they guided her to her room was because of Frigga. It wasn't the right moment to make a ruckus, not when Thor's mother was between life and death. She sighed, feeling the anger leaving her body, being quickly replaced by sadness. Frigga was the only person in all of Asgard who accepted her, who looked at her not as foolish, weak mortal, but almost as a daughter.

To even imagine that she could die and that she would never see her again made her heart clench.

Still, this situation was not acceptable. Odin might justify that it was for her own safety all he wanted, but even so it wasn't right and Jane could only hope Thor would solve the situation. Bored, she walked around the big room, that looked like something out of a palace of a roman emperor, trying to occupy her mind with something. The place was filled with books and beautiful paintings
and it even had something Jane could assume it was the Asgardian version of a radio, but nothing could hold her interest right now.

Maybe a bath? That sounded nice.

Distracted, barely registering anything around her, Jane started to take her clothes off. Asgardian dresses, what was she thinking? It was a good thing Asgardians lived thousands of years, because the women probably took a few hundred just to learn how to wear the damn things! The worst part? She couldn't even tear it in a fit of anger, because the cloth was just too damn strong.

"God damn it! Get out of me, you son of —AHHH!"

Clark Kent was flying right in front of her window. Super-fucking-man was watching her wrestle her dress for who knows how long; she could only be glad that she didn't win. Stomping her feet, Jane went the to windows and opened them, allowing him to enter.

"What are you doing here?! What if I wasn't wearing anything?" Jane asked, happy to finally have someone to take the brunt of her bad mood.

"Well, to be honest, the way things were going with that dress that would take hours to happen," Clark said, smiling; Jane wanted to punch him, but she knew, by her experience in punching Thor, that she would break her hand.

"What are you doing here?" Jane asked, quickly looking at the door. "Where is Thor? Can I leave? How is—"

Clark stopped her.

"I'll tell you everything on the way, but we have to leave, quietly. Now!"

"Where are we going?" Jane questioned, lowering her voice and looking again at the big doors. "And how?"

"We are going to Svartalfheim to take the Aether out of you," Clark answered, fast. "But, um, Odin didn't like the idea that much so we can't be caught, so we are going through the window."

Jane immediately looked down, feeling a cold in the spine at the height.

"I-I'm, um, I'm not so sure about this," Jane stuttered.

"You rather stay here?"

Jane looked at the door and back down, barely able to see anything from that distance.

"Point taken. Okay, let's go," Jane agreed reluctantly, moving before she could lose her nerve.

The moment she touched Clark's shoulder, however, the Aether glowed under her skin; and before she could try to do anything it exploded in a storm of red, sending Superman flying to the other side of the room, alongside everything in its way.

So much for leaving unnoticed.

"This is so unlike you, brother," Loki quipped, unusually giddy. "So clandestine! Are you sure you wouldn't rather just punch your way out?"
Thor sighed, looking around to see if they were still not being chased by guards.

"If you keep speaking, I just might," he answered, walking fast.

"Fine, as you wish," Loki conceded, too quickly for Thor's tastes. "I'm not even here."

And in a flash of green, he truly wasn't anymore; in his place was now an Einherjar lieutenant, with golden armor glowing under the fire.

"Is this better?" Loki asked, his voice completely different now.

"It's better company, at least," Thor agreed.

Loki shook his head. "Still, we could be less conspicuous."

Before Thor could say anything there was another green glow, this time surrounding both of them.

"Hmm, brother, you look ravishing!"

Thor immediately looked down at himself; except he was looking at Sif. He rolled his eyes, seeing Sif's reflection do the same in a passing mirror.

"It will hurt no less when I kill you in this form," he assured.

His brother was obviously very amused. "Very well. Perhaps you prefer one of your new companions, given that you seem to like them so much."

He almost reached for Loki, but he was faster and they were surrounded by the green light again. Steve Rogers, wearing his Captain America uniform, was in Loki's place now.

"This is much better!" Loki said in Steve's voice, the 'vibranium' shield even making its usual sounds. "Ooh! The costume is a bit much. So tight! But the confidence… I can feel the righteousness surging!"

Was this really how Loki saw his friends?

"Hey, do you want to have a rousing discussion about truth? Honor? Patriotism? God bless Amer--"

Thor pushed him against the wall, closing Loki's mouth with his hand as the illusion started to dispel; his brother's eyes were wide.

"What?" Loki asked.

Thor didn't speak, he just nodded towards the hallway, where two guards were patrolling.

"You could at least furnish me with a weapon," Loki suggested. Thor didn't even bother himself to answer. "I'm not Superman, you know? Or maybe I am!"

He almost strangled his brother when he started to glow green again, this time assuming Kal's form, complete with his blue Kryptonian skinsuit.

"Take your filthy hands of me, primitive!" Loki demanded in Kal's voice, except he'd never heard Kal sounding so harsh or arrogant before. "Barbarian, with you long hair and unshaved beard, going around swinging a hammer in the Allfather's name! I should eradicate your entire race!"

Thor looked back at "Kal's" face and frowned. "You have no idea how Kal is, do you?"
Loki groaned and dispelled the illusion. "Give me a break, I don't know him."

"Steve's impersonation was not that good either."

"Oh, is that what you are going to do now? Teach me how to impersonate your friends? Give me a weapon! My dagger, something!"

Thor sighed again and took his hands to his belt.

"At last!" Loki exclaimed, happy. "A little common sense!"

And he was happy until the moment the cuffs closed around his wrists. He lifted his hands, looking murderous.


That seemed to shut him up, but Thor knew it wouldn't last, so he began to walk fast again, going to the throne room. They couldn't outrun the Asgardian troops on foot and any ship in the palace would be either heavily guarded or being used; except for one.

The Dark Elf vessel that crashed right in the middle of the throne room.

"Are we going to get the mortal now?" Loki asked, proving Thor's theory that silence wouldn't last.

"Kal is handling that part."

Loki's little laugh wasn't a good sign. "Are you sure that is a good idea, brother?"

"What do you mean?" Thor asked, confused.

"Well, I don't know the man, that is true, but the guards do like to talk," Loki began, grinning. "By what they said, the Kryptonian is a lot like you. And when I say he is like you, I mean he is a highly destructive person."

"He is not! And neither am I, for that matter. What happened in Midgard wasn't his fault. Mortal's buildings are just heavily flawed! They still didn't learn how to build things that well, but they will."

"If you say so, I'll believe you," Loki agreed, shrugging.

Right when a huge explosion made the entire palace shake. They looked at each other, Thor with his eyes wide and Loki with an arrogant smile.

"I'm sure that had nothing to do with Kal, but we should make haste," Thor said, purposely avoiding eye contact with Loki.

"You are probably right, brother, everything will be just fine."

"Oh, shut up, Loki!"

"That's not good," Volstagg said, as the palace started to shake. "Not good at all."

Sif couldn't help but agree with him. Something in that crazy plan had already gone wrong and since the sound came from the direction of Jane's quarters, then she had a pretty good idea where it went wrong.
"We have to hurry," Sif stated, urging Volstagg to run.

Their part of the plan was simple: secure the getaway vehicle, or so Kal had defined. In this case, the vehicle they were supposed to acquire and defend was the Dark Elven ship in the middle of the throne room. Something fast, showy and hopefully not enough guarded that they could use to get some distance between them and the palace.

Thor and Loki, like Kal and Jane, were supposed to meet them there, but Sif had no idea if the plan was still going the way they hoped. While she and Volstagg quickly moved to the throne room, she could see several armed guards running in the direction of the explosion; useful for them, but not so much for Kal and Jane.

Regardless, there was nothing she or Volstagg could do right now. They needed that ship. She could only hope things hadn't gone wrong with Heimdall's part of the plan; because if he failed in taking Odin out of the throne room, none of them would be leaving the palace today.

"You called me here on an urgent matter," Odin spoke, arriving at the Bifrost, looking Heimdall. "What is it?"

Heimdall looked from Odin to the palace, watching the different parts of Thor's plan coming together, but not without a few setbacks. Well, there was nothing he could do, so he looked back at Odin.

"Treason, my lord," Heimdall said, stopping by his sword's side, the key to open the Bifrost.

"Whose?" Odin quickly asked.

Heimdall took his sword.

"Mine."

The guards jumped in front of Odin expecting an attack, but Heimdall would never raise his blade against Odin. Instead, he offered the weapon to his King, just as Tyr, the commander of the Einherjar, appeared.

"My King, Loki has escaped and there is some commotion in the mortal's quarters!"

Odin looked at Tyr and then back at Heimdall, raising an eyebrow.

"Stop Thor," he ordered, already knowing what was happening. "By any means necessary."

Clark was a pretty resistant man. It was one of the benefits of being a Kryptonian under a yellow sun, few things were strong enough to hurt him. He had shrugged off knives, bullets, explosions, alien weapons, punches from beings as strong as he was, godly lightning bolts and who knows what else.

That red burst of energy, however, was painful.

He groaned in agony, getting up from the remains of broken furniture, feeling his body aching in ways it never did before. The Aether was an Infinity Stone, Clark knew that, but he wasn't expecting such a painful hit. The shock he felt, however, was nothing compared to the surprise of seeing the reflection of his face in the remains of a cracked mirror.
Seeing the bruised reflection of his face in the cracked mirror.

Clark was speechless for a moment, taking his hands to his cheek to actually confirm that it was real. He had never, in all his life, been bruised; he didn't even know if his body was capable of bruising. Apparently, though, he was and very capable, because his face was black and blue.

And then, just like that, the bruising began to disappear, healing itself. Faster than he could process, his body was all right.

"The Dark Elves had a special distaste for Kryptonians. They are made from darkness as much as you are made from light. Your kind is the highest form of heresy to them and the Aether will sense that. Keep that in mind."

Odin's words came rushing through his mind as he started to move in Jane's direction and suddenly his bruising made sense. His powers came from light; the Aether, for lack of a better word, devoured light. It turned it into darkness. Clark wasn't harmed because Jane unleashed such a powerful attack, he was harmed because the Aether destroyed the "light" inside him. No light, no superpowers.

He couldn't imagine what would happen if he was hit by a truly powerful blast from the Aether.

Well, now wasn't the time to think about it; he had to get Jane out of there. Running to her fallen form, Clark approached her slowly, imagining if the Aether would lash out again, but apparently Jane didn't have the energy to sustain another energy burst. That was both good and bad.

"Jane, can you hear me? Jane?!

"Wh-Clark?" Jane slurred, opening her eyes.

"Yes, it's me, we are getting out of here."

He took her on his arms and went to the window, right at the moment the doors were kicked open and a bunch of guards entered the room, swords pointed at him.

"Put the mortal down!" the Einherjar leader yelled.

"This is not what it looks like," Clark answered.

"So you are not taking her away?"

"Well... Maybe it is exactly what it looks like," Clark admitted. "But I have good reasons. So I'm really sorry for this."

As he said this, Clark's eyes became red; all the guards stopped in their tracks. And without saying anything else, he unleashed a powerful burst of energy, the red beams cutting the floor under the Einherjar troop's feet. They disappeared in the newly made hole, falling down screaming, and Clark took his chance to jump out of the window with Jane.

They needed to move faster now that they were being pursued.

"I don't think those Einherjar are moving," Sif said, pointing at the group of soldiers guarding the Dark Elf ship.

Whatever Kal did had sent the Einherjar running in his direction. That was not good for him, but it made Sif's job a lot easier, since the throne room was basically empty; she should be glad at least
some of them stayed behind so she could do something.

"I take the ones on the right and you take the ones on the left?" Volstagg suggested, grabbing his huge axe.

"Sounds fair."

And before the guards could even process what was happening, they were upon them. It couldn't even be called a fight, Sif thought while she kicked a guard in the face. They were caught by surprise and they were fighting two of the best warriors Asgard had to offer. Even if they were holding themselves back so they wouldn't kill anyone, their resistance was pitiful.

"This is embarrassing," said a familiar — and hated — voice behind them. "It makes me wonder if I shouldn't have just escaped by myself, if those were the people guarding me."

Loki, the God of Mischief, the Liar, Thor's brother and, once upon a time, a friend Sif would die for. How things had changed…. It didn't happen out of nowhere, Sif knew, no matter how much Thor liked to think so. She too didn't see it coming, but thinking about it now, she should have.

Jealousy, anger, fear… Loki was filled with those emotions and he always had been. And somewhere along the line he had allowed them to fester so much that it became all he knew.

He was a friend once, but now Sif had no doubt he would kill any of them without a second thought. And this was the man they were trusting to guide them through the Dark World.

"If you tried, my axe and her blade would be in your way," Volstagg answered, punching the last guard standing. "So perhaps you are right, you should have tried."

Loki just laughed, not bothered by the threat one bit.

"My friends, the commotion… It was not you, was it?" Thor asked, dragging Loki towards the ship.

Sif shook her head. "That was Kal, most likely."

Thor and Loki looked at each other and the younger brother raised a single eyebrow; Thor just pushed him to the ship's entrance.

"I think we should go to him," Thor said. "The guards probably blocked his path, it will be easier to meet him in the air."

"Do you even know how to fly this thing?" Loki asked, gazing at the ship.

"How hard can it be?"

Very hard, apparently, Sif concluded when all of them entered the Dark Elf ship and looked at the controls; they were nothing like the Asgardian's. Thor, after a small shocked pause, began to press the buttons seemingly at random.

They were going to crash, Sif was certain.

"Well, whatever you are doing, brother, I suggest you do it faster," Loki needled. "I can hear steps approaching."

"Shut up, Loki," Thor answered, still pressing buttons.
"He is right, though," Volstagg said, apprehensive.

"You must have missed something," Loki said again, looking at the controls.

"I didn't!" Thor exclaimed, losing his patience. "I am pressing every button on this thing!"

"No, don't hit it, just press it, gently."

"I am pressing it gently, it's not working!" And then, for some reason, it suddenly did. The ship powered up, lighting its panels. "Ah-Ha!

"Shut up and fly, Thor!" Sif yelled, listening to the soldiers arriving.

The engines roared and the ship took off, exploding forward, destroying every single column in its way.

"I think you missed a column," Loki provoked.

"Shut up!"

And then they were in the sky, flying over Asgard, seeing the buildings becoming small under them. As soon as that happened the artillery began to fire against them, the energy bursts passing close.

"Why don't you let me take over?" Loki offered. "I'm clearly the better pilot."

Sif didn't like the idea of Loki in control of their ship, but with the way Thor was flying she wouldn't object.

"Is that right?" Thor countered. "Out of the two of us, which one can actually fly?"

"Is that Thor?" Jane yelled in Clark's ear, making him wince as he flew towards the ship dodging the defensive weapons.

In normal situations, Clark could reach that ship in a second, but Jane couldn't fly that fast; at the speed they were she was already having problems. The plan, of course, wasn't that. It was to take Jane out of the room and to the ship, before it took off. Apparently, Thor had forgotten that part.

"Close your eyes, Jane, I'm going to go faster," Clark said.

And as soon as she did, he dashed forward. She was almost curled up in a ball and Clark was doing what he could to protect her from the wind, but there was a limit. The ship was flying fast, maneuvering to escape the defenses, and soon enough small Asgardian ships appeared pursuing it.

The good news was that Thor was making such a ruckus that Clark and Jane could fly unnoticed; to the sea, then.

"Now they are following us!" Loki yelled. "Now they are firing at us!"

"Thank you for the commentary, Loki, is not at all distracting!" Thor yelled back.

Things were not going as planned. Thor was doing what he could, but the amount of fire he was being forced to evade was absurd! His father truly must've been mad about what they did. He turned the sword-like ship around, dodging the energy bursts, going through the middle of a
mountain.

Except the ship hit one the statues on the entrance.

"Well done, you just decapitated your grandfather!"

Loki was one commentary away of being punched.

Soon enough the city was left behind and Thor could see the sea, passing quickly under them. They were close.

"You know, this is wonderful," Loki started. "This is a tremendous idea. Let's steal the biggest, most obvious ship in the universe and escape in that! Flying around the city, smashing into everything in sight so everyone can see us. It's brilliant, Thor, it's truly bril–AHHH!"

Thor looked behind, eyes wide; Sif met his stare.

"He was annoying me," she explained.

"Oh, you'll get no complaints from me!" Thor guaranteed. "I just hope it wasn't too early."

"No, it's time, I can see Fandral," Volstagg said. And without waiting, he jumped off too.

Sif and Thor followed him, abandoning the ship, falling to a smaller Asgardian ship piloted by Fandral close to the sea; he could watch the Einherjar following the Dark Elf ship, not realizing it was empty.

Fandral was laughing when Thor landed.

"I see your time in the dungeons has made you no less graceful, Loki," he said, as Loki got up disheveled.

Loki didn't even bother to answer; instead he looked at Thor.

"You lied to me," he accused; and smiled. "I'm impressed."

"I'm glad you are pleased," Thor answered. "But keep your eyes open for Kal and Jane."

The four of them looked around, flying fast over the water, just in time to see two Asgardian ships approaching.

"We are being follo–"

Before Sif could finish a pair of red beams cut the sky, hitting the hulls of the two ships and dropping them; they all laughed, knowing what that meant. Suddenly Kal was over them, landing on their ship.

"Jane! I'm glad you are alright!" Thor exclaimed, embracing her as soon as Kal released her.

"Thor, good to see you!" she said, hugging him tight.

They all greeted each other and then Thor looked at Loki.

"Now do as you promised, take us to your secret pathway."

Loki nodded and assumed command of the ship; and before any of them could say anything, he
turned it towards a mountain.

"Loki!" Thor yelled, as the huge mountain approached fast.

"If it were easy, everyone would do it," Loki answered, not slowing down.

Thor, Kal, Sif, Fandral and Volstagg got closer to each other, around Jane, preparing themselves for an eventual crash.

"Are you mad?!" Thor screamed as the mountain got bigger.

"Possibly!"

And then the ship went against it; but instead of crashing, they entered a very small fissure in the mountain, the ship scratching against the rocks as they continued flying nonstop. Energy began to build up against them, sparks flying as they bounced and then a white light.

They were not in Asgard anymore.

"They did it," Heimdall said, seeing the exact moment when they reached the pathway and disappeared.

He was still at the Bifrost, by Odin's side, at the same place he was when he informed his King of his treason. Except there weren't any guards there anymore and Heimdall was not a prisoner.

Odin sighed in what could only be described as relief.

"I still cannot believe Thor did this," he said, shaking his head.

"Really?" Heimdall asked, smiling.

"You are right, it would be strange if he did not do anything against my orders," Odin admitted, chuckling. "I wanted to see if he would really take the risk."

"Are you sure it is wise?" Heimdall asked.

"Wise? No. It is not the action a King would take, that is why I couldn't," Odin said. "But it is the action a good man would take and I am glad my son took it."

"I just hope they can take the Aether from the girl," Heimdall said. "And not lose it to Malekith."

"Well, that is up to him now." Odin turned to Heimdall and suddenly he could see the face of the warrior feared across the universe. "But regardless of Thor's success, Malekith will be there to claim the Aether. We know where and when they will show up."

With a single gesture, Odin gave the Bifrost Sword back to Heimdall.

"Prepare yourself, my friend. The Asgardians are going to war."
Chapter 26 – The Dark World – Part 1

"Welcome to Svartalfheim!" Loki announced as the Asgardian ship pierced the veil of the Yggdrasil. "Where Gods go to die, if legends are to be believed."

Clark had no idea if that was true, but he would wholeheartedly agree that the Dark World wasn't exactly a place full of life. It was a barren land as far as his very good eyes could see, cold, dark and extremely inhospitable. He couldn't hear a single being anywhere and there were no traces of civilization; the only sound besides the ship was the wind howling, lifting the dust and ashes on the ground like waves made of sand.

It was a dead planet; a dead planet with an almost dead sun.

It was still a yellow sun, Clark could feel its energy, but it was weak and almost entirely covered by the thick clouds in the sky. He couldn't help but to wonder if the planet was naturally like that or if the clouds were engineered by the Dark Elves at some point, to shield them from the light. Regardless of their origin, Clark was relieved to know the planet didn't have a red sun; he had enough of those to last a lifetime.

"This place is horrible!" Fandral exclaimed, after several minutes of silence, apparently incapable of keeping his perfectly styled hair in place with all that wind.

"They would not call a place 'Dark World' because it is a pleasant place to visit," Sif replied.

"This place is not just dark, it is dead," Volstagg added, surprised.

"As usual, you look at the surface and fail to see what is beyond," Loki taunted, turning the ship slightly to the right. He waited a second to see if they understood, but nobody seemed to know where he was going with that; he rolled his eyes. "Dark Elves hate light. Where do creatures that do not like light hide?"

"Underground," Clark exhaled, finally getting it.

"Very good, Kryptonian," Loki congratulated, with a hint of mockery. "It seems that, even though you share my brother's talent for sheer destruction, you are still smarter than him."

Thor, sitting on the corner of the ship with a slumbering Jane on his lap, just rolled his eyes.

"If we want to reach what is left of the Dark Elves civilization, we must go deep underground," Loki continued. "That is the true Dark World."

"And can you take us there?" Thor asked. "You have been here before?"

"No, but Mother did," Loki answered. "And she was kind enough to share the memories with me."

"Why? Why didn't she show them to me too?"

"Because – and I'll quote you, brother – 'magic is for women and the occasional effeminate warrior and I do not care about a bunch of long dead pointy-eared monsters'. Maybe Mother somehow got
the impression you were not interested, I don't know."

Clark saw a little blush coloring Thor's cheeks.

"Oh, Thor…" Jane mumbled, apparently waking up just in time to hear that.

"Jane! Glad to see you are back with us, my love," Thor exclaimed, helping her to get up. "I still cannot believe you slept through this whole ordeal."

"Maybe she is dying?" Loki piped up, as everybody glared at him.

Jane's drowsy eyes became full of fire suddenly. "You're…?"

"I am Loki, you may have heard of—"

SLAP! Clark couldn't help but to wince as Jane's hand clacked against Loki's face like a whip, a blow that most definitely hurt her more than him; to her credit, she didn't flinch.

"That was for New York!"

Loki smiled, incredibly amused; he looked at Thor.

"I like her!" Then he turned at Clark, his eyes gaining a calculating glow. "What about you? Are you going to slap me too because of what I did to all those humans?"

Did Clark want to hit Loki at that moment? If he denied it, he would be lying to himself. For the first time since he boarded that ship with Jane, Clark truly looked at the god dressed in green and gold who had invaded Earth and rained destruction over New York. Even cuffed and surrounded by people who wouldn't like nothing else than to toss him off that ship, Loki managed to exude confidence, every bit of his royal bloodline clearly displayed even on the smallest of gestures. Unlike Thor, however, whose presence felt vibrant and big, but even then kind, Loki was a predator. Those eyes weren't just filled with intelligence and cunning, they were filled with malice. Loki didn't simply look at someone, he evaluated them, almost as if searching for weak points.

There was a man who clearly believed he was born to rule, above everything else, no matter what anybody else thought about that.

"I'll pass," Clark finally said, after almost a minute of silence, still staring at Loki without blinking. "Don't get me wrong, it is a tempting offer, but we would lose too much time looking for you a few hundred miles from the ship, buried in the sand."

Loki held his stare for a long moment, then laughed. "I like this one too, brother. Where do you find such fascinating creatures?"

He couldn't help the twitch of his fingers when Loki said that; Clark had a lot of self-control, but even he had limits.

"Keep pushing," Jane interjected, still gazing furiously at Loki. "I watched the tournament, Loki, I've seen what Clark can do when he is provoked. So, please, do me a favor and keep at it so we can see a repeat of what the Hulk did to you in the Avengers Tower."

Jane's words weren't the most ominous threat a person could come up with, but Loki's paling face was proof enough she had hit a nerve; it was back to normal quickly, but not before everybody noticed it.
"What is she talking about?" Fandral asked, looking very interested.

Jane smirked, fishing her cellphone from her dress and approaching Fandral, Sif and Volstagg.

"It was the most viewed YouTube video from all time," she said, playing it. Clark almost laughed as the Asgardians eyes got wider, listening to what he assumed was Loki being crushed against the ground over and over again and then the iconic 'Puny God' at the end.

There was a second of silence; then Sif, Fandral and Volstagg began to laugh uncontrollably.

"I take it back, Thor, I do not like her at all," Loki mumbled, glaring at his brother.

"Puny God… This is too good!" Sif laughed, actual tears flowing from her eyes.

"The mortals did capture your good side, Loki, especially when you were moaning in pain at the end," Fandral commented, full of glee. "Don't you think so, Volstagg?"

"No doubt. The device that captured the sounds, particularly, is very impressive," the big Asgardian said, a full blown smile on his face. "You sounded like a dying rodent."

"What manner of beast is this, though?" Fandral asked. "I was not aware such a creature existed in Midgard."

"That's not a beast, it's Doctor Banner," Clark explained, quickly, knowing very well what would happen to Fandral if he ever said something like near Bruce. "He had a, um, accident and ever since he gets like that when angered."

"And Loki does have a talent for making people angry, does he not?" Sif said, smirking at Loki. Loki glared at her.

"Oh, don't be like that, Loki, it was funny!" Thor chuckled. "And you deserved it."

"Yes, funny, wasn't it?" Loki answered, as he turned the ship slightly. "Almost as funny as that time when you lost Mjölnir and had to put on a dress to seduce the giant that stole it to take it back."

Clark's head became a blur as he turned to look at Thor, not sure if he heard it right. That was a sudden silence in the ship.

"What was that?" Jane asked, shocked.

Thor, all of a sudden, seemed to want to be somewhere else.

"Oh, this is a good one!" Volstagg said, tapping Jane's shoulders so strongly that her legs almost bended.

"Once upon a time, when Thor was younger and foolish, rather than just foolish, he thought it would be a good idea to take Mjölnir from Odin's Vault so that the future king of Asgard could practice with his chosen weapon," Loki started, as if telling a tale to children, his eyes full of mirth. "That he managed to lift it was a feat by itself, but of course Thor needed more, so we went practicing in Vanaheim. We heard there was a group of giants making camp there, so the hero of our story took upon himself the burden of correcting that wrong, to prove himself worthy."

"And we did, end of story," Thor interrupted, but he was shushed by everybody.

"The giant's leader was called Thrym and he was old, very old, and almost blind, but still feared.
An opponent that the *Mighty* Thor would relish in crushing!" Loki continued, clearly having a lot of fun, ignoring Thor. "So there we were, Thor, Loki, the Warriors Three and Lady Sif, ready for battle. But Thor needed the glory, so he went alone, and vowed to end them in one single blow."

Despite Thor's clear uncomfortableness, Clark couldn't help but to be curious; say what you will about Loki, but he knew how to entertain a crowd.

"On he went, to face the beast! He raised Mjölnir and the skies thundered, the very nature bending to his will! And he tossed it!" Loki glowed green and suddenly Thor himself was in his place, throwing Mjölnir against an invisible enemy; there was a second of suspense and then Loki transformed back. "And he missed."

"He missed?" Jane repeated, getting a betrayed look from Thor.

"I do not think I ever saw someone missing the target by that much," Sif admitted.

"True," Fandral agreed.

"It wasn't even close to hit Thrym," Volstagg explained, "which was weird, because he was a pretty big target."

"Really now?" Thor complained, but Loki continued his story.

"Mjölnir landed far away from the intended mark, very far away, right in the middle of their camp," Loki went on. "It destroyed a lot of innocent houses and buried itself deep in the ground. The Mighty Thor could not believe that he would miss that badly, but he did, and it was incredibly embarrassing." Thor rolled his eyes. "But the quest needed to be finished, so the Mighty Thor called the weapon back, so he could strike again… But nothing happened."

"You still didn't know how to do that, did you?" Clark asked, smiling.

"No, I did not," Thor agreed, looking down.

"The quest changed!" Loki exclaimed. "Now it was not about destroying Thrym, it was about retrieving the mighty hammer Thor stole from the vaults, so Odin would not have his head for it. But how could we do it? There would be no help, we had little time, and without Mjölnir there was no way to fight our way in."

Loki raised a single finger, enjoying Thor's embarrassment far too much.

"When brawn failed, Thor turned to the brain of the group." Everyone rolled their eyes at that. "So the true hero of the story suggested that instead of challenging a whole group of giants to a fist fight, so we could retrieve the hammer, we should consider our options. You see, there was a rumor that Thrym, despite his old age and truly hideous appearance, wanted a wife. But not just any wife, no, he wanted to marry the most beautiful Asgardian lady he had ever seen in his whole, long, life, the Asgardian with the shining golden locks that glimmered as the sun itself: Frigga."

"You are kidding!" Clark exclaimed.

"I wish he was, my friend," Thor mumbled. "It is not everyday we learn some old giant creep wants to marry your mother."

Jane was already beyond words, apparently.

"In exchange for Mjölnir, Thrym wanted to marry Frigga," Loki continued, almost laughing at the
notion. "Obviously that would never happen, but he was arrogant enough to be convinced otherwise."

He could see where this was going, but he still couldn't believe it.

"How exactly did you think you could pretend to be your mother by wearing a dress?!!" Jane asked, incapable of waiting for Loki to actually finish the story.

"I did not!" Thor denied, appalled. "Loki convinced me he could get us into the camp if he hid us under his illusions. He was supposed to transform into a maid-servant and I would be transformed into Mother, just until we got close enough to take Mjölnir back!"

"But?" Clark asked, when Thor turned to glare at Loki for far too long.

"But instead of changing me entirely, like he told me he did, Loki just transformed my clothes into a dress!"

Something about the thought of Thor, bearded and muscled, wearing a dress and walking through a camp full of giants with the intention of fake-marrying one, was just too much for them to bear. Slowly at first, like a dam starting to leak, they all started to laugh, until all of them, Jane and Clark included, were bended in half holding their stomachs.

Thor, of course, was the only exception.

"H-How did they not noticed that you were a guy in a dress?" Clark asked, as soon as he was able.

The God of Thunder sighed and shook his head. "I do not know for certain. Maybe from up there we all look so small and similar to giants. And Thrym was pretty blind."

"I think it had more to do with the fact that Thrym was such a terrifying monster, famous for devouring his adversaries," Fandral theorized, trying to speak between everybody's laughs. "I mean, how do someone tell such a person that the woman he is about to marry has the arms of a blacksmith and a thick beard?"

That brought another set of uncontrollable laughs.

"I-I'm sorry for laughing Thor, but did it work?" Jane asked, trying to hold herself back.

"He was fooled, alright," Loki answered, grinning. "Just until he felt up his 'bride' and his 'bride' punched his face. Then everything exploded in generalized violence, as usual."

Clark laughed again, imagining the absurdity of the situation.

"I can't believe this really happened," he mentioned, chuckling. "I thought it was one of those made-up mythology stories."

That brought a sudden silence.

"What do you mean 'made-up' mythology stories?" Thor asked, slowly.

"Well, you see~" Clark started, imagining how the hell he would explain that, but Thor interrupted him.

"Loki! Did you tell this story to the mortals?!" he yelled.

"I would never!" Loki answered, very unconvincingly in Clark's opinion.
The brothers started to argue, again, but Clark wasn't really paying attention anymore. Instead, he was reevaluating what he knew about mythology, or, as it would seem, history. Were all the tales and stories real? Did that mean…

"That whole thing about Sleipnir, is that… True?" Clark asked Loki, interrupting their argument; he couldn't keep the horrified expression out of his face.

"What are you talking about?" Loki asked, carefully. "What 'whole thing' about Odin's eight-legged steed?"

Did he really need clarification?

"You know… That you… That he is… Your son."

The silence in the ship was deafening.

"WHAT?!" Loki exclaimed, standing up in front of Clark. Everybody started to laugh again, no one louder than Thor.

"T-They think you fathered a horse?" Volstagg asked, trying hard to talk between his laughing.

"A-Actually," Clark explained, hesitantly, "the story says Loki is the mother."

A moment of silence; then the laughing restarted, louder than ever.

"THOR! I am sure this is your fault!"

"I had nothing to do with it, brother!" Thor defended himself, still laughing. "But I really wish I had."

"Hey, do not steal my credit!" Sif exclaimed. "It took me a long time to spread that rumor."

They all turned to Sif, Loki faster than all.

"Why?! Why would you tell such a story to mortals?" Loki asked, wrathful.

"Why? WHY?! You shaved my head!" Sif screamed back at him. "A little shame is a lot less than you deserve!"

"So the myth about Loki stealing your blond hair is true?" Clark asked, fascinated.

Both of them looked at him. "Blond hair? No! He just shaved my head, that was the prank!"

"That was not a prank, it was retribution," Loki countered. "Or don't you remember cutting my hair the day before, with that sword of yours?"

"In combat! We were training, it was an accident!" Sif justified herself.

"Really? All seven times?!"

Sif apparently had no good answer for that.

"You did spread that rumor that she was married to Thor, did you not?" Fandral risked speaking.

All eyes turned back to Loki. "I had nothing to do with that! Maybe if you two didn't have your 'post-battle celebration' in public, mortals would not make assumptions!"
"You two were truly loud sometimes," Volstagg admitted, looking down.

Everybody looked at Thor and Sif; then all eyes turned to Jane.

"Did you two--" Jane began to ask.

"A long time ago, a really long time ago!" Thor explained himself, incredibly quick.

"It was a brief thing," Sif added. "Too brief, really."

"Not that brief!" Thor defended himself.

"So about the blond hair..." Clark asked, looking at Sif.

"What is with you and blond hair?!" Sif exclaimed. "I was never blond, not even before Loki shaved my head! Why? Would you prefer I was?"

"No! Not at all, you look perfect just the way you are!" Clark answered fast, deciding not to pursue the conversation; Jane gave him a thumbs-up from behind Sif, mouthing a silent 'Well said!' to him.

The trip down the memory lane seemed to give the Asgardians, and by extension Clark and Jane, a little time to relax, some moments to forget the truly frightening place they were in. They were still nervous, of course, on edge, but the silence wasn't heavy anymore, as they flew over the ashes hills.

"We really did get into some weird adventures, did we not, my friends?" Thor asked, looking at everyone there with a big smile. Then, he sighed, losing the happy expression when he looked at Loki. "How did we get to this point?"

This time no one answered.

They flew over the fields of ashes for a long hour, the mood increasingly tense. There were no more joking and reminiscing past adventures, not when they were so close of getting to their destination, the heart of the Dark World. Not when they were so close to the deciding moment of their quest: saving Jane.

Thor looked at her, wincing a little bit at how weak she looked. She was doing her best to seem strong, to appear as if there was nothing wrong, but he didn't very well need his Asgardians senses to notice how wrong things were. Jane was pale as snow, cold and shivering, and under her skin he could easily feel the power of the Aether, pulsing like a malevolent presence; he couldn't before.

If they couldn't take it out of her soon... Shaking his head, Thor tried to dispel his distractions. It wouldn't do any good for anyone, least of all Jane, if he allowed himself to be defeated before the fight even started. And there would be a fight, there was no doubt about that. He looked at Loki for a second, seeing his brother's focused face; Thor could only hope the attack came from the expected adversary and not from behind.

This was another problem. The one guiding them, the only one who would take them through the dark paths of Svartalfheim and back, was the same one who had betrayed him on several occasions.

Thor sighed, feeling for the first time the entire weight of everything that happened since the Convergence began. It was weird, and hard, to be in this quest with Loki, as if nothing happened.
As if his brother hadn't plotted to kill him, to steal the throne, to conquer Midgard. Thor knew he wasn't perfect, that he made mistakes, that maybe, just maybe, if he had done things differently Loki wouldn't have done what he did.

But that didn't change what his brother did. That didn't bring the people he killed back or made his betrayal any easier to bear.

Despite what he said when he broke Loki out of his cell, Thor loved Loki. Blood or not they were brothers and that didn't just go away. And having him here, by his side, in this adventure was oddly comforting.

It shouldn't be and he was well aware of that.

Sooner or later Loki would betray him, it was his nature. Thor didn't believe for a second that after all this, considering they were successful, Loki would quietly go back to his cell. It would never happen, if not for the fact that he would stay locked up for a very long time, then simply because Thor had ordered him to.

And when that happened… Thor really didn't know if he was capable of fulfilling the promise he made when he took Loki out of jail.

"We are almost there," Loki announced, snapping Thor out of his musings. "See?"

"Are those…?" Kal asked.

"The last battlefield of the war."

Under their ship, in every direction they looked, they could see the remains of the last battle of the war, won by his grandfather, Bor. Countless Dark Elven ships crashed, changing the entire landscape of the planet, like mountains of metal piercing the sand. Thor had seen memories of that battle, he saw the scale of the conflict, but seeing the remains of the battlefield lying there even after all that time bothered him.

It was a mass grave, littered with the bodies of Dark Elves and Asgardians, lost forever on a dead planet.

Thor fought a lot of battles in his life, lots of wars, but he rarely saw what happened after he went back home. After the fight, after the honor… After. Asgardians liked to fight, they reveled in it, their code of honor was based on it, but this? Thor didn't like to see it at all.

He thought he understood his father a little bit more when he came to that conclusion.

Loki brought the ship down, moving carefully between the huge sword-like Dark Elven ships. The silence made the whole thing even more tense, as if they were intruding in a place they shouldn't. And maybe that was true, but there was no other choice.

And then, abruptly, there it was: the entrance to the true Dark World.

Like a black hole in the middle of the fallen ships, sucking all the light around it, the entrance to the underground made itself known as they approached. It was a huge circular hole, so big that their ship was merely a speck close to it, surrounded by a perimeter of stone and runes. The most impressive thing about it, however, wasn't its size.

It was how utterly dark it was.
It was more than lack of light, it was like all the shadows were alive, like a thick mass of pure darkness; a taste of how the previous universe was, before its own Ragnarok.

"I can't see it," Kal whispered, shocked. He looked at Thor, eyes wide. "I can't see through that darkness."

That was not good. Unconsciously, he turned to Loki.

"They do not call it the Dark World for nothing, Kryptonian," Loki answered the unspoken question, rolling his eyes. "Svartalfheim, like the Infinity Stones and the Dark Elves themselves, is a relic of the previous universe. Maybe not all of it, maybe not its surface, but its core? Pure darkness." His brother smirked. "That will do wonders to your complexion, won't it?"

Yes, that was not good at all.

"What can we expect down there, Loki?" Sif asked, her eyes fixed on the underground entrance as the ship went down.

Knowing that Kal would not get any light down there was bad news and they all took it as such. No one there was afraid of anything, they had fought truly monstrous things over the course of their lives, but none of them was stupid to face the unknown without being prepared. And having their Kryptonian friend with limited energy supply while facing old enemies of Asgard was, to say the least, bad.

"There is a truly vast variety of creatures and monstrosities that like to eat gods for breakfast down there," Loki answered, all too gladly. "My, even some of the plants! For example, there is even a rare flower, said to survive in pitch black darkness instead of sunlight, that is extremely poisonous. One touch and even the strongest of beings is put to sleep, sometimes forever."

"We are not battling flowers, Loki," Fandral complained as the ship descended. He was fidgeting with his goatee, which he always did when he was nervous.

"It would be foolish of you to try," Loki insisted, purposely misinterpreting what Fandral said. "The pollen alone would send you comatose!"

"Loki..." Sif warned.

"Right, the non-plant entities then. Most of them perished with time and the continuous wars, but some survived. There was a reason why few were brave enough to step on this planet, even with the Dark Elves supposedly dead. Unnamed creatures, some older than this very universe, some changed by it. Undersea monsters that care about nothing else than feeding upon each other. Creatures that eat dreams and consume minds. Races with a thousand eyes all across their bodies and others completely blind. All of them lethal."

He smiled at his crowd.

"But none more lethal than the spiders."

Sif almost wasn't able to control her wince; she hated spiders.

"I do not know if they existed before, in the previous universe, or if they were somehow born from the remaining darkness that crossed to ours. What I do know is that they feed upon light itself. They are bred for a single purpose: war. I have heard stories of swarms of these spiders eclipsing planets. Some of the biggest ones were famous for swallowing entire stars."
"By Odin's beard..." Volstagg whispered, too shocked to do anything else. Sif wasn't that far behind.

"Let us hope none of them survived Bor's purge!" Loki added, grinning, before plunging the ship down towards the dark entrance.

If Sif wasn't too concerned about thoughts of spiders big enough to eat stars, she would have hit Loki.

"Son of a–" Jane exclaimed, hugging Thor as the ship dropped down. "I almost had a heart-attack!"

Despite their rapidly descent to that ominous pit of darkness, Clark had to make an effort to prevent a smile from showing on his expression when Thor looked at him with desperately widened eyes.

"It's just an expression, Thor, she is alright," Clark explained, seeing the puzzled faces all around.

"Are you sure? Maybe the Aether–"

"I can see and listen to her heart, trust me, she is fine!"

Jane looked from Thor to him, but Clark just shook his head, reassuring her. They had enough to worry about now without Thor's new found paranoia. Like the fact that Loki was a crazy bastard who was dropping their ship into a black hole filled with monsters at an alarming speed.

Before Clark could fully prepare himself for what was about to happen, the ship disappeared into the entrance, the shadows surrounding them like the cold from the deep sea. Difference was, Clark didn't feel cold no matter how deep underwater he was on Earth; he felt cold now.

Looking around he could see he wasn't the only one bothered by the cold shadows moving around them, everyone was, Jane most of all. She was shivering and Clark could actually see the red from the Aether running through her veins and glowing in her eyes. It was reacting to the traces of its old universe.

"I know that the only reason we are here is because of the Aether inside of her," Loki gleefully screamed as they went down in great speed, "but you should be thankful now that it is. A mortal would be dead as a draugr in no time in here!"

Maybe for the tenth time in that short period, Clark wanted to hit Loki. Of course he didn't warn them that Jane was at risk simply by stepping there, that would be the nice thing to do and he was anything but.

Clark's vision was confused. He imagined that was how humans felt as their eyes got accustomed to a dark room, but he never felt something like that before, so it was hard to place himself as the tendrils of shadow danced around the ship. Even the sound was muffled. If a watered-down portion of the old universe felt like this, Clark didn't even want to imagine what it would feel to make the transition back to it if Malekith managed to win.

He probably would feel worse than the Dark Elves felt in this universe, if he survived at all.

For all the anticipation Loki's abrupt dive caused them, the long way down killed it eventually; they could stay on edge for so long before it became boring. Instead of an exciting air maneuver, it was more like the slow descent of a submarine, especially when the darkness around them was so thick it made looking around basically impossible.
They traveled for a long time down the entrance, the only noticeable change being that at each inch down it became colder and darker. Jane was once again sitting down, shivering, the red glow of the Aether stronger at each second under her skin. The only sound they could hear was the muffled roar of the engines and there was nothing to see through the veil of shadows.

Clark quickly lost any notion of the passing of time, which wasn't difficult considering there was nothing happening. Eventually, however, he began to hear a familiar sound. Distant, at first, what made it hard to distinguish it, but soon enough Clark was able to.

"Water," he exclaimed, barely recognizing his own voice. "There is water close to us."

"Then we are almost there," Loki answered, turning the ship forward and stopping the descent. "We reached their sea and it is unwise to get too close to it."

"Why?" asked Volstagg.

"Because--"

Before Loki could answer, there was a powerful roar and something lunged at them out of the water; something huge. Loki pushed the ship up, just at the moment they heard a powerful snap of a jaw. It was such a strong blow that the air around them pushed them away. And then, whatever attacked them fell back, like a mountain crashing against an ocean.

There was silence.

"Because of that," Loki finally said as he fixed his hair, making sure to keep the ship well above the sea.

Clark couldn't help but agree it was a good move.

"How much longer, Loki?" Thor asked, after they managed to calm down.

"Not long now. Of course, I could be wrong, since I am flying blind here."

He wasn't, obviously. Or, more accurately, he was flying blind, but he was relying on something else to guide them. Magic, according to the book Odin gave him, left traces behind. Following familiar magic was like following footsteps and Loki was used to Frigga's magic. To all of them, there was no difference between a dark corridor and the other, but Loki was following a trail of magical breadcrumbs, a trail put into his mind by Frigga.

So Clark wasn't surprised when Loki took the ship down, without any fear of being devoured by a giant fish, and landed it safely on the ground.

"Here we are, ladies and gentlemen," Loki announced. "We have to continue on foot now."

They all got out of the ship, Jane helped by Thor, and started to follow Loki through the dark path; dark enough that even Clark couldn't see more than vague forms in the distance, but it was enough, at least, to not hit the walls. Still, it was like anything Clark had ever felt. He was used to have senses better than anyone else's, not being almost blind.

All that changed the moment Jane stepped out of the ship.

For a moment, Clark actually thought he was seeing the start of a fire, but he was wrong. It wasn't fire that was glowing red, it was the Aether making everything around it shine like a blazing sun. Huge crystal formations lit up in red, all around them, finally giving them a look of how the
underground of Svartalfheim looked.

If Clark didn't know, he would never believe they were actually underground. It was too big, too open, with mountains as big as the ones they had on Earth, a vast ocean and a city carved in the very stone, as big as the biggest cities back home. It was unbelievable and if Clark wasn't suffering in that darkness he would have liked to explore it, during better circumstances of course.

"What is left of the old universe is reacting to the Aether," Loki said, gazing at the crystals glowing red with interest. He grinned. "Well, if even the environment knows the Aether is here, you can be sure that Malekith does too."

He turned to them.

"I would make haste, if I were you. If we do not reach the temple where the Aether Chamber is before the Dark Elves, we will effectively doom the universe."

"The Aether found its way home," Malekith whispered, pulling the healing mask off his face and looking at Kurse.

He could feel it, calling to him, asking for help. A piece of his own universe still alive even after the end. A piece he had shaped into their salvation. The Convergence was near its peak, they needed the Aether back before it happened.

Malekith stood, getting out of the healing chamber of his ship. The Asgardian Prince had dealt quite the blow against him on Asgard, burning the right side of his face and most of his body, but it wasn't anything that would hold him back now. Not when they were so close from achieving their goal.

He did not know how the Aether was back in Svartalfheim, but it meant they would not need to attack Asgard again. It would save them time, but it was regretful that he wouldn't be able to burn down the Realm Eternal before destroying the universe. Regretful that he could not end Bor's lineage with his own hands.

Malekith would have to be satisfied with the deaths of their queen, the last Kryptonian and Alfylese.

"Prepare the ship, the Aether calls."

"What now, Loki?" Sif asked, arms crossed in front of her chest. "Right, left or forward? You might want to decide soon, before some horrible creature appears and makes the decision for us."

They had reached the proverbial fork in the road and Loki clearly wasn't sure which way they should go. The path into the city was long and confusing, but while they were walking its streets there was no problem; the problem appeared when they left the stone buildings, arriving in front of one of those huge subterranean mountains. There were three paths in front of them: a tunnel going up, one going down and one continuing forward.

Who knows where they would get if they entered the wrong one.

"The temple is behind this mountain," Loki finally said, turning to them. "Probably all of these tunnels lead there, problem is I do not know what we will encounter in the middle of the way."

"Can't you make one of those portals?" Jane asked, tracing an invisible circle in the air. Loki stared at her for a long, uncomfortable moment, but she didn't look away; Clark was proud of her. "You
know, like Frigga does? As a matter of fact, couldn't you have saved us all the time and done that from Asgard? Or you don't know how?"

"Of course I know how to do it," Loki said, too proud to allow the needling to go unanswered. "But I have never been in the temple before. To open a portal leading somewhere I need to know where I am going, otherwise we would end up even more lost. As for not opening a portal on Asgard… Time and distance matter in magic. To move around on a planet is one thing, to change Realms is quite another."

"So you do admit we are lost!" Fandral exclaimed, as every Asgardian began to talk at the same time.

Clark sighed, turning to look at the city down there, at the foot of the mountain; he had already lost count of the number of times they argued since they arrived in Svartalfheim. By that point he couldn't tell if that was normal for them or they were arguing because of Loki's betrayal, but it was getting tiresome.

The abandoned city in the middle of the valley was almost erased from his vision by the shadows, but Clark could still see it. It looked like a dark ancient city, something out of a fantasy movie, kind of creepy now that was empty, but beautifully built. Back then, when it was full of people, it must've been quite the sight.

He looked at it for a long time, almost forgetting the voices arguing behind him, just until he saw something weird over the city.

"Hey. Hey!" Clark called, making everyone stop talking to look. "Look there, can you see anything?"

All of them turned too look to where he was pointing, squinting their eyes to see better.

"I see shadows... And darkness. And, yes, more darkness!" Loki mocked after a few seconds.

To everybody's surprise, Clark agreed with him.

"Yes, but there is something darker than the usual darkness," he said.

And to his own shock, he saw Loki stiffen. The God of Mischief approached the edge of the mountain, trying to see better, then looked back at them.

"We have to leave this place. Now!" Loki said, walking to the three-way path. "Make a choice and let us hope for the best."

"Why, what is there?" Thor asked, approaching the edge too.

Clark was forcing his eyes to try and pierce that darkness, walking closer as well. There was something there, something he couldn't still define, but he knew with absolute certainty that it was big. He could see it sliding down from the far away ceiling over the big city, spreading long tendrils of darkness all over it, as if preparing to embrace the entire thing.

And then eight eyes opened, even darker than the rest of its body.

For some reason, Clark felt dread fill his body. He didn't know what the hell that thing was, but he knew it was dangerous; and it was hunting them.

"NOW!" Loki yelled, making everybody jump scared.
But before they could all run to one of the tunnels, the shadow over the city *lunged* at them. Clark had no idea how something that big could move that fast, but all he could see was the already dark place becoming even darker; the wind howled for a second and there was a screech.

Thor pushed Jane to a corridor at the same time Clark pushed everybody close to him, not even spending a second to see where he had tossed them. And without looking, he also jumped towards one of the entrances, colliding against Loki as he did it.

At the moment he managed to enter the tunnel, whatever attacked them collided loudly against the mountain and the entire place trembled.

And before any of them could do anything everything started to collapse.

Clark felt pieces of the tunnel falling upon him, the rocks breaking on contact, filling the way out with debris. The sound of the mountain falling apart was terrible, but worse than that was the earthquake-like shaking. He couldn't see where he was, the noise was confusing the only useful sense he had left and the vibrations and the rocks falling on him were beginning to pile up; he needed to get out of there.

Knowing only that he was running away from the tunnel's entrance, Clark began to dig his way, breaking the huge stones with his hands to go through. That was, until his hand hit something a little softer than rocks.

"Curse you, Kryptonian! Stop bumbling around!" Loki yelled, getting up from under the collapsed rocks.

That made him stop; it was just his luck, to be buried in the Dark World with Loki.

"Loki, are you alright?" Clark asked, when the sound of collapsing rocks began to stop. He could vaguely see Loki getting up in the darkness.

"I am unharmed," Loki answered, trying to clean himself from the dust; a pointless exercise, since the tunnel was now filled with it. "But we are not getting back through there."

Clark looked to where he was pointing to see what he already knew: the entrance to the tunnel was blocked. They were separated from the others.

"Do you think everybody is okay?" Clark asked, approaching the pile of collapsed rocks that was blocking their way back. He tried to see a path through them, but there was none.

"I hope not," Loki answered, stopping by his side. "But knowing my luck they are probably fine."

Clark turned to Loki. ""What the hell was that?!"

"You mean the huge monster that buried us here? Most likely one of those spiders I mentioned. A big one."

"That thing wasn't a spider!" Clark exclaimed. "It had more than eight legs and it was *the size of that city!*"

"Well, I am sure you can make your case to the historians back on Asgard if we survive, but first we have to get away from its nest." Loki studied the blocked path. "If I were you I would not try to move these rocks. The whole thing could fall over our heads."

"I wasn't," Clark answered.
"Then you are already smarter than Thor, because I am absolutely sure he will do something like this."

Clark rolled his eyes. "Thor isn't stup--"

BOOOOM!

The whole place shook again and more rocks fell from the ceiling when something – or someone – hit the mountain. He heard a faint yell from a distance and he was pretty sure he recognized Sif's angry voice.

"Let's just try to find them," Clark sighed, ignoring Loki's smug face as they began to walk down the tunnel.

"That stupid oaf!" Sif snarled. "I cannot believe he tried to open a path using his hammer!"

Sif was angry, but not just angry: she was worried. The reason was the very frail mortal she had just saved from being crushed to death and the fact that, somehow, she was the one that ended up with her, separated from the others.

The last thing she needed right now was another cave in.

"Are you harmed?" Sif asked, trying to see any injury on the mortal.

"I-I'm okay, don't worry," Jane answered, fast. "You-you saved me!"

That was an understatement. Sif couldn't recall any situation when she took so many direct hits to the head as she did now, trying to shield the mortal from the collapsing rocks; being as fast as she was, getting hit, especially repeatedly, was a true novelty.

"Yes, you can say that again," Sif sighed, shaking her head to remove dust from her hair. "The way back is blocked, we have to move forward. Not that I am eager to go back to see if that monster is still waiting for us… We will probably meet them somewhere along the way."

Saying that, Sif grabbed Jane's arm and started to guide her through the dark tunnel, not trusting the mortal to not just fall and die.

"Can you even see where you are going?" Sif asked, curious about human's senses.

"I can, oddly enough," Jane answered, passing over a huge boulder. "It must be because of this thing inside me, because I'm sure I would be blind as a bat here normally."

The Aether inside her, that made sense. It was fortunate, because Sif would hate to have to carry her of all things. They walked in silence for a sometime, not making much progress; humans were slow, after all. Sif was already reconsidering carrying her.

"Thank you," Jane whispered, after a time, snapping Sif out of her thoughts. "For saving me. I know you don't like me, but--"

"Who said I do not like you?" Sif interrupted.

Jane was speechless for a moment, before answering: "W-Well, I just assumed… Because of Thor, you know, Thor and I and before that you and Thor, I mean--"

Sif sighed and stopped her; this was just painful to watch.
"Enough, I understand." Sif gathered her thoughts. "I do not hate you, Jane. I \textit{was} jealous at first, but as Kal pointed out to me, that is normal. What Thor and I had… It was brief and it was a long time ago. Could it happen again, had you two not met? Maybe, but it is pointless to wonder about that. Thor is my best friend and I wish for him to be happy. If you make him happy, then I wish the best for both of you."

Listening to her own voice saying those words somehow made them even more real. Sif had wondered about that ever since Thor came back from Midgard in love with a mortal. It made her think if she truly loved Thor and, if she did, if she had really lost her chance. She wasn't lying when she admitted jealousy; seeing Jane with Thor was painful. But since her talk with Kal, since spending the night with him, the pain had lessened.

Maybe she did love Thor, a long time ago. But Thor, even being her best friend, never loved her, not in the way she wanted him to. Perhaps they were never meant to be, after all.

"Thor made his choice," Sif said, after a while. "And I will respect it. You have nothing to fear from me."

"Oh, that's… Thank you," Jane stammered.

"Stop thanking me."

"Okay!" Jane agreed, quickly.

Obviously, that wasn't the end of the conversation; humans did feel the need to fill the silence, for some reason.

"So, you and Clark?" Jane asked, making Sif roll her eyes.

Sif's first instinct was to tell her it was none of her business, but at least while the mortal was busy asking nonsensical questions she was less likely to panic and make her life even harder.

"We are just friends, nothing else."

"But you did sleep together," Jane affirmed. "I think everybody on Asgard knows that…"

"It does not make my statement any less true," Sif countered. "We are friends."

"He seems like a good guy," Jane mentioned. "I mean, he is Superman, isn't he?"

"He is a good guy," Sif agreed. "And a very skilled lover."

"I-I don't really need to know that much."

"I thought everybody on Asgard already knew?" Sif joked.

That made Jane laugh. Weirdly enough, Sif didn't feel the need to strangle her now, like the other times she heard her laughing. She called that "progress"; she \textit{was} moving on, apparently.

"We and Kal are not involved," Sif explained, "nor do we want to be. It does not mean I do not value his companionship. Who knows? Maybe in the future." She moved a big rock out of Jane's way. "Is this concept really so weird in Midgard? Kal was also bothered by it."

"Depends on the person, but usually yes," Jane answered. "It's expected some form of relationship between people when they are sleeping together. Not always, but it is common." Jane smiled. "Maybe that's why people on Earth think you and Thor are married."
Sif rolled her eyes again.

"That was a long time ago and it meant nothing, Midgardians are just meddlesome," Sif explained. "And I was far from being the only woman Thor…" She stopped talking, sensing this was not a topic Thor would like her to disclosure, especially to Jane. "We were not even together, is what I meant."

Her deflection obviously didn't work.

"Has Thor been with many women?" Jane asked, not looking at Sif; the goddess sighed.

"Thor is very old compared to you, Jane, so by your perspective, yes, he has." Jane seemed to become even quieter when she said that, so Sif stopped her and looked in her eyes. "But I have never seen him in love before. You were the first."

And as much as it pained her to admit this, it was true. Thor never truly loved any woman, even if he had been with quite a bit of them.

"Really?" Jane asked, smiling again.

"Really," Sif confirmed. "And he was even engaged before!"

"What?!"

Sif laughed, remembering the story as if it happened yesterday.

"Do not worry, he is not engaged anymore and it happened against his will," Sif explained. "It was some centuries back, when we were in the middle of a quest, in a planet of the Almeracian Empire. As always, there was a fight and Thor is quite the crowd pleaser. So much that he called the attention of Queen Maxima or, at the time, Princess Maxima."

Sif wasn't sure why she was telling this to Jane, but she was having fun. The girl wasn't so bad after all; she was a good listener.

"Almerac is the center of their Empire and is ruled by the House of the Blood Royale. Now, something vital for the understanding of Almerac is that they are a matriarchal society that put a lot of emphasis in procreation." Jane's eyes widened. "The royal house is the product of countless generations of Queens and their worthy mates, always with powerful genes. They take such care in those matters that the House of the Blood Royale became so powerful compared to the common Almeracian as an Asgardian is to a human. And the Queen is the finest example of that."

"How does Thor fit into this?" Jane asked, probably already guessing.

"Thor is strong. He is an Asgardian Prince, son of Odin, and one of the most powerful warriors of all time. Maxima wanted him for herself. So she took him."

"How?!"

Sif sighed. "Thor was not without blame in this… He was seduced quite easily by her and when he woke up he was already in her ship, halfway to Almerac to his wedding."

"This can't be legal!" Jane contested to Sif's amusement.

"I do not think she cared," Sif chuckled. "Not when she had one of the most powerful fleets in the universe and was herself one of the most powerful beings out there. Not a lot of people would
argue with her over anything." She shrugged. "Of course, Odin is not just anyone."

"Oh, I bet he wasn't happy, was he?"

"No, he was not. He made a request for his son to be delivered back, which was more of a threat than a proper asking, but at least the Queen of Almerac decided it was better to just send Thor back."

"And the Princess? Did she agree?"

"She did not have much of a choice, not when Heimdall used the Bifrost to bring her ship back to Asgardian space to be greeted by the Allfather himself." Sif laughed. "She released Thor and went back to Almerac, but obviously not before she had the gall to march to the palace and propose to Odin."

"She WHAT?!" Jane exclaimed.

"She proposed to Odin," Sif repeated, laughing. "I was there, I remember as if it were yesterday. She suggested that he got rid of his 'old wife' and married someone younger, prettier and more powerful."

"Jesus fucking Christ… What did Frigga do?"

"That was the first time I saw Frigga trying to summon the armies and Odin trying to appease her," Sif said, still laughing. "We almost went to war, it was a close thing."

"I can't even imagine… Is this Maxima crazy or something?!"

"She is something," Sif agreed, remembering the red haired Almeracian. Funny as that situation had been, the last thing she wanted was too meet that spoiled brat again. "Thor can count himself lucky for avoiding her, I will say that much."

Jane chuckled, kicking a little pebble out of her way as she walked.

"Do you know Thor for a long time?" she asked.

"Since we were children," Sif answered, smiling when she remembered the good old days. "I always dreamed of being a powerful warrior, someone people would sing about in legends ages from now, like the Valkyries. And the quickest way to get noticed was to challenge someone worthy."

"Like the Prince of Asgard?"

"Like the Prince of Asgard," Sif grinned. "So I tried to infiltrate the palace to challenge him, but I did not go very far without being noticed."

"The guards caught you?" Jane laughed.

"No, not the guards. Loki." Sif noticed as Jane's face lost the mirth.

"Let me guess, he tossed you in jail," Jane huffed.

Sif sighed, not exactly having the arguments or the will to defend Loki.

"He was not always like this, you know?" Sif said, remembering Loki as a child, with a bright and mischievous smile. "Before becoming what he became, before doing what he did, Loki was… He
was our friend. A prankster, a trickster, but a friend nonetheless." Sif stopped talking for a moment. "I do not know if I could have done something different, if I could have been a better friend… I do not know why he did what he did, nor do I know if it could have been stopped, but back then he was not what he is now."

Jane was listening with interest, no doubt searching for some understanding in Thor and Loki's relationship.

"Loki helped me to get into the palace unnoticed," Sif continued, "until I could face Thor. I challenged him and he accepted. And we had our duel. " She smiled, remembered how badly both of them fought. "It was awful, neither of us had any idea of how to fight properly, but we did enough of a ruckus to draw Odin and Frigga to us."

"Oh, no!"

"Those were my exact thoughts too," Sif commented. "I thought for certain the Allfather would toss me in the dungeons or banish me for attacking his son. Instead, he and Frigga invited me to dinner and allowed me to train with Thor and Loki ever since." She shrugged. "We became friends."

Which was why Loki's betrayal hurt so much. The worst thing about betrayals was that it never came from your enemies.

"We are going to make this right," Sif announced suddenly, looking at Jane. "We will remove the Aether from you and then stop Malekith, you have my word."

And then, maybe, they could solve this whole thing with Loki as well.

"So tell me, Kal-El, where were you when my Mother was over exhausting herself to a coma none of us know if she will recover from?" Loki quipped after several moments of walking in silence.

Clark closed his eyes and held a sigh, already expecting something like this sooner or later.

"I was there, trying to save her," Clark answered, calmly. "Where were you?"

There was a second of silence, almost as if Loki was surprised by the comeback.

"Rotting in a cell," he countered, dramatically. "Put there by my own brother, no less."

"For trying to conquer Earth and killing countless innocent people," Clark added, serious, raising an eyebrow. "Don't forget that important part."

Loki just waved his hand.

"Dying by my hands, dying a year from now, a hundred… What's the difference? Mortal's lives are a heartbeat."

"All the more reason to protect them," Clark answered, beginning to lose his patience.

The predatorial smiled in Loki's face was an indicative he had noticed that.

"Oh, yes, Mother did mention you had a personal affinity for humans," Loki needled. "How was it, being raised by a lesser form of life in such an underdeveloped Realm? Is the fact that mortals are so fragile and quick to die what inspired you to protect them so fiercely?"
"I don't know. Is the fact that you were raised by a superior form of life what inspired you to betray the family that adopted you and loved you like you were one of them?"

This time, Clark was the one who noticed Loki's discomfort.

"You understand nothing," Loki snarled a moment later. "I did not betray Asgard, I merely acted upon the lie I was fed my entire life: that I was born to rule."

"In my experience, nobody is born to do anything," Clark countered. "In fact, it was that very belief that proved to be Krypton's doom. It removed the element of choice, of freedom." He looked at Loki. "Our actions are what define us, Loki, and even though you believed you were born to be a king, you did not act like one. That is why you were in that cell."

Loki chuckled, shaking his head.

"Do you truly believe that? That you are no better than the mortals you so dutifully protect?" he asked. "They are like children, ignorant, weak. If you wanted, you could bring that entire Realm to its knees in the blink of an eye!"

Well, it should be no surprise that Loki clearly thought very little of humans and very much about himself.

"Even if you were right and humans were no more than children, which is just not true, how do you expect them to be any better if you take away their chance of growing, of learning?"

"Oh, I'm all for the 'burnt hand teaches best' kind of philosophy, but if you do not draw the line somewhere the children are going to burn down the house and everyone in it." Loki turned to him. "Have you actually seen what they are doing? Wars everywhere, playing with Infinity Stones without even knowing what they are, creating abominations such as Dr. Banner, developing weapons capable of breaking their planet like an egg, challenging the universe when they can barely fight their own gravity... If nobody does anything, they'll be extinct in less than a century."

"And I'm supposed to believe you care about that?" Clark asked, sarcastically.

"I care about wasted potential and they do have that by the loads," Loki answered, grinning. "Potential to serve a worthy king."

"And what makes you, or me, worthy of ruling them all, Loki?" Clark asked.

"Power," Loki summarized.

Clark chuckled, shaking his head.

"Then that means you should be serving the Hulk, then."

That made Loki trip, but he regained his balance pretty quickly.

"Power goes beyond the ability to smash people," Loki retorted. "It has to do with leadership, with intelligence, nothing a beast like him could ever hope to have."

"Convenient," Clark mocked.

"Come now, have you never wondered all the good you could accomplish if you decided to get rid of this self-loathing?" Loki questioned, ignoring completely Clark's commentary. "If you stopped the mortals from killing each other, if you guided them towards a better path? You could stop all
their suffering, all their misery, and yet you choose not to. Why?"

Yes, Clark had wondered that. How could he not? Loki asked if he knew what humans were doing and the answer was a very emphatic "yes"; he had no way not to. Wars, crime, evil of the likes he wished he could forget.

Like Loki said, he had the power to do things better, to change things, to just take what he thought it was wrong and correct it. But he also knew that if he did this he would have to fight the very people he wanted to protect. And war… War was never good, even when fought for the right causes.

There was also the fact that he couldn't be matched. If he took Earth, like Loki suggested, if he became a king and did all he judged necessary to end evil on Earth, things would well; just until the point they weren't. Power had a way to corrupt people and absolute power would corrupt absolutely. Slowly, gradually, day by day and he wouldn't even notice. And if he became a tyrant, a tyrant blind to his own crimes, who would stop him? Who would be powerful enough to show him he was wrong? Because Clark knew that, despite what some thought, he was not a god who could do no wrong. He was a person and people made mistakes.

Becoming the very thing he was trying to stop would be a terrible ending for this tale. So no, he was just fine doing what he was already doing.

"Why would I become a king?" Clark said after a while. "I can do all that without the need to take over Earth. I can save them, help them, give them something to aspire to. Give them hope. Becoming Earth's ruler just seem like a lot of trouble for no good reason. And I seriously don't know why someone would."

"You are kidding! Why would someone not?! To be respected, adored, loved? To have power in your hands!"

"You already were all that before trying to take Earth, Loki," Clark countered. "You just didn't think it was enough because from where you were standing, Thor's shadow seemed too big. And then you tossed all that away. Was it really worth it?"

This time Loki wasn't so eager to answer.

Still, even though Clark managed to shut Loki up for the moment, his words seemed to echo in his brain while they walked. Because no matter how much trust he had on humanity, no matter how much he loved Earth and no matter how much he knew there was a lot more good than bad, sometimes… Sometimes he wanted nothing more than to shake that whole planet until all that was wrong with it was tossed away.

And he knew that if he ever did that, if he ever allowed himself to go that way, he would never come back.

Silver-tongue indeed, Clark sighed in silence.

His internal musings were soon interrupted when he started listening for movement not too far away. He stopped Loki.

"I hear voices," he whispered, when the God of Lies looked at him puzzled.

Loki nodded and they advanced, stepping lightly. The sound grew louder at each step and soon Clark could distinguish different voices and steps. And when the tunnel ended, at the other side of the mountain, they finally saw the source of the noises.
A group of Dark Elves patrolling the valley that grew around a big temple right in the middle of it.

"The Eastern Spires," Loki whispered, as they approached the way down to the valley, crouched so they could remain unnoticed. "The center of the Dark Elves kingdom, where the throne of the Witch-Queen Alflyse is located."

Clark's eyes widened as he looked at the valley in front of him, full of stone spires growing from the ground all they way up, until even his vision couldn't see. It was like a forest of dark onyx, filling the entire valley between them and the huge ziggurat-shaped temple in the middle.

He wasn't a fan of the darkness and the underground, but even Clark had to admit it was a beautiful view, even if harsh; much like Alflyse herself. He felt a pang in his heart, knowing he was looking at the last remains of Alflyse's people. A people that no longer had a Queen to look out for them.

"I'll kill the ones on the right, you kill the ones on the left," Loki said, materializing a knife out of nothing and already standing.

Clark grabbed him and pulled him back, almost making him fall; he did not like that, by the look on his face.

"What?!" he snarled.

"No killing," Clark clarified.

"You are joking!" Loki laughed, as if he couldn't believe in what he heard. "This is war! They are the enemy!"

"Malekith is the enemy. Those are not his soldiers," Clark pointed out, seeing the differences in their armors, weaponry and colors; obviously not the same soldiers that attacked Asgard. Those Dark Elves in the valley were Alflyse's people, not Malekith.

Alflyse died for them, he would not repay that debt by being responsible for her people's death, especially not while he had a choice.

"So?! They are Dark Elves! They want us all dead!"

"And if you meet them in the battlefield I will not stop you from fighting," Clark retorted. "But killing them now, while they are defenseless? That I will not allow."

"Oh, that is all I need, a Kryptonian with qualms about killing non-Kryptonians! The things my bother is able to find baffle me!"

"They are vassals of the same woman who gave her life to save your mother," Clark said, harshly, trying to evoke some sense of compassion on Loki.

He should've known better.

"Better her than me!" Loki exclaimed. "If she was alive, I would send her flowers, but she is not. Dying here because of your misplaced morals will change nothing!"

Clark sighed, massaging his temples. "We don't need to fight. I can fly us there."

"I'd rather die." Loki summarized what he thought about that plan. He looked down again and sighed, his dagger disappearing into thin air. "If you insist in this foolishness, we will do it my way."
As he said that, there was a brief green glow and both of them disappeared; in their places there was a pair of Dark Elves. Now that was impressive, Clark thought, looking at his own hands, noticing the different skin tone.

"Follow my lead," Loki said, before starting to go down to the valley.

Still looking at his own changed body, that somehow was even able to reproduce the sounds of an armor he was pretty sure he was not really wearing, Clark followed.

"How exactly does this work?" he asked, surprising himself again at how different his voice sounded.

"The illusion? Do you truly want me to summarize centuries of magical knowledge in a couple of minutes? You sound like Thor more and more at each moment."

"I don't need to know specifics," Clark complained, quite unnecessarily in his opinion. "Just… Is there any flaw in them? Any way for them to notice us?"

"Illusions are Mother's specialty and she taught me well," Loki bragged. "But everything has weak points, obviously. If people know what to look for, what to notice, it is possible to see through an illusion. The more complex the illusion is, the more flaws it will have. The more magic I pour into it, the more difficult to find such flaws." Loki gestured towards them at the moment they arrived at the first stone spires. "I am capable of fooling even Heimdall, when I want to. We should be fine, unless you start doing something stupid."

Clark rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help his anxiety when they passed the first few Dark Elves; Loki, on the other hand, just nodded, greeting the soldiers, as if he did things like this every day. As far as he knew, that could very well be the case.

No one stopped them as they moved between the stone spires, going towards the temple. No alerts were given, no weapons were raised; they were passing through as if there were no defenses at all. It was only a matter of getting in the temple, finding the Aether Chamber and then finding Jane.

That should be enough to attract Malekith to them.

Soon, the ziggurat temple grew large in front of them. It was as big as mountain, made of dark stone, going up so high that the its top was lost in the darkness just like the thousands spires around it. He and Loki marched towards the entrance stairs like they owned the place, not hesitating for a second so they wouldn't draw any attention.

The temple was huge, but Clark didn't actually notice just how much until they entered it. They could fit, easily, several SHIELD Helicarriers in it. He had no words to express how awestruck he was.

Loki wasn't as impressed.

"Not much use to have such a big temple without anyone to visit it, don't you agree?" he asked, cruelly. "Anyway, I remember this place from Mother's memories."

"She was actually here? Inside the temple?"

"Better place to look for ancient magic. The temple that housed the Witch-Queen's personal collection. And she had the advantage to come here when there were no Dark Elves around, before they woke up from their hibernation." He tapped his chin. "If I remember correctly…. The Aether Chamber is right in the middle, so let us walk faster."
The temple was even darker than the outside, full of statues of Dark Elves and weird beasts that Clark supposed belonged to the previous universe. There were murals depicting beautiful pieces of art, strange sceneries that didn't exist anymore. This place wasn't just a temple, it was a piece of memory of a universe long gone.

And there, right in the center of the temple in a circular room, atop a pedestal, was the Aether Chamber they were looking for.

It was, pretty much, a miniature of the Aether Chamber Malekith used in the previous war. Two pieces of dark stone, in the form of a square prism, almost touching one another, but leaving an empty space in the middle to house the Aether. The difference between that and the one Malekith used, aside from the size, was the golden metal around the stone and the handle on the top, giving it the appearance of a small old-fashioned lantern.

"There it is," Loki whispered. "Now we only need the girl and someone that knows how to remove that parasite from her."

"And who are you two?" spoke a grave voice behind them.

Clark and Loki turned immediately, ready to fight, only to be greeted not by a person, but by what seemed to be cracked glass; except that there was no window anywhere, it was like the very reality in front of them was fracturing.


"It seems so are you," said the voice. "And yet, I am not familiar with you and I trained almost every sorcerer in this Realm."

And then, like a window breaking, the borders between the dimensions tore apart and a Dark Elf crossed, the broken space behind him going back to normal as he did it. Clark was ready to fight, already gathering his limited energy to end this as quick as possible, knowing just how bad it was to be caught in a combat situation without his powers. But instead of attacking, the Dark Elf simply stopped in front of them.

The first thing Clark noticed was that he was old. Granted, he hadn't seen many Dark Elves to compare, but his face was distinctly different than Alflyse's or Malekith's. It had the same burning from the light, and there was no beard – he didn't even know if they could grow one –, but there were wrinkles and his eyes were almost fading. He had a long, white hair, and was wearing black robes. What truly gave away his age, however, was the way he was holding his staff, almost as if he couldn't stand without support.

"I may be going blind with all the light in this universe," the old Dark Elf said, "but I still can see through illusions when you are putting so little effort in maintaining them."

Saying this, he bashed his staff against the ground. And just like that, the illusions around them glowed green one last time before disappearing.

"Now can I kill him?" Loki asked, materializing his dagger again, never taking his eyes from the old Dark Elf.

Instead of looking scared, yelling for help or preparing to fight, the Dark Elf just laughed; a hoarse, rough laugh, but a real one. Clark really didn't know what to think.

"The impertinence of the very young," he said. "Always so ready to spill blood. And yet, the
temple guards are still very much alive. Why is that?"

"Funnier to see you all dying slowly than to end your suffering," Loki taunted, before Clark made him stop.

"There was no need to fight," Clark explained. "No need to hurt anyone."

The Dark Elf stared at him for a long time with those near-blind eyes of him.

"Before you covered yourselves with those illusions you mentioned that the soldiers around the temple are vassals of the woman who died to save his mother," the old sorcerer said, seriously, pointing at Loki; he was watching them since that moment? "Was that woman Alflyse?"

Clark stared back almost as long and then nodded. "Yes."

There was a long pause.

"Do you mind telling me how did that happen?"

"Malekith threw those black hole grenades against us during Asgard's invasion," Clark answered. "We survived them, but we were thrown on a planet full of Klyntar. Alflyse bought us time to escape." Clark looked down. "But she stayed behind to do it."

Once again, the Dark Elf sorcerer stared at him in silence.

"Why did she do it?" he finally asked.

"She wanted to rest with the honor she had left," Clark said, remembering her words. "I think… I think she realized that destroying this entire universe to save what was left of her race wasn't the right thing to do."

They stayed quiet for so long that Clark wondered if he was going to say anything else at all. And then, against all odds, he smiled.

"She remembered what we once were," he said, smiling sadly. "Before we became monsters in children's stories."

The sorcerer began to walk and Loki and Clark moved out of his way, without taking their eyes from him. He made no movements to attack them, though, he simply walked to the Aether Chamber and, slowly, took it in his hands.

"I taught her since she was a little child," he said. "Taught her magic, politics, war, history… She became the greatest Queen in generations. And then the universe ended." He looked at them. "We thought we survived, that we were too strong to be killed, chosen for a higher purpose. But the truth was that we allowed fear and despair to end what we were even more thoroughly than the end of our universe."

The old Dark Elf stopped in front of them, holding the Aether Chamber.

"I will help you take out the Aether from inside the mortal. All I ask is your help in stopping Malekith."

"What are those things?!" Thor asked, swinging his hammer against what looked like a spider-shaped shadow monster. "There is no end to them!"
By his sides, Volstagg and Fandral were battling the hordes of shadow spiders just as he was, unleashing their weapons against the huge beasts nonstop. Problem was, no matter how many they killed, more would follow.

They had fallen into a nest when the tunnels fell apart, by the look of things, and the only good thing he had to say about their situation was that the huge spider, the one that made the mountain collapse, wasn't there.

"We need to leave!" Fandral said, slashing one of the monsters. "Now!"

"Can you see a way out?" Volstagg asked, punching an enemy away. "Because all I can see are spiders!"

Thor needed to take them out of there. They couldn't fight forever and, worst of all, he didn't know if Jane was safe. What if she had fallen into a place like this?

"Enough! I will show these monsters not to challenge Asgard!" Thor said, bringing Mjölnir up; electricity began to clack around his hammer. "I am the mighty Thor and I-Ahhh--"

Whatever was going to say was interrupted by a red, fiery portal opening right under them, removing the ground under their feet; suddenly, they were falling. They didn't fall for long, which was good, but it also took from them the chance to try to land with a little more refinement; landing on their backs and heads wasn't heroic at all.

"Graceful as ever, brother," he heard Loki's voice say, full of mirth. "Like a fat, round and dumb bilgesnipe. Or, you know, like Volstagg!"

"Curse you, Loki!" Fandral exclaimed, getting up fast and fixing his hair as he looked up, assuring that no spider had fallen with them. "Is this your doing?"

"I used the energy his Asgardian father imbued him with to pinpoint your location," a sage, rough voice said, "but the portal is my doing. My apologies for the fall, but I suppose it is small price to pay to get away from those spiders."

A Dark Elf was in the room with them, right in the middle of Kal and Loki. What was happening?

"What--"

"Shhh! I am trying to pinpoint the girl with the Aether, be quiet for a moment," the elf interrupted. Then, like he did with them, he opened a second portal; Sif and Jane were standing just behind it, looking at them wide eyed.

"Jane!" Thor exclaimed, forgetting all about the Dark Elf for a second.

"Thor!" Jane exclaimed back, jumping towards him.

"Wow, glad to know you missed me," Sif muttered, rolling her eyes as she crossed the portal, eyeing the Dark Elf carefully.

"Of course we missed you!" Thor laughed, pulling her into a hug too, only to be promptly slapped against the head.

"Idiot, you almost caused a second cave-in, what were you thinking?!" Sif exclaimed.

"We were being attacked!"
"Actually, we were attacked after that," Volstagg admitted. Thor glared at him and Sif slapped him again.

Thor rolled his eyes and, with Jane firmly held at his side, he turned towards his brother, Kal and the very old Dark Elf between them; the strangely non-hostile Dark Elf between them.

"Who are you?" Thor asked.

"My name does not mean anything to anyone anymore," the Dark Elf answered. "The important thing is that I can help you."

"How?" Sif promptly asked. "And more importantly, why?"

"I know how to remove the Aether from a living host. And the reason I will do it is because I do not believe in Malekith's vision of our future."

"You are willing to doom your entire people because you disagree with Malekith?" Thor asked, skeptic.

"I am willing to look for another way to save my people, one that does not involve dooming the entire universe. The Dark Elves are better than that," he answered, looking seriously at Thor. "In return, I only ask that you remember that not all of us are like Malekith, when you return to Asgard."

"What do you mean?" Thor asked, frowning.

"Bor's war did not end with Malekith's defeat," Loki answered. "The Aether was taken, Malekith and his armies defeated, but that was not enough." His brother stared him with a grin. "There is a reason we all believed there were no Dark Elves left in the universe, brother."

Thor looked from Loki to the old Dark Elf, waiting for him to correct his brother, but his silence said all. He looked down, ashamed.

"You have my word," he vowed.

The Dark Elf smiled and turned to Jane, gazing at her with his almost blind eyes. "Then I will help. But I think the decision really belongs to you, does it not? You are the Aether's host."

Jane held her stare for a moment and then looked at Thor; she seemed lost.

"I-I don't know," she said, her voice very low.

"Is it dangerous?" Kal asked.

"It is," the Dark Elf answered, sincere. "The Aether is volatile and is ever seeking a living host. It will not want to be trapped in this Chamber. But I am certain I can take it off you without too much danger."

Once again, Jane looked at Thor, searching for an answer, but Thor himself was filled with doubts. In the end, however, they did not have a choice. They could leave it inside Jane until she died or have someone remove it; and he trusted this old Dark Elf a lot more than he trusted Malekith.

"It is going to be alright, Jane," Thor said, kissing the top of her head. "I will be with you the whole time. But we have to do this."

She didn't seem less afraid, but she looked decided; nodding, she kissed Thor one last time and
looked at the Dark Elf.

"I'm ready."

Jane was terrified. She was afraid ever since that thing got into her, she was afraid when they entered the Dark World, but right now she was terrified beyond anything she ever experienced in her life. She could feel the Aether inside her, clutching not only her body, but what she could only define as her spirit, if such a thing was even real. It was a part of her right now and she knew, more than anyone, just how much it would fight to stay.

The old Dark Elf took her to the center of the room and walked back a few meters, holding the Aether Chamber in his hand. Everyone else was lined up at a distance, watching with barely concealed apprehension, Thor most of all; despite everything going on, she couldn't help but to feel loved when she saw his eyes.

"Remain calm and try to will the Aether out," the sorcerer said, putting the Aether Chamber on the ground, between them, and raising his staff with both hands.

Jane had no idea how to do that, but before she could ask she was lifted from the ground, slowly, her arms opening. And then there was only red. The Aether began to flow through her, leaving her essence, as if a living being was being removed from her body. But she was not seeing that anymore, all she could see was the Aether, flying, fighting the removal. And in that moment, she could see the entire universe.

She was seeing Reality itself.

Jane didn't know how long she gazed over all creation, it could've been a second or a thousand years, but eventually the universe disappeared from her vision and she could see the temple again. The Aether was flying like a menacing red cloud in the sorcerer's direction, slowly, unwillingly, but bit by bit it was leaving her.

The Aether divided itself into several red tendrils, beginning to fall towards the Chamber. It approached it, painfully slowly, fighting every inch of the way against the sorcerer's command; the old Dark Elf had his eyes closed, his concentration absolute, as the Aether approached, ready to be trapped.

And then, without warning, the red tendrils of the Aether lunged forward, completely ignoring the Chamber and piercing the old Dark Elf like spears. His eyes opened quickly, surprised, as blood flowed out of his mouth.

Out of nowhere, a red sword-shaped ship appeared in the temple.

To say they were all shocked was an understatement. None of them could even react, too stunned with the turn of events. They could only watch as the ship appeared out of thin air, Malekith standing on the opened door with his arms raised, as the ship floated in place.

"To think you, from all people, would betray us… I am disappointed," Malekith said, eyes fixed on the old Dark Elf.

The old sorcerer coughed, weakly, but met Malekith's eyes.

"You were the one who betrayed our race," he answered, gurgling blood.
"I am making sure the Dark Elves have a future!" Malekith countered.

"What you have in mind is no future at all," the old Dark Elf said, lowly.

"You are weak, just like Alflyse was," Malekith snarled. "And I will not allow you to taint our race anymore."

Saying that, he called the Aether to him. The tendrils retreated from the old Dark Elf, making him yell and fall as his blood was spilled, and the Aether began to change direction, going towards the ship; towards Malekith.

That was what finally snapped Thor into motion. Roaring, he lifted Mjölnir and prepared to throw it against Malekith; only to be stopped by Loki.

"No! If you do this, you will kill the mortal!"

Thor looked quickly at Jane, still floating, as the Aether was pulled from her to Malekith. With the sorcerer down, Malekith was their only option to take it out of her. So, with electricity clacking around his hammer, he waited, seeing his friends preparing to battle too, just waiting for the right moment.

The Dark Elves had no such problem.

Troops of Dark Elves jumped from the ship, led by that beastly abomination that had hurt his mother, the Kursed. At the same time, several smaller ships disengaged from the bigger one, flying in their direction.

And without the need for any order, all of them attacked.

Thor spun Mjölnir and flew against Kurse, screaming in rage; Kal took off so fast that he almost disappeared, flying directly against one of the ships; Loki, Sif, Fandral and Volstagg met the Dark Elves soldiers head on.

With Mjölnir in front of him, Thor prepared himself for the collision against Kurse, already relishing at the thought of breaking that thing's bones; he should've known it would not be that easy. The hammer collided against Kurse, but the Dark Elf's weapon of mass destruction simply swatted him to the side, backslapping the hammer, and Thor, with such strength that he was sent flying to the side.

He crashed painfully against the temple's floor, breaking the stone and rolling for several meters, but as soon as he was able he firmed his feet and got up, already swinging Mjölnir against his enemy; only to have his arm grabbed easily by Kurse. The horned, scaled monster looked into his eyes for a moment, then headbutted him as strongly as Kal did in the tournament.

He really needed to get used to wearing a helmet.

Loki was grinning like a madman when he conjured his daggers, spinning and jumping to avoid the hail of energy shots coming against them. By his side, Sif was also dodging them, deflecting the occasional shot back with her small shield and sword, just like Fandral; Volstagg was, mostly, hiding behind his huge war axe and armor, too big and slow to avoid the shots, but too strong to be bothered by them very much, not when his armor was taking the brunt of it.

And in seconds, they were between the Dark Elves.
He would never, ever, admit it, but Loki missed this. His companions were all idiots, beneath him in social standing and intelligence, but he couldn't help but to miss their adventures together and nothing spoke of adventure like being in the middle of an enemy troop, slashing and cutting and killing. Loki was practically dancing amongst them, dodging their weapons, his daggers precise and lethal.

But Loki could do better than that.

Concentrating for barely a second, Loki allowed his magic to flow and suddenly a green glow took all of them, Asgardians and Dark Elves included; they all stopped for a moment, looking around, not knowing what was happening. Because now there were no Asgardians or Dark Elves there, only several dozen Loki's.

Nobody moved for a brief instant; then all of them began to attack each other, not knowing who was with them and who was an enemy. With some time to think it would be obvious that the real Loki and the rest of the Asgardians would not be firing the weapons covered by the illusions, since they had only melee weapons, but in the chaos of battle they didn't think; they only died.

Of course, he overestimated his companions as well, if the "heavy stepped" Loki attacking him with an invisible war axe had something to do with that.

"It's me, imbecile!" he yelled, dodging the illusion covered axe.

"Oh, sorry about that," Volstagg apologized, his own face staring at him dumbly.

Loki just snarled, going back to the fight, sparing a moment to glance at Malekith and the mortal, still connected by the red cloud of the Aether. It wouldn't take long for that to end and then they would have to kill Malekith as quickly as possible. Without a host, they could trap the Aether in the Chamber and be done with it.

Even as confident as Loki was in his own abilities, however, he knew that facing the wielder of an Infinity Stone would be anything but easy.

Clark dodged the shots from the fast ships, unleashing his heat vision against one of them, cutting off part of its hull. The ship fell quickly, crashing against the ground, but he wasn't even looking anymore, already chasing another ship while two more pursued him.

This was new, Clark thought as he dashed forward, grabbing the ship he was chasing with his bare hands and tossing it down; he never imagined he would be actually fighting spaceships before. Well, he had dropped Zod's ship back on Earth, his ship now, but this felt different somehow.

Under him, Thor was fighting that Dark Elf monster in a flurry of hammer blows and punches, beating each other fiercely. And the others… Well, Clark couldn't really tell what was happening, since all he could see was the nightmarish vision of dozens of Loki's, but he assumed they were doing alright. The sight of Loki being beat up in several different ways was amusing, at least.

Jane was still floating in place, the Aether being drained from her, but he could tell it would not take long for Malekith to finish it; as soon as that thought crossed his mind, Jane fell back to the floor, the last remnants of the Infinity Stone out of her.

Clark smiled and raised his speed, colliding against the ships pursuing him and dropping them from the air, his eyes going from Jane to Malekith. The Dark Elf was absorbing the Aether into his own body, the red cloud entering his mouth and eyes until it disappeared; when his eyes opened, they were pitch black.
It was time.

He exploded forward, flying so fast that the shockwaves he produced were enough to drop the approaching ships, his fist raised in front of him. But instead of crashing against Malekith, as he intended, Clark collided against a red wall formed by the Aether. He had a quick flashback of fighting the World Engine with its Liquid Geo back on Earth, as the Aether closed around him, trapping him like a giant hand.

"I thought I killed you, abomination," Malekith sneered, still unmoving, holding Clark in place. "If you are alive… Alflyse?"

"She is the reason I am alive," Clark answered, trying to break free, feeling his strength leaving him.

"She was as weak as that old fool."

"She was ten times the Dark Elf you are," Clark answered, his eyes glowing red.

Malekith had a fraction of a second to toss him away, before Clark unleashed his heat vision against him. The energy beams missed Malekith by inches, carving his ship, but Clark was already flying away, too fast and too stunned by the Aether to be able to control his landing.

He clashed directly against Thor, both of them tumbling over the ground in a mess of limbs and groans. They looked at each other for a second, still on the floor.

"Trade opponents?" Clark asked, seeing Kurse approaching.

"Trade opponents!" Thor agreed, jumping up and preparing to fly against Malekith.

Kurse moved to intercept, but Clark was already up too, ignoring the bruises and pain as he flew against him. He collided against him, shocked at the how solid that monster was; it was like crashing head on against Nam-Ek. Instead of dropping him, Kurse managed to stand his ground, digging his feet in the floor and holding Clark down. If he hadn't been hit by the Aether like an idiot…

Roaring, Kurse pushed him and Clark felt dizzy when the Dark Elf’s fist clashed against his jaw and then his stomach. His muscles were not as strong as before and the blows hurt, but that didn't stop Clark from punching back, his own fist exploding against Kurse's face; to his surprise, despite the incredible sound, it didn't do much.

That wasn't good at all.

Clark barely had time to prepare himself for the barrage of punches unleashed by Kurse, each of them feeling like a meteor against his body. He was feeling like a boxer against the ropes, each blow sending him back a few inches, too strong and too fast for him to react properly without energy, because clearly there was no yellow sun in the Dark World's underground to recharge him.

But there was a sorcerer trained by Frigga.

He didn't see what happened, there was just a very bright glow and suddenly any weakness he was feeling before vanished, replaced by pure power.

"You helped Mother, Kryptonian," Loki said, from behind him. "Now we are even."

Kurse glanced at Loki and roared, lifting his arm and unleashing the strongest punch he could
against Clark's face; this time, his cheek didn't tremble against Kurse's fist. Clark stared at him, the black fist still touching his face, then grinned.

"My turn," he said.

Clark moved so fast that Kurse had no time to even blink before his fist clashed against his windpipe; it was well protected behind that hard skin, but no one could escape unscathed against a blow like that. Kurse coughed, suddenly gasping for air, before Clark attacked his temples, stomach, knee, groin and chin, moving so quickly that he became a blur in the air.

Kurse was tossed back, dizzy and hurt, but Clark was not nearly done with him; his eyes burned and a pair of red beams came out of them, impacting his chest with the force of a thousand suns. That made a mark.

The Dark Elf abomination roared in pain as his steel-like skin was melted from his chest, whole parts of it falling from his body like a broken armor, exposing the tender flesh beneath it. Kurse fell to his knees, eyes darting around madly because of the pain; they were done.

"It's over," Clark said, seeing the beast almost passing out.

It was what he thought, at least, before a sword was buried in Kurse's back, impaling him from one side to the other.

"Now it's over," Loki grinned.

One of these days, Clark promised, he would do to Loki what Dr. Banner had done to him in the Avengers Tower.

The inside of the temple was a battle of lightning against Aether, blue against red, as Thor flew around the ship trying to attack Malekith. The smaller ships fell all around him, brought down by the powerful storm and the winds, but Malekith himself was unharmed, while he commanded the Aether to chase him in the air.

"Your time is up, Asgardian," Malekith announced, still at the entrance of his own ship since the fight began. "The Convergence will soon be upon us and I have the Aether. The tyranny of the light is over."

"In your dreams, Malekith!" Thor screamed back. "I will stop you, like my grandfather did."

"I am still here. Your grandfather failed, like you will."

Saying that, he raised his arms and brought them down; the Aether seemed to form a gigantic wave in the air, sweeping everything in its path, including Thor. The Infinity Stone hit him like a tsunami, tossing him down on the ground violently.

"Asgard will perish alongside all my enemies," Malekith said, as Thor got up.

The Dark Elf brought his hands together, willing the Aether to gather between them in the form a sphere; the sphere didn't grow, no matter how much of the red cloud entered in it. Thor had a very bad feeling about this.

"But you will perish now, Asgardian."

And he lifted the sphere at the middle of the temple. For a second, nothing happened; then, almost
exploding, the sphere expanded, forming a tornado so massive that it reached the top of the temple. And it was getting larger by the second. The whole place was trembling, the wind howling, and the ceiling began to collapse; soon, it would take the entire temple.

"Farewell, Asgardian," Malekith said, getting back in his ship.

Thor yelled in rage, tossing his hammer against it, hoping to destroy it alongside Malekith, but in the blink of an eye the ship disappeared, Mjölnir passing through nothing.

"Thor!" Sif yelled, lifting an exhausted Jane on her arms. "We need to leave!"

He glanced at the place Malekith's ship had been for a last time, before running to them.

"Nice voyage to Hel, monster!" Loki taunted, passing through Kurse as he walked towards Clark, grabbing one black hole grenade belt from a fallen Dark Elf; the huge Aether tornado was growing fast at the other side of the room. "Remember, in the very short time of life you have left, that you are dying because of what you did to Frigga."

Clark was barely paying attention to the provocation, too busy eyeing the growing tornado, but suddenly Kurse lunged forward, moving too quickly for someone supposedly close to death. He reached Loki in a second, grabbing him by the shoulders, the tip of the sword that impaled him now pointed at Loki's chest; then he pulled him.

It was like time had stopped. Clark was moving so fast that everything around him stood still; he could see dust stopped in the air, Loki and Kurse completely immobile, even the Aether tornado fixed in place. And then he was between Loki and Kurse, his hands pushing them apart with all his strength.

Loki was sent flying to the other side of the room and Kurse, sword still inside him, was tossed right in the middle of the Aether tornado; or he would have been, had the tornado not tore him apart just as it touched him.

"We need to get out of here," Loki stated, disheveled, getting up just in time to see Kurse's demise. He slapped a stunned Clark's shoulder. "He was dead anyway, let's go!"

The tornado was growing fast, consuming the temple. It was beginning to crumble and Clark doubted they could get out before it collapsed. Sif, carrying Jane, Thor, Fandral and Volstagg appeared running.

"We are not outrunning that thing!" Fandral exclaimed. "Open a portal, Loki!"

"I already tried, believe me!" Loki retorted and Clark had no doubt that he would have left them if he succeeded. "That Aether tornado is causing chaos on the dimensional energy around!"

"Approach me," a weak voice called them; a familiar weak voice.

All of them turned to see the old Dark Elf sorcerer, still fallen in a pool of his own blood, trying to get up. Clark ran to him, ready to help him, but he waved him off.

"It is too late for me, but not for you," he coughed, raising his hand. "You must stop Malekith, for all our sakes."

Saying this, he began to trace a circle in the air, the familiar fiery magic opening a portal; a portal leading straight to the ship they used to get there.
"This is the closest from the exit I can take you," he said, coughing blood. "Leave me and go, if you want any chance at stopping Malekith. Just, let me rest…"

He closed his eyes and fell.

"Kal! We have to go!" yelled Thor, grabbing the Aether Chamber and pulling him through the portal.

Loki was already inside the ship, turning it on as Sif boarded it with Jane on her arms. Fandral and Volstagg jumped inside and then Thor and Clark as well. The entire underground was shaking, huge pieces of rocks falling nonstop. He had no idea what would happen, but he really didn't want to stay and find out.

"Go, Loki!" Thor yelled and Loki took off, flying as fast as he could.

The earthquakes seemed to grow stronger, making even the underground sea under them shake. At every moment, Loki had to bring the ship left and right to dodge from falling debris. The situation was getting progressively worse, as that Aether tornado grew stronger.

And then Loki turned the ship back.

"What are you doing?!" yelled Sif.

"It will take too long to exit through the same place we entered!" Loki screamed in response. "I know another way!"

Saying this, he brought the ship up. Clark couldn't see through the darkness to know where they were going, but he did remember very clearly what kind of creatures seemed to inhabit the top of the underground caves.

"And you just remembered this path now?!" Fandral asked.

"No, I knew it was there," Loki answered. "I just didn't want to risk flying thought a nest of light-eating spiders."

Yes, Clark was right; it brought him no pleasure.

The ship was flying incredibly fast, almost completely vertical, and the closer they got to the top, the more they had to move to dodge the huge falling rocks. Loki, to his credit, was flying perfectly.

"I see something!" Clark said, suddenly. "An entrance."

Loki grimaced. "That's the place. Get ready."

Soon, they all understood why he said that. The tunnel was big, easily fitting their ship, but it was full of webbing. Everywhere, crossing all the extremities of the entrance with little space between them, there were nets of webbing. And where there was web…

"Careful!" Volstagg yelled, swinging his axe just as a spider tried to jump them.

Soon, a whole swarm of spiders was attacking them. They ran through webs, fast, lunging at the ship without any sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

"They are trying to eat the light generated by the engines!" Loki yelled, maneuvering the ship. "Give them something to chase!"
Good idea. Clark walked to the side of the ship and unleashed his heat vision down, against the webbing; it caught on fire easily, spreading fast. The light allowed him to see better and what he saw brought a cold to his stomach: a never-ending swarm of black spiders running inside the tunnel. At least now they were heading to the flames, instead of the ship.

"I hate spiders," Clark whispered, knowing he would never forget that sight.

"They hate us too!" Thor laughed.

At least he was laughing; or he was, before the ship inexplicably stopped.

"Oh, no!" Fandral exclaimed, seeing the reason why they had stopped.

Thin pieces of web had gathered around the ship's hull, not enough to stop them at first, but eventually taking its toll. Just like a fly glued to a spider's web.

"Make yourselves useful and cut us free!" Loki ordered, desperately, as more and more debris fell. They needed to move before the spiders noticed their situation.

Everybody jumped to work, cutting and tearing the webbing as fast as they could, trying to set the ship free. The engine was roaring loudly, as Loki accelerated, and the ship was advancing inch by inch, stretching the web more and more.

"Almost there," Loki whispered, looking down. "Oh, dear…"

Clark saw the reason for Loki's exclamation soon enough, in the form of an incredibly dense mass of pure darkness under them; a darkness that they had already seen before.

"That big bastard is here!" Thor yelled. "Cut the web! Cut the web!"

Everybody was working doubly faster, the blades hitting the webbing nonstop, but it was clear they would not get loose before that huge beast got to them; they needed a boost. Without saying anything, Clark jumped from the ship, flying under it, ignoring the desperate yells from his friends.

And he began to push up, lifting the ship over his shoulders.

The web was strong and it resisted for a moment, but soon enough he heard a snapping sound and the ship was boosted up. Clark continued pushing, ignoring the fact that they were loose, because new strands of webbing were hitting the ship at each second and because that huge monster was still in pursue, climbing the tunnel fast.

Their velocity began to drop again and Clark redoubled his efforts, hoping to tear the webbing, but it was more than that. One of the spiders raining like a storm over their ship had just bit one of the engines, damaging it; he slapped it away, but the damage was done. Thor was swinging Mjölnir as fast as he could, the hammer spinning like a hurricane, tossing the spiders everywhere, away from the ship. Sif, Fandral and Volstagg were doing their best to cut the webs, but their weapons were proving to be inefficient at their task, gluing themselves to the webbing more often than they could cut them.

And the giant spider was getting closer.

Clark saw Loki looking down for a second, then looking up. The ship was not moving at the necessary speed with all the webbing and the destroyed engine, the spiders continued to fall and soon enough that extremely big monster would catch them. Could they fight it? Probably. But could they do it leaving their ship intact, in time to escape before the tunnel collapsed? That was
harder to know.

He saw the decision forming in Loki's eyes.

"Thor, keep flying up as fast as you can," Loki said, conjuring his daggers. "I will buy us time."

"What?! What are you saying, Loki?" Thor asked, still swinging Mjölnir to keep the spiders from overwhelming them.

"I am saying that for once in my life, I will do something heroic," Loki announced, walking to the edge of the ship. "Tell Mother, when she wakes up, that I love her. And that I am sorry."

"No, no, no, no, Loki, no!" Thor yelled, trying to turn to grab him, but without being able to stop fighting the falling spiders. "Don't you dare!"

"I am sorry, brother. For everything."

And with a last look, Loki jumped.

Clark saw him falling, dodging the webs, his daggers firmly held in his hands; until he landed just on top of the gigantic spider, sinking his blades into its eyes. The monster roared in pain, beginning to bounce on the tunnel's walls in despair, but Loki didn't let go. He stabbed it, over and over again, dark blood spilling everywhere. The spiders falling from over them began to attack Loki, grabbing him with their legs, biting him; he screamed in agony, but didn't stop stabbing the big one.

And then, Loki's shout echoing in the tunnel, he grabbed the black hole grenades he stole from the Dark Elves from his belt, activated them and tossed all into the spider's mouth.

There was a second of silence; then a muffled explosion and a scream of anguish, as the grenades detonated inside the spider, swallowing its insides and tossing them to the other side of the galaxy. The giant spider stopped to move, suddenly, dropping its weight completely over the webs. Loki killed the little spiders over him with his dagger and looked up, smiling, blood covering his entire body.

The web sustaining them suddenly snapped.

"NOOOOO!" Thor yelled, as Loki and the spider fell, disappearing into the dark pit.

They couldn't do anything. Clark couldn't release the ship with its damaged engine and Thor couldn't stop fighting the falling spiders; Loki was gone. There was a sudden blue glow and an electric discharge clacked through the tunnel, dropping hundreds of spiders, as Thor howled in pain.

The web holding them was finally cut.

Clark pushed the ship up as fast as he could, while Thor used Mjölnir to shield the ship from the falling spiders. This time, the webbing was not capable of stopping them, running thinner as they got closer to the surface; the spiders, too, began to disappear. And after a few minutes, they were flying without being bothered.

No one celebrated.
Chapter 27 – The Dark World – Part 2

"He was my brother," Thor whispered, when they reached the surface of the Dark World, looking down at the tunnel's entrance. "I know what he was, what he did… But I loved him. He was family."

Jane hugged him, trying to offer some comfort, but Thor seemed completely lost with grief. They all were. Sif, Fandral and Volstagg as well, Sif most of all.

"We failed," Thor continued, closing his eyes. "Malekith has the Aether, Loki is dead and we are stranded in the Dark World with no way to get back. When the Convergence starts…"

The end of everything, Clark finished in silence. They had truly failed. Jane was safe, but not for long; none of them was. And now they didn't even have a way to escape this planet, not without knowing the passages Loki knew.

Unless…

"Kelex, can you pinpoint the focal point of the Convergence?" he asked, suddenly.

There was a second of anticipation, a second every person there looked at Kelex, wide eyed.

"I can, sir."

For the first time since that whole thing began, Clark truly smiled. They didn't need to know a secret passage through the branches of Yggdrasil, not when the Nine Realms would be completely connected for the first time in 5000 years. They just needed to be there at the right time.

Steve looked at the sky in anticipation, fully clad in his blue uniform, his shield strapped at his back. Around him, Tony was wearing his suit, without the helmet, Dr. Banner was cleaning his glasses in a nervous tic, Natasha was checking her guns, including some menacing big cannon made from the parts of some Asgardian magical armor that had attacked New Mexico and Clint was fidgeting with his arrows.

According to Selvig, the Convergence would soon reach its peak and its focal point would be right where they were, at the Old Royal Naval College, in Greenwich. They had prepared. The place was evacuated, the army had formed a perimeter and SHIELD agents were patrolling the place. The gravimetric spikes Selvig developed to prevent the Convergence to reach its full potential were already ready and installed.

Now they were waiting.

For what? Nobody really knew. Hopefully nothing at all, except a weird natural phenomenon, but if Steve learned one thing since he woke up in this weird time was that portals leading to alien worlds usually meant trouble; thus, the many weapons.

"I bet a hundred dollars that something awesome is going to happen," Tony said, breaking the heavy silence.
"That's very specific," Clint said, sarcastically. "What do you consider to be 'awesome'?"

"You know, something amazing!" Tony answered, cheekily.

They rolled their eyes.

"Not something incredible?" Bruce asked, smiling.

"Nah, 'incredible' doesn't really convey the awesomeness of something 'awesome','" Tony retorted.

"What Clint means," Natasha explained, still checking her pistol, "is that what one person might find 'awesome' and what another person might find 'awesome' can vary greatly. Take Steve, for example," Steve sighed, tiredly, "an older fellow like him will probably shock easily at any technological advancement, like a TV or a cellphone."

It was weird that he was already getting used to being Natasha's source of amusement?

"For your information, you are wrong," Steve answered, raising his eyebrows at her. "After aliens, gods and portals, I would easily pay a hundred dollars if anything else can shock me ever again."

Natasha holstered her pistol, looking at him with a grin. "It's on."

It was exactly when she said that, that a sword-like spaceship of the size of a skyscraper appeared out of nothing, gliding over the sea and digging through the ground as it landed in front of them.

The Avengers almost jumped in surprise, readying their weapons to meet whatever was coming at them, retreating slowly as the ship stopped in front of them; an elevator, all the way to the top of the ship, began to come down.

"We have contact," Natasha warned on the radio, any playfulness on her voice gone. "Secure the perimeter, nothing comes in or out. Prepare the jets for airstrike."

They assumed a battle formation around Steve, side by side, their eyes fixed on the doors of ship, waiting to see what would walk out of it. Then the doors opened; a troop of aliens, armed and masked, came out, led by a menacing being clad in dark robes, with the right half of his grey face burned.

"Dark Elves!" Selvig exclaimed through the radio connection, as the aliens approached them, not fazed by their presence whatsoever.

"Elves?!" Stark asked. "Like Santa's little helpers and Legolas?"

"More like the beings that survived the extinction of their own universe," Natasha corrected, no doubt remembering Clark's mention of them while they were on the Helicarrier, in what felt like ages ago.

How could a race survive the end of their universe Steve didn't know, but it certainly made them dangerous. He didn't know if they were here to fight or what was their real objective, but the way they landed the ship and the way they were equipped wasn't exactly a good indicative for peace.

Steve stepped forward, raising his hand.

"That's close enough. Identify yourselves."

Surprisingly, the Dark Elf really did stop, but apparently not because of him; he was looking up, right in time to see the appearance of eight portals taking form in the sky. The Convergence was
beginning to reach its final form. The Dark Elf studied them for a few seconds, then stared at Steve.

"It seems that mortals are still ignorant of matters taking place out of this Realm," he said in a powerful voice. "I am Malekith, ruler of the Dark Elves, but this should make no difference to you. Soon, I will end this universe and restore min–"

Whatever he was going to say was interrupted by a truly brutal energy blast fired by Natasha's cannon, made from the parts of the Asgardian's Destroyer. The blast hit Malekith directly against the chest, exploding in a weird plasma like reaction, sending the ruler of the Dark Elves flying against his own troops.

Steve, and everyone else, turned to her, jaws agape.

"What? He said he was ending our universe, I didn't need anything else."

She wasn't wrong, Steve admitted, before taking his shield. "Attack!"

The Avengers advanced against the Dark Elves still standing, dodging their firing as they approached. Tony took off, his suit unleashing a wave of missiles against them, at the same time Natasha fired her pistols, waiting for the Destroyer cannon to cool down; the explosive rounds she was using, designed by Stark himself, were doing a very good job at hurting the Dark Elves.

Clint, like Natasha, was shooting explosive arrows, blasting his enemies away with them; most Dark Elves managed to get up, but not unharmed, that was easy to see. Managing to finish the job or not, Natasha and Clint's suppressing fire was enough to hold the Dark Elves in place as Steve and Bruce approached.

Steve deflected the firing against him with his vibranium shield, seeing the repelled energy drop some hostiles, and then he was on them; he kicked the closest Dark Elf in the face with all his strength, surprising himself at how little he actually hurt the alien. But maybe it should be expected, from a race able to go toe-to-toe against Asgardians.

The Dark Elf was not capable of ignoring the blast of his shield against his face, however.

The vibranium unleashed a powerful bash, sending he Dark Elf to the ground immediately, as Steve spun to hit another one. Natasha, Tony and Clint continued to fire from a distance, making it easier for Steve to move in the middle of them, creating chaos.

And then there was a roar; the Hulk was ready to fight.

Tony grinned when he saw the Big Guy jumping right in the middle of the fight, sending the Dark Elves flying in all directions. The Hulk was screaming like crazy, punching and kicking everyone around him, basically ignoring the firing against him; it was seriously cool seeing Bruce let out all that pent-up anger, provided he was not the target.

His repulsors took him close to the battle, so that he could fire his laser against the alien troop, managing to destroy some of their weapons. It was clear from where he was standing that the Dark Elves weren't expecting such a greeting. They were caught unaware, imagining there would be no resistance at all, and it was costing them. They were divided, without a leader and pinned down; it was almost too good to be true.

It usually was.
Tony saw only a red glow coming from the place where Malekith had been blasted, but he already knew it was bad news.

"TAKE COVER!" he yelled.

Steve, Natasha, Clint and the agents positioned nearby did what they could, hiding behind covers or shields; the Hulk, however, completely ignored him. A gigantic red wave originated out of nothing, sweeping the battlefield, tossing Bruce so high up in the sky that Tony had to dodge midair not to be hit.

The Big Guy dropped back to the ground like a meteor, making the entire place shake and dust rise up.

"I will make you suffer before I end this universe!" Malekith vowed, getting up, his armor burned, and walking towards the crater the Hulk had made.

Lifting his hand, the red cloud appeared again, going against the Hulk with the force of a train, widening the crater even more. Tony was momentarily stunned; anyone that could do that to the Hulk was someone to be feared. And right now they didn't have Superman or Thor to ask for help, because apparently those two were out in the galaxy partying or something.

Another alien force attacking Earth… Tony was beginning to think things would only get worse with time; provided, of course, they were capable to survive this one.

Diving, Tony powered his repulsors, dropping from the sky fast. Too fast for Malekith to notice and react. Tony punched the guy right in the face, feeling his armor strain at how dense that guy was, then he landed, turning to face the Dark Elf with his repulsors aimed.

Malekith simply stared at him, as if he had barely felt the punch.

"When your people was still hiding in caves and marveling at fire, I was already waging war against empires spanning thousands of worlds! And now do you presume to hurt me?!"

"Me? Oh, no," Tony answered; then he pointed behind Malekith. "But he will!"

The Dark Elf barely had time to turn before the Hulk smashed him, burying him in the ground; that was very satisfying to watch.

"It appears the mothership is deploying aircrafts, sir."

"It seems so, Jarvis. Let's greet them, shall we? The Big Guy seems to have things handled here."

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Natasha grabbed her rifle, loaded with special Stark armor-piercing ammunition, and began to fire against the Dark Elves, trying to prevent them from scattering. She could see her shots dropping some enemies, the bullets made from a mix of Earth metals and Chitauri alloy, but more often than not the Dark Elves would simply get up again, well protected behind their armors; slower, harmed, but not dead as they should be.

That was beginning to annoy her.

"What the hell was that red thing?" Clint exclaimed, shooting his arrows nonstop.

"Difficult to know," Natasha answered, completely cool, as she traded her rifle for the Destroyer cannon; one single shot and five Dark Elves caught in the explosion didn't get up. "But it managed
to hurt Bruce, so I would stay clear if I were you."

Pistols again? Or should she try her new grenade launcher? Decisions, decisions…

"You could at least pretend that you are not enjoying yourself," Clint mumbled, as he managed to put an arrow directly against a Dark Elf's forehead; the new arrow drilling its way in for a second, then exploded. "It's not like our universe is at stake here."

"Who says I'm enjoying myself?" Natasha asked, shooting the grenade launcher three times, scattering the enemy soldiers gathering around the Hulk.

"Oh, I don't know, maybe I got the wrong impression when I heard you giggling."

"I do not giggle," she deadpanned.

"Not with sounds," Clint agreed. "It's more like a silent giggle. An emotional giggle."

"Am I emotional giggling right now?" Natasha asked, as she noticed that the Destroyer cannon was ready for another shot.

The big weapon glowed red and then fired, causing destruction all around.

"Oh, yes, you are!"

Malekith held that green beast's fist with his hand, the Aether giving him the necessary power to resist such strength. Snarling, he used the Aether to attack him, conjuring a wave that tossed that monstrosity away.

What was happening? Nothing going on here was expected. Midgard was supposed to be a weak Realm, a perfect place where he could unleash the Aether when the Convergence reached its peak, but it was anything but. Their weapons were capable of killing his soldiers, their fighting abilities were proving to be a match even against his best warriors and that green beast… What was that thing?!

He had no time to find out. Looking up he could see that the Alignment was nearly complete. When it was, he would have seven minutes to do what he needed to save his universe, bringing the darkness back; any delay was simply unacceptable.

The green monster got up again, even madder, roaring when he began to run in his direction; it was time to end this. The beast was strong, but at the end of the day it was just a beast and beasts could easily be caged. Calling forth all the power from the Aether, Malekith brought his arms up, gathering the red cloud around the monster. Instead of recognizing what was happening and flee, the beast fought, punching the Aether, trying to even bite it, but Malekith focused, keeping the Aether from dispersing, immobilizing his limbs one by one.

And then he closed the spherical cell around him; now he would have some peace to do what he needed.

Walking forward, completely ignoring the battle, Malekith stood right under the Convergence portals, looking up, ready to see what would soon be his new universe. What he saw, instead, made his eyes go wide.

The Asgardian Prince and the Kryptonian were flying to Midgard, crossing the several portals one by one, with the Asgardian armada behind them.
Clark landed back on Earth together with Thor, breaking the ground. He looked around for a second, quickly noticing that the ones fighting the Dark Elf invasion were the Avengers, assessing if any civilian was at risk; to his relief, there wasn't. They could fight.

"You will pay for what you did, Malekith!" Thor roared, lifting Mjölnir.

"You needn't have come so far, Asgardian! Death would've come to you soon enough!"

"Surrender, Malekith," Clark ordered. "Give back the Aether and surrender. Please."

Malekith laughed. "If you are that afraid, abomination, kneel. I swear I will grant you a swift death."

"It's not my life that I'm worried for," Clark answered, looking deeply into Malekith's eyes.

The Dark Elf sneered. "Your universe was never meant to be! Your world and your families will be extinguished!"

Saying this, he summoned the Aether and attacked them. It seemed peace was not an option.

"Was that Thor? And Clark?" Tony asked Jarvis.

"I believe so, sir. And they brought reinforcements."

An Asgardian armada was crossing the portal, the Viking-like ships flying fast, firing their cannons against the red and black Dark Elven ships. Finally some help around here! Tony flew forward, targeting the closest enemy ship and blasting it with his repulsors, before maneuvering to avoid a yellow energy blast.

"I'm on your side!" he yelled, landing on an Asgardian ship for a moment to reprimand them.

The big axe the even bigger Asgardian lifted seemed to indicate he hadn't really heard him.

"Volstagg, stop!" yelled a very attractive lady by his side. "It is that metal man Thor keeps talking about! You know, the weird one."

Weird one? What sort of lies was Thor spreading through the galaxy?!

"Oh, apologies, Metal Man," Volstagg said, embarrassed. "I will just help the ground effort. You can handle the sky."

And saying this, he jumped down, apparently not concerned that they were hundreds of meters up in the sky.

"Wait for me!" the lady warrior said, before jumping too. "Fandral, you and Metal Man can deal with the ships!"

"It is you and me, Metal Man!" a blond Asgardian said, turning his ship.

"It's Iron Man!" Tony yelled, before taking off in pursue of a Dark Elven ship. "And I'm not weird at all!"

"It seems you are famous on Asgard as well, sir."
Somehow, that didn't make Tony feel any better.

Thor was thrown against a car by an Aether blast, the vehicle bending under him. Malekith's troops were being handled, his ships were being countered, but the Aether was a problem that they were struggling to solve.

Clark was using all his speed to dodge the blasts, knowing they would hurt him a hell of a lot more than they hurt Thor, but the ever-changing nature of the Aether made that complicated; it was not so different than fighting Liquid Geo, except Liquid Geo couldn't drain his energy just by touching him.

Dodging a spear made of Aether, Clark dashed as quickly as he could and blasted Malekith right in the chest, throwing him against a stone pillar. Thor tossed his hammer while Malekith was still in air, the extremely heavy weapon crashing against the Dark Elf like a mountain; Malekith was tossed down.

But before hitting the ground, he simply disappeared.

"What?!" Thor asked, frowning.

Clark opened his mouth to answer it probably had something to do with the Convergence, but before he could Malekith appeared again, right behind him, his Aether-covered fist punching his face.

It hurt more than any other punch he had ever took and it tossed him back; but not to the ground. Clark felt only an extreme heat, before opening his eyes and seeing himself in a place that could very well have inspired the descriptions of Hell, complete with magma rivers, fire everywhere and creatures that seemed to be comfortably burning.

He was beyond shocked, though as soon as his mind whispered the word "Muspelheim" to him, his body passed through another rift; he fell against the ground, back in London.

"Good to see you, Clark," he heard Natasha's voice saying. He opened his eyes to see the lovely red-haired assassin smiling at him, while holding a very big cannon. "Had fun in your trip?"

"Is that a fucking bruise on your face?!!" Clint asked, very much alarmed by the whole situation.

"It's, um, I'll explain later!" he said, taking off with a parting wave to Natasha, when he saw Thor and Malekith falling from a skyscraper on the other side of the city.

Clark crossed the distance in the blink of an eye, noticing Thor was not holding his hammer for some reason; that reason might be why he could hear something breaking the speed of sound as it flew through the city in their direction. He arrived at the same time Mjölnir did, going back to Thor, and suddenly Thor dashed down quickly, bashing Malekith with his hammer, now able to fly again.

Malekith, surprisingly, blocked the blow, sustaining his body in the sky with a cloud of Aether. Electricity clacked across his body, but he opened his arms and tossed Thor up against the building; he was not quick enough to avoid Clark's punch, though.

He clashed so strongly against Malekith that the shockwaves broke windows all around. The Dark Elf flew back, but instead of going over the city, he crossed another rift, disappearing; Clark followed him immediately, arriving at a frozen world.
To his surprise, Thor was already there, trading blows not with Malekith, but with a white, huge monster, set on eating him; a monster Malekith clashed against, still flying back because of Clark's punch. Both of them crashed against the ice mountain behind them and suddenly everything began to shake.

"Avalanche!" yelled Thor, unnecessarily, as pieces of ice of the size of trucks began to fall.

However, they never hit the ground, disappearing alongside them, when a rift opened, tossing them back to Svartalfheim. Clark, Thor, Malekith and pieces of ice fell against the ashes of the Dark World, rolling the hill before they could control their flight. And as soon as they could, the three of them flew against each other.

There was a never-ending storm of punches, red energy attacks and hammer blows, the sounds so loud that they echoed through the Dark World; Clark was pretty sure he was on the receiving end of some of those hammer blows, but at the moment he didn't care.

Getting some distance, Thor alongside him, Clark's eyes flashed red; he unleashed his heat vision, just as Thor unleashed a powerful lightning bolt.

Except none of the attacks reached Malekith, disappearing into a rift opened inches away from the Dark Elf's chest.

That was not good.

Steve had a second, maybe, to hide behind his shield when a very familiar pair of red energy beams and a blue lightning bolt appeared out of nothing, devastating the battlefield around him, sending the Dark Elves flying in all directions.

"Those two idiots!" he heard an Asgardian woman yell. "They could have killed someone!"

That was very true, but since some Dark Elves were still fighting he didn't have much time to be mad. He got up, ready to continue the fight, but before he could he saw Thor and Malekith appearing out of nothing, falling heavily on the ground, trading punches.

The Dark Elf managed to kick Thor away and then blast him with that red cloud, before looking up; following his eyes, Steve saw the Alignment was complete.

"Attack! Do not let him unleash the Aether!" the Asgardian lady screamed and everyone was already moving to intercept, but there wasn't time.

A huge red cloud formed around Malekith, growing quickly, taking the form of a spiraling hurricane; a hurricane that reached for the portals in the sky, completely closing itself around Thor and Malekith.

"Oh, no," whispered the Asgardian woman. "It has begun."

Steve could only assume that she was referring to the end of their universe; he didn't know what to do.

Thor groaned in pain, spiting blood while he got up. Everything around him was red, fearsome, dark. The Aether was beginning to change the universe.

"Darkness return, Asgardian," he heard Malekith saying, barely able to see him. "Have you come
"I've come to accept your surrender," Thor said, calling Mjölnir, feeling the weapon traveling to him from who knows where.

Mjölnir or not, Thor would fight. He lunged forward, arm raised to punch Malekith, but something pulled him back; it took him a second to understand what. They were immersed in the Aether, everything there was under Malekith's control. The Aether grabbed him and tossed him down, face first.

He felt Malekith's armored foot stomping his head.

"You presume too much, boy." The foot pushed him down and Thor grunted, trying to fight back. "I was here before your race even existed. I was here before your very universe existed. And you believe you can stop me from saving my people?"

Thor was lifted in the air, completely under Malekith's control, until the Dark Elf grabbed him by the hair and forced him to look into his pitch-black eyes.

"Know this, Asgardian: it brings me great joy to have Bor's descendant here to witness your end."

Saying this, Malekith tossed him back and walked to the center of the Aether tornado, looking up. Thor could see the Aether entering the other Realms, infecting the Yggdrasil, where it would seep all around the universe until nothing of their universe would be left standing.

Malekith opened his arms and began to float, guiding the Aether to fulfill its purpose; and there was nothing Thor could do.

"Jarvis, what the hell is happening?" Tony asked. "Selvig? Anyone?!"

"My readings indicate that the energy we are witnessing is somehow changing matter, sir."

"To what?"

"Dark matter."

Tony had no words, he could only watch as the red cloud oozed into the portals, while he observed from the sky. This would be, literally, the end of the universe. Game-over. And he wasn't talking about Earth or even their solar system, it was the End, capital "E".

"Alright, everyone, listen to me!" Tony yelled on his radio. "Concentrate everything we got on that thing!"

"Will it help?" Steve asked, sounding strangely defeated.

"I have no idea, but I have no intention of going out without trying!"

Saying this, Tony powered his repulsors and flew directly at the red tornado, dead-set on passing through to continue the fight. The moment he touched it, however, the red dust simply tossed him aside, launching him against the college building.

"TONY!" Steve yelled.

God dammit! This was not good, Tony thought, assessing the damage on his suit. He couldn't cross that thing, not without turning his suit, and himself, into dust. Maybe someone stronger? He
couldn't see Superman anywhere and Thor and the Hulk were inside that mess.

"Steve, pass your radio to some Asgardian there!" he yelled.

There was a second, then a woman spoke. "What?"

"Look, I'm going to be blunt, unless you can cross that red stuff we are all going to die. Can you?"

Silence.

"I cannot."

Tony Stark sighed and closed his eyes.

"Kelex, where the hell are we?!" Clark asked, flying through unknow sky.

"I believe this is Vanaheim, sir."

Oh, great, stupid rift! "Can you find me another rift?"

"Keep going forward, sir."

Clark did as he was told and in seconds he was flying through another sky; not Earth's as well.

"Oh, my god, what is this place?" he whispered, feeling a truly cold chill fill his body.

It was dark, darker even than Svartalfheim, and somehow the cold was even more piercing than Jotunheim, full of mist and shadows. This was not a place he wanted to be.

"Another rift!"

"Go up."

Clark dashed up, feeling relieved as ever when he felt the warmth of Earth's sun; a feeling that quickly disappeared when he saw what was happening. He exploded downwards, going to the middle of the Avengers and a group of Asgardians close to the Aether tornado.

"Clark!"

"Kal!"

"Where is Thor?" Clark asked.

"Inside," Steve answered. "But none of us can get in, that thing is too strong."

"Can you?" Tony asked, approaching him.

Clark hesitated; he didn't know. The Aether was not only powerful, it was particularly harmful against his physiology. He had no idea if he could get in and, even if he could, how long he would survive in there.

But they didn't really have an option.

Nodding, his expression completely serious, Clark took the Aether Chamber in his hands.

"Sir, I must warn you, there is a high probability you won't survive this," Kelex said.
Everybody around looked at him, shocked.

"If I don't do this, Kelex, there is a high probability none of us will survive this," he answered.

Clark looked at his friends for a last time, smiling at them, them looked up; and took off. He flew so fast that in a matter of seconds he was seeing Earth from the space. He closed his eyes for a moment, basking in the sunlight, recharging his energies completely. Then, looking down with resolute eyes, Clark advanced. He could feel the atmosphere burning around him as he reentered the planet, but he completely ignored that, focused only on the goal; he prepared himself.

Then clashed against the Aether.

He felt pain beyond anything he had ever experienced, his very skin cutting when he passed through the walls of Aether; he could feel his muscles losing their power, his senses diminishing, his ability to fly vanishing, but he kept going, using all his force of will. He raised his arm.

And stabbed Malekith on the back with the Aether Chamber.

Clark crashed against the ground and didn't see anything anymore.

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Thor had his eyes completely wide now. Kal had just punched a hole in the Aether tornado with his own body and clashed with all he had against Malekith; the Dark Elf fell hard against the ground, breaking it with a powerful bash.

And impaled in his back was the Aether Chamber.

The hit alone was enough for Malekith to lose his hold over Thor, but the presence of the Aether Chamber did more than that; it was absorbing the Aether from inside Malekith against him will. For the first time since he got there, Malekith was not in complete control over the Infinity Stone. That meant two things: Thor could move.

So could the Hulk.

The spherical prison Malekith made for the Hulk crumbled in seconds when the enraged green monster forced his way out, more furious than Thor had ever seen him. Malekith had only time to look terrified, before the Hulk delivered an uppercut so powerful that the Dark Elf was sent flying out of the Aether tornado.

Thor grinned; now it was his turn.

Opening his hand, he recalled Mjölnir; the hammer opened a path through the weakened Aether and was in his hand in a moment. Then, spinning it, Thor flew. He broke the Aether barrier and went high up in the sky, passing a spinning Malekith on his way up. And then, using every single bit of power he possessed, Thor summoned all the storms he possibly could.

The sky became a black dome of hurricanes and lightning.

Thor raised Mjölnir, absorbing all that strength; and hammered Malekith's head on his way down.

BOOOOOOOOM!

The bright glow of lightning could be seen from all Nine Realms.

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Odin felt the power of Mjölnir all the way from Asgard; he smiled. It was finally over. Thor had
defeated Malekith, this time permanently. Words failed to express how proud he was at him in that moment.

And how proud he was of Loki.

Despite what he might demonstrate, Odin loved his adopted son. He took him in when he was baby, raised him, taught him… And when the time was right he would've helped him reclaim the throne he was born to rule, Jotunheim's, so he and Thor could lead the Nine Realms in peace and prosperity for millennia.

Nothing happened as he planned.

Loki found out he was adopted before Odin and Frigga had the chance to tell him and he didn't know what to do with that new information. And at the same time, Odin fell into Odinsleep, Thor was banished and Laufey was scheming to start another war. Before he could set things right, Loki fell from the Bifrost, apparently to his death, only to return even more poisoned by his anger.

Odin had no choice but to send him to prison. It brought him no pleasure, no satisfaction, but a King had to be fair and Loki had attacked and killed thousands of innocents. That could not go unpunished. As a King he had no doubt; as a father, sadly, he had all of them.

He was prepared to be hated forever by his son, but maybe, just maybe, Loki would learn something while in prison. Maybe he would allow that thick head of his to understand that he had made a terrible mistake and he had to atone for that.

He was not sure that had happened, only Frigga could talk to him these days, but whatever Loki was thinking, he helped Thor to defeat Malekith. Odin was no fool, he knew the only reason he helped was to avenge Frigga and, of course, to try to escape; but the fact that he still cared so much for his adopted mother gave him hope.

That was why he felt cold when he saw a Einherjar approaching the throne with a grim expression; and Loki's horned helmet in his hands.

"Forgive, my liege, but I bear grave news," the Einherjar said, holding he helmet so he could see. "It seems Loki–"

"Learned nothing from all this," Odin finished, sighing.

"Learned nothing from all this," Odin finished, sighing.

The Einherjar widened his eyes for a second, before disappearing completely; Odin heard a blade cutting the air from behind him. The gall of this kid! Not even turning, Odin unleashed his power, stopping the dagger, and Loki, without moving a finger. Then he turned.

Loki was immobilized, frozen in place by Odin's magic, capable of only widening his eyes and speaking.

"And here I thought you were beginning to regret your actions," Odin said, taking the dagger from Loki's gloved hand.

"Please, I have learned everything I need," Loki scoffed, the action somehow dampened by his immobility.

"And yet here we are," Odin replied, gesturing towards Loki paralyzed form. He walked closer to him. "Your brother just defeated Malekith. All the Nine Realms witnessed him saving the universe. You could have shared that honor, earned your forgiveness. But you chose to fake your death and try to assassinate me."
"At least I'm honest!"

"No, you are not, God of Lies," Odin said, immediately. "Especially when it concerns your own faults."

"The Allfather, knower of everything, omnipotent and omniscient!" Loki recited, mockingly. "How tiring must be to be right all the time!"

Odin smiled, sadly. "If only you knew how many mistakes I made, Loki… You were the most recent."

Loki glared at Odin, losing his composure for a moment. Odin sighed.

"You are not the mistake, Loki, what I did was," he explained, to a suddenly silent Loki. "I kept the truth from you, tried to protect you, and that only made things worse. I failed you, you are right to be angry. But either you like it or not, I AM YOUR FATHER!"

His son recoiled from the sudden outburst as best as he could while paralyzed.

"I love you, Loki, even if you never love me anymore. And that is why I will do whatever it takes to teach you, no matter how harsh I must be. You killed innocents. You almost destroyed not only Midgard, but Jotunheim before that. You tried to murder your own brother. Believe me, Loki, if I did not love you, you would be dead a long time ago."

Loki seemed incapable of speaking, just staring at Odin in silence.

"Now I want to know the real reason of what you are doing here."

"I came to assassinate you," Loki answered, immediately.

"Doubtful. You might be arrogant, Loki, but you are not stupid. You know you do not stand a chance against me, not even with your tricks."

The God of Mischief grinned. "Funny you should call me arrogant, Father. I am beginning to think it is a family trait, passing even to adopted members."

Throwing insults now? Odin almost sighed; he should have expected this. To his surprise, however, Loki continued talking.

"You see, you believe yourself unbeatable. And as far as I know you might very well be. But we all have flaws, Father, and yours is the arrogance to think you are always a step ahead."

"I saw through your trick, did I not?" Odin asked, showing him the dagger Loki used to try his assassination.

"But what if that was the trick?" Loki countered, grinning. "There are a lot of interesting beings in the Dark World, Father. Spiders that eat light, sea creatures big enough to feed on gods, dream eaters… There is also a flower so poisonous that it can even put gods to sleep with one single touch. Guess what I found while I was on Svartalfheim?"

As he said that, his eyes looked down to the dagger Odin was holding; except that, after a brief green glow, it wasn't a dagger he was touching anymore. It was a black flower.

"So much for arrogance, huh?" Loki said, seeing the black tendrils flowing through Odin's unprotected hand and arm, like a moving tattoo.
Odin dropped the flower immediately, but the harm was already done. He had lost the sensibility on his arm, and the poison was quickly traveling towards the rest of his body; he couldn't stop the infection anymore.

"Of course, the flower was barely alive when I found it," Loki continued. "Svartalfheim is not the place full of life it once was. That is why I stopped by your Vault first and used a spark of the Eternal Flame to put some life back into it. Do not worry, it will not kill you, you are far too powerful for that. But it is getting difficult to sustain this magic, isn't it?"

Saying this, Loki used all his power and broke Odin's hold over him, quickly banishing him against a pillar; Odin tried to defend himself, but his body just wouldn't listen.

"The hard thing was keeping you from noticing that the dagger was not really a dagger, but illusions were always my specialty. And with Heimdall's eyes on Midgard, well…"

Loki crouched near Odin, still smiling. Odin was trying to move, to do something, anything, but the poison was too strong. If only he could keep Loki talking for a few minutes, he could flush the toxicity away with his powers, but until then…

"Arrogance, Father. My fatal flaw, Thor's fatal flaw… And yours too." He touched Odin's face, almost with care. "That is why I better hurry, before you can overpower this poison."

Odin stared at Loki with his one eye, expecting a dagger against his throat, but Loki began to chant a spell. He could feel the dimensional energy flowing, Loki's own focus, even Asgard's energy being used.

"Mother really is the one who developed this spell," Loki explained. "I read her grimoires and I had a lot of time to perfect it while in my cell, didn't I? I certainly didn't spend all that time doing nothing."

There was a green light and runes began to appear all over Odin's body. He couldn't tell what the purpose of the spell was, at first, but suddenly he felt weak; he was sealing his Asgardian Force, just like he did with Thor when he banished him.

"Like I said, I won't kill you," Loki said, looking into Odin's eyes, serious. "But I will send you away for a while. Something is coming, sooner than we think. Something terrible. And you and Thor, with that misplaced sense of honor, will not be able to prepare Asgard as it should be prepared. I will. But don't worry, when it arrives, I will come to get you."

Odin widened his one eye, trying to speak, trying to ask what Loki was talking about, but before he could his son touched his forehead.

"Sleep."

The Allfather closed his eye and didn't see anything anymore.

Clark was still feeling pain, even after being under the sunlight; the Aether really did a number on him. But at least it wouldn't be a problem anymore, now safely trapped into the Aether Chamber and ready to go back to Asgard.

"I will make sure this tale is told all across the Nine Realms!" Thor exclaimed, gathering around the Avengers to say goodbye. "What a battle it was!"

"Just make sure to tell them that my name is Iron Man and that I'm not weird. Come on, look at me,
"I'm already stuff of legends all by myself!"

"That you are, Stark," Natasha agreed, maybe not in the sense Tony meant.

"Do not worry, friend, I will!" Thor guaranteed, turning to talk to Jane.

According to him, he would come back right away, this time to stay. Clark wasn't sure what Odin would say about that, but Thor was stubborn, so he would probably get his way. Sif, Fandral and Volstagg, however, were going back for good; or until a good fight presented itself on Earth again.

"Make sure to practice Torquasm-Rao every day, Kal," Sif said, as she approached to say goodbye. "If I find out you are being lax with your training, I will come back and personally beat you up."

"If it makes you visit…” Clark joked and Sif punched him; she was smiling, though.

"Asgard is in disarray right now, it need us, especially if Thor intends to stay here for longer. With the Dark Elves attack, Frigga's condition and the escape of several criminals from the prisons we will have our hands full." She looked at him and smiled again, kindly. "But as soon as I can I will accept your invitation."

Then she kissed him on the cheek – punched his chest real hard – and turned to the place where the Dark Elf prisoners were contained, so Heimdall could take them to Asgard. Fandral and Volstagg said their goodbyes too, also with punches, and left with Sif on the Bifrost.

"You are not going to Asgard?" Natasha asked, appearing out of nowhere. "You seemed very friendly with Lady Sif."

"She taught me a bit of martial arts. A Kryptonian one," Clark explained, fast, flushing for some reason.

By the way Natasha raised her eyebrows knowingly, he had fooled nobody.

"Maybe we could practice together some time, then," she said, grinning, using a very sultry voice that made Clark blush hard.

Yep, easy to embarrass, that was him; Natasha finally had him back to torture. Steve met his eyes as Natasha turned, nodding in understanding.

"Now do you see what I go through?" he asked and Clark laughed.

Tony was still hounding Thor, probably to make sure the Asgardian would really say good things about him when he told the stories, much to Jane's nuisance, who wanted some alone time with Thor before he left; Clark would not stick his nose there. Natasha, probably overhearing Steve's remark, was making him blush and stutter for some reason; was that a hundred dollar bill Clark saw Steve giving her? Clint was sitting with Bruce, eating a candy bar; he noticed Clark's look.

"Hey, Clark, how was the trip? Good?" he asked.

"Well, before our universe was almost destroyed, yeah, pretty much."

"Apocalypses always do ruin everyone's fun," Bruce agreed, still shaking a bit because of the transformation.

"How are you doing, Bruce? Alright?"

"Same as always, it will go away. How about you?" he asked, shrewdly, seeing that Clark was not
"It will go away. Kryptonians and the Aether… We don't do so well together."

"Good thing it's going far away, then, isn't it?" Clint said.

It really was, that was true. Clark only hoped that it would be kept safe; he would hate to face another alien set on destroying everything using the Aether.

Thor kneeled before his Father, respectfully bowing his head.

"You once said there would never be a wiser King than me," Odin said, standing in front of his throne, Gungnir in his hand. "You were wrong. The Alignment has brought all the Realms together. Everyone of them saw you offer your life to save them. What can Asgard offer its new King in return?"

He smiled, looking at his father. "My life."

Thor did not want to be king, nor he thought he was ready. A king would have allowed Jane to die, instead of giving Malekith the opportunity to reclaim the Aether while trying to save her. A king would not have released Loki, for any reason, giving his brother the opportunity to die a noble death and to redeem himself. A king would not have fought side by side with his companions, in the front lines of the battle, to save the Realms.

Once upon a time, Thor wanted nothing more than to be the King of Asgard, but he knew nothing back then. So little time had passed, especially to Asgardians, but Thor felt like a completely different man.

"Father, I cannot be King of Asgard," Thor continued, standing up. "I will protect Asgard and all the Realms with my last and every breath, but I cannot do so from that chair. Loki, for all his grave imbalance, understood rule as I know I never will."

His father widened his eye for a very brief moment, probably because of his last admission, but Thor meant it.

"The brutality, the sacrifice… It changes you," Thor said. "I'd rather be a good man than a great king."

There was a long silence, then Odin asked: "Is this my son I hear, or the woman he loves?"

Thor smiled.

"When you speak, do I never hear Mother's voice?" His father sighed, tiredly, recognizing the truth in his words. "This is not for Jane, Father. She does not know what I came here to say. Now, forbid me to see her or say she can rule by my side, it changes nothing."

Odin sat down, sighing again.

"One son who wanted the throne too much… Another who will not take it. Is this my legacy?"

"Loki died with honor," Thor assured him, remembering his brother's sacrifice. "I shall try to live the same. Is that not legacy enough?"

There was a long silence again, then Odin nodded. Thor looked down at Mjölnir, the weapon his father gifted him so he could rule Asgard; he offered it back. It pained him to do so, but it was a
trade he was willing to make.

His father waved his hand. "It belongs to you, if you are worthy of it."

"I shall try to be."

For a long time both of them stared at each other.

"I cannot give you my blessing," Odin started, "nor can I wish you good fortune."

"I know," Thor answered, sadly, even if understanding. He turned to leave.

"If I were proud of the man my son had become," Odin continued, making Thor stop, "even that, I could not say." Thor looked back at his father. "It would speak only from my heart."

Odin smiled at him.

"Go, my son."

"Thank you, Father," Thor said, feeling warmth inside him as he left the throne room.

Leaving before he could see a strange green glow inside Odin's eye.

"No, thank you."

Sif followed the pink-skinned servant as she entered the building, Volstagg at her side, looking carefully around. The place was big, but cramped, full of every single object one could imagine. Rare objects, valuable ones.

And, also, specimens.

Plants, animals… people. Sif had to clench her hand tight, so she wouldn't break those tanks.

"I present to you," the servant began, doing an overly-elaborated greeting gesture, "Taneleer Tivan, the Collector."

Sif looked at the man approaching. She knew what to expect, but even so the appearance of the man was weird. The Collector was an older man, clad in expansive clothes, with white fur on his shoulders. His hair was also white, pushed back and up, and his lips had make-up on them.

It wasn't his appearance that made her recoil, however, it was what the man was.

*Collector* wasn't just how Taneleer Tivan was called, it was what he was. He was obsessed with collecting rare things, to the point that his entire life and fortune was channeled into finding and acquiring said artifacts; whatever it took to get them.

Usually, Sif would not care about that. If the man was obsessed, that was not her business. The problem was, however, that the Collector also liked to collect living beings. Rare plants, animals in extinction and even unwilling people who were captured and taken there to be exposed in his collection like things.

So no, Sif wanted nothing more than to take her sword and decapitate that man; unfortunately, Tivan had his uses and they would need him now.

"Whoa… Oh! Asgardians, what an honor," Taneleer Tivan greeted them, bowing, making an
exaggerated greeting gesture even more elaborated than what his servant had done.

Sif didn't want to deal with that man longer than she had to.

"You know why we are here."

Tivan stood straight again, blinking.

"Of course," he answered, speaking each word very slowly. He approached them. "But if I may ask, why not keep it secure in your own Vault?"

"The Tesseract is already on Asgard," Volstagg answered, no trace of his usual good humor. "It is not wise to keep two Infinity Stones so close together."

"That's very wise," Tivan agreed, but he was barely interested in the conversation anymore.

So Sif showed him what he wanted to see. She moved her cape to the side and lifted the Aether Chamber, now glowing red because of the Infinity Stone trapped in it. Tivan approached and slowly, very carefully, picked it from her hands.

"I can assure you," he said, holding the Aether Chamber possessively, "it will be absolutely safe here, in my collection."

"See that it is," Sif threatened.

The Collector bowed again, while they turned to leave and hopefully never return. Before they could, however, Tivan spoke:

"There are whispers that a Kryptonian helped to capture the Aether," he said, in his very slow speech. "The last Kryptonian."

Sif felt herself fill with dread; she stopped, breathing deeply, and turned.

"Keep the Aether safe and your mouth closed."

The Collector bowed again, immediately, in his exaggerated gestures; Sif had a very bad feeling about this.

Hela observed the dark sky of her prison, Hel, especially crafted by Odin to keep her sealed in Niflheim; she was doing that for a long time now, without blinking, without moving, without breathing.

Hel was dark, cold, but most of all, it was boring. Predictable and tedious, forever unchanging. But not today. Today something had crossed the skies of the same Realm her prison was, someone, and it was such an event that Hela couldn't do anything else but stare at its direction.

It was a day to be remembered. She knew every speck of dust in that accursed prison, every particle of mist and ice. Nothing changed there. The air remained the same, there was no sound, no light, no new smells or sights… Until that moment. Until someone used the Convergence to pass through Niflheim and Hel.

Hela would never forget that feeling, as if a sun had shined upon that Realm for the very first time. She could feel his heat, taste his power, listen to his heart… Sense his life. She had never, in her very long life, felt such vitality.
It made her want to *snuff it out*; the Goddess of Death smiled for the first time in millennia.

Maxima was beyond bored. She was sitting on her throne, playing with her long bright red hair, as suitors approached her. Kings, princes, emperors, warriors, practitioners of the Mystical Arts… Beings of every corner of the universe arrived on that day on Almerac with entire entourages and presents and offerings.

And none of them could hold her interest for more than a second.

She was not interested in alliances or pretty baubles, Maxima had no use for that. Almerac was the center of an Empire that spanned thousands of worlds and she was the sole ruler. Queen absolute of an army so powerful that few would dare to challenge.

No, Maxima didn't want political or military power. She was not interested in trade routes or magical artifacts. There was only one thing that Maxima wanted: a worthy mate.

The Royal family of Almerac thrived because of this, it was the source of their strength. Powerful genes from powerful mates. It didn't really matter to her which race they were, as long as they were powerful Almeracian science was able to make it work. And Maxima? She was the most powerful Queen in ages, maybe ever.

She, more than any other Queen before her, deserved someone *outstanding*.

For a time, Maxima wondered if she should have pursued the Asgardians. Odin, and even his sons, were powerful. But Odin was not interested and the blond one, the one who liked to swing the hammer – damn it, she couldn't recall his name! – was still a runt back then. Maybe he had grown stronger? His brother was remarkable in his domain of the Mystical Arts, she remembered that, but he was thin like an arrow; Maxima liked a little more muscle.

Maybe she should pay them a visit again. At the very least they couldn't be any worse than the disappointment she was being forced to tolerate that day; perhaps she could try her luck with Odin again, she thought, grinning.

"My Queen, I have news!" one of her servants yelled, interrupting a long speech from a Kree suitor. She ran, passing the Kree entourage, and stopped at her throne.

"Speak," Maxima ordered, knowing she would not have interrupted if it wasn't important.

"There was a war on Asgard and then on Terra," the overly excited servant begun. "Apparently the Dark Elves weren't extinct at all and they returned to end our universe–"

"Please, girl, get to the point," Maxima sighed, tiredly. The last thing she needed now were reports of meaningless battles.

"They say there was a Kryptonian fighting amongst the Asgardians!" she finished, excitedly.

Maxima's eyebrows raised fast; a living Kryptonian? That was wonderful news! If there was a being worthy of her out there, it was a Kryptonian. Maxima grieved when she heard of their destruction, not only because an old and respected race had vanished, but because any chance she had to bear a child with such powerful genes was gone forever.

But maybe there was still a chance.

She got up fast from her throne, feeling full of energy, excited in a way she hadn't been in a very
long time. Her transparent green dress swayed as she walked, every step followed by the eyes of every man in the room, as it was expected; Maxima was the most beautiful woman in the universe, she never had any doubt about that. With pale skin, long red hair, a figure that exhaled sensuality and shining green eyes, Maxima was without a doubt an avatar of beauty in this universe.

And she was as powerful as she was beautiful; fitting for a Kryptonian, she thought, grinning.

"Y-You can't leave just like that!" someone yelled from behind her.

Maxima rolled her eyes and stopped, looking behind. It was the Kree suitor with the never-ending speech that she barely heard. Apparently he had more courage than she gave him credit for.

"And why, pray tell, I cannot leave my own palace?" she asked, raising a single eyebrow.

"B-Because I'm not done speaking yet. I believe a union between our Houses will be beneficial for us all! I have an old fortune, connection within the Kree military, influence--"

"So what you 'have,' Maxima interrupted, "belong to others?"

The Kree blushed for a moment, his blue cheeks becoming even bluer.

"Influence is power," he replied, raising his chin.

Maxima laughed, feeling tears on her eyes. She looked at him, raising both her eyebrows; then unleashed a powerful Psychic Blast that sent all his entourage to the ground, cracking the stone of her palace. And before he could even understand what was happening, she dashed forward, lifting him by the neck.

"No, my dear. Power is power," she whispered, close to his face.

And bashed him against the floor.

"Find everything you can about the Kryptonian!" she ordered her servants as she left the throne room, leaving a multitude of suitors properly scared behind.

It was time for Maxima to find her future mate.

Sanctuary was an extensive asteroid field lost in space, surrounded by stars and nebulas, floating in the eternal vastness of the universe. It was big enough to have gravity, even if potentialized by an artificial generator, and it had its own atmosphere. The asteroid field, however, was not known because of its landscape, but because of who owned it.

Thanos, the Mad Titan; the most powerful being in the universe.

The Other walked across the asteroid, approaching the floating throne of Thanos. It was turned away from him, as his master observed the vast space, even though he knew Thanos was aware he was there.

"I received news from the Black Or--"

"Where is the Aether?" Thanos interrupted, his voice echoing mightily.

The Other closed his eyes for a second, both intimidated and in awe of the raw power Thanos exuded by merely speaking.
"The Asgardians managed to stop Malekith from using it. There was no need for them to interfere in the battle," he answered, fast. "The Dark Elves were defeated and the Aether was taken back to Asgard. And then moved somewhere else."

"Where?"

"I-I do not know yet."

Thanos did not say anything in response, but his disappointment could be felt like fire touching his skin.

"We will find it! Now that the Reality Stone resurfaced–"

"I asked for the Stone, not for excuses," Thanos interrupted again.

The Other looked down, prepared to be erased from existence at any second; it was not him who failed Thanos, but he would gladly accept any punishment his master deemed necessary. But before that, there was a piece of information he needed to give.

"There was a Kryptonian fighting against the Dark Elves," The Other spoke, quickly, before he was killed. "One that somehow escaped the death of his race."

The pressure of sheer power that threatened to crush him at any second vanished; there was only silence. Then Thanos turned the throne to look at him. As always, The Other was in awe of his master. Fully clad in his golden armor, Thanos was an extremely intimidating being, his size alone dwarfing The Other. He was built of pure muscle, every fiber of his body a weapon by itself, and his face was harsh and threatening; it was impossible to stare at him and not feel small.

"Nobody escapes Death," Thanos uttered; then he smiled.

The Other was more afraid of his smile than he was of his stare; whoever this Kryptonian was, he was doomed.
Chapter 28 – Home Sweet Home

Clark sighed in relief when he entered his building, happy to finally be back at his home. It's not as if he didn't enjoy Asgard, but his brief vacation was pretty much ruined by the threat of destruction of the universe and things like that tended to get tiresome pretty fast. Add in that fact all the people that died, the destruction and the fight and he almost felt as if it was the second coming of the Kryptonian invasion.

But at least things were settled now and he could, finally, rest a bit.

Distracted, he got out of the elevator, tuned out the loud noises of New York City's evening, and made his way through the corridor, stopping right in front of his door to grab his keys; that's when he finally realized something was wrong. Someone was in his apartment, he could hear them, and unless Jessica had broken into his place with a bunch of electric tools he was pretty sure she wasn't the one to blame.

Alarmed, Clark quickly grabbed his keys and unlocked the door. What greeted him was not the peaceful environment he was hoping for.

Men in bright orange uniforms were running around his apartment, carrying every type of tools, breaking what seemed to be every single inch of his place. The floor had simply been removed, the walls were full of holes, the ceiling had exposed wiring. His furniture was nowhere to be seen. And the dust… So much dust, everywhere, to the point he needed his Kryptonian vision to be able to actually see through it.

What the actual fu—

"Hey, you can't come in here!" one of the working men said, noticing him by the door, speaking in a thick Russian accent.

That snapped Clark out of his daze.

"This is my apartment!" he exclaimed. "Who are you people??"

The man stopped to hammer his wall for a second to look at him. Then he grabbed a piece of paper from his pocket.

"Are you Mr… Kunt?"

"Kent! Clark Kent!"

"Oh! Then I'm supposed to pass you a message. Let's see…" He began to look into his pockets again and Clark sighed in frustration, still unable to stop staring at the men destroying his apartment. "Here!"

He gave Clark the note.

"I'm at Trish's and your stuff is with me. J.J."
That was it; he even turned the note to see if there was something on the back, but no. No explanation about what those people were doing in his apartment, no reason why his place was being torn apart, absolutely nothing. Typical Jessica.

"Hey, who are you people and what are you doing here?" Clark asked the man who gave him the note.

"Renovation," the man answered, starting to hammer the wall again.

Clark's eye twitched. "Let me rephrase that… Who is paying you to do this?"

"Boss Stark," he mumbled.

And suddenly, it all made sense; which said a lot about the person responsible for this, because nothing about this should make any sense. Tony was pretty much the only person he knew with no personal barriers whatsoever. He could just imagine him visiting his apartment while he was on Asgard and deciding on a whim that it needed some renovation. And the result was this.

"Tony Stark told you to do this?" Clark asked. The man nodded. "He is paying you?" He nodded again. "How long it will take?" This time, he shrugged; Clark's eye twitched again. "Make an educated guess."

"A week? Two months to finish the whole building."

If Tony wasn't still in London, Clark would have some very especial words for him.

Jessica Jones was eating a bowl of cereal, barely listening to Trish's huge TV, while trying un successfully to check her e-mails. Her hand was already trembling with barely controlled rage as she typed her password for the 10th time.

Wrong password.

For a second there, Clark's notebook was in serious risk of flying through the window, but she managed to contain her first impulse. How could it be wrong? She had exactly one password for every single account she ever created in her life, taking into consideration certain changes demanded from site to site, but they were all basically the same. And now this thing was telling her it was wrong?!

Breathing deeply, she forced herself to calm down. It wasn't a big deal, there was no reason to lose her cool, all she had to do was change the password. Which was what she proceeded to do, very aware that her cereal was turning into a homogeneous paste while she was forced to waste her time. But there was no way around it, not when the stupid account wouldn't accept her password. So she changed it to her default password, the one she had already tried for ten consecutive times.

New password can't be the same as the old password.

That's when Clark's notebook flew through the window. She didn't mean to do it, it was like her arm moved by itself, but the thing was already airborne when the rational part of her mind realized what she did; and how much it would cost her to buy Clark another notebook. Jessica jumped towards the window in a futile attempt to try to save the damn thing, several curses leaving her mouth as she did it.

"Son of a b--AHHHH!" Jessica yelled, jumping back, when Clark appeared out of nowhere and entered through the window.
Clark Kent in the flesh, holding his own tossed notebook in his hands and with a very upset expression on his face.

"Shit, thank god you grabbed it!" Jessica exclaimed, relieved, then she punched his chest. "And don't scare people like that, you asshole!"

He looked very slowly at what he was holding and then back at her.

"Dare I ask why my notebook was falling from the 15th floor?" he questioned, putting the computer safely back on the table.

"Look, it wasn't my fault, okay?" she defended herself, knowing very well it really was.

"Is Trish home?" he asked, also knowing very well that she wasn't.

"No..."

"Then I'm pretty sure it is," he concluded, feigning a smile at her. "But let's put this away for a second and talk about something a little more important. Like: what the hell is going on with my apartment?!

Oh, that. She knew there was a reason Clark was in a bad mood.

"Look, it wasn't my fault, okay?" she said, again, realizing she was just repeating herself when the words were already out of her mouth.

"Was Trish at my home?" Clark asked, ironically, and she punched him again.

"It was that asshole's fault, Stark!" Jessica exclaimed. "He broke into your apartment the day you traveled and next thing I know he bought the building and a lot of guys are just breaking everything!"

"Just like that?" Clark asked.

"Yeah!" Jessica confirmed.

"And you had absolutely nothing to do with his decision to do that?" he inquired.

"Of course not!" she denied.

"He just couldn't be stopped?" he pressed.

"When I realized what was happening it was already too late," Jessica defended herself.

"Hummm… So then why is your apartment also being renovated by Stark?"

Jessica just stared at him for a long minute.

"Look, it wasn't my fault, okay?!"

Clark just sighed, dropping on the chair. "Jessica, I don't have a place to stay! You know that!"

"You can stay here, Trish wouldn't mind," she offered, knowing very well her sister would be thrilled at her invitation; on another hand, maybe that wasn't a good idea at all.

"And I'm sure Tony would let me stay at the Avengers Tower too, but, come on, Jessica, you can't
"First off, Stark was the one who threw you out," she corrected him, grabbing her bowl of cereal and tossing the disgusting paste in the sink. "I just managed to throw myself out from my own apartment, when I convinced him to renovate my apartment as well, but he was dead set on renovating yours. And second… Clark, our apartments were garbage. I know it, you know it, the upstairs neighbors who could see it through the hole in your ceiling know it. If Stark is willing to pay for it, hell, let the guy have his fun!"

He considered her words for a second, then he sighed again, nodding, no doubt recognizing her superior arguments.

"But you should have warned me first."

He just had to have the last word, didn't he?

Jessica felt her old anger riled her up. "And how exactly should I have done that? You said you were leaving in a few days, you said you were going to keep me posted! Surprise, surprise, next thing I know you are already on Asgard! And then there is that."

She grabbed the remote and changed the channel, going back to the news; the real source of her crankiness that day. The images on the TV, recorded with a series of different smartphones and pieced together by the news channel, showed a bunch of portals opening in London's sky. It also showed Thor, Superman and the Avengers fighting against yet another alien force, a fight that ended up with Clark unconscious, a hell of a lot of broken things, but thank god, with victory for the earthlings.

"We are back with John Jonah Jameson," said the newswoman, her voice grating on Jessica's nerves. "Mr. Jameson, what is your opinion on the Avengers statement that this was not in fact an invasion, but just a prison breakout on Asgard?"

"What is my opinion? This is hogwash, that's my opinion! The Avengers are a menace! But you know what really is a menace? Aliens! This is the third large scale invasion against our planet and yet, we are apparently happy in having more aliens living among us! Thor, Superman, that big green monster that my sources guarantee it can only be a Martian… They are menaces and they have to be dealt with!"

"But weren't they the ones who saved our world all three times?"

"If it weren't for them, there would be no invasion! No more, I say! It's time for us upstanding citizens to put an end to this! No more illegal aliens, no more Avengers, no more!"

Jessica turned the TV off and looked at Clark, pure murder in her eyes; Clark flinched.

"Now, tell me, buddy, when exactly should I have warned you that Stark was renovating your apartment? When you left to Asgard without telling me, even though you said you would? When you were doing who knows what on some planet out there? Or when you came back to fight another invasion and almost got yourself killed?"

Clark sighed and looked down.

"Okay, that's my fault, I admit that," he said. "But I had good reasons! Jane, that's Thor's girlfriend, needed help. A parasitic alien artifact got in her and we had to find a way to take it out before she died. And then one thing led to another and the Dark Elves attacked, trying to destroy the universe so they could bring back theirs."
Jessica wouldn't pretend she understood what Clark was trying to say, but by the look of things he did have good reason. Not that it mattered, she was pissed anyway. Jessica had exactly two friends and one of them was her sister; she couldn't just shake the worrying feeling that filled her when Clark put himself in those situations. And she didn't like that one bit.

"So that story about an Asgardian prison breakout?" she asked.

Clark's expression could only be interpreted as a politer way to say "fucking bullshit".

"Like I said, this was serious," Clark replied, looking more tired than she ever remembered seeing him. "When I said those guys were trying to end the universe, I meant literally." He sighed. "We were lucky to stop them in time."

Well, his day was apparently a bit busier than hers, Jessica realized. And the universe almost ended while she watched TV drinking cheap beer… If that didn't put things in her life into perspective, she didn't know what would. Shaking her head to dispel the unpleasant feeling, Jessica grabbed the cereal box.

"Want some?" she asked and Clark shrugged.

She filled two bows and sat down on the sofa, turning the TV on again, but changing channels quickly; something about J. J. Jameson made her want to punch stuff.

"So you're staying here tonight?" Jessica asked as Clark sat by her side.

"Nah, I think I'll go see Ma tonight," he answered, eating his cereal. "She must be worried."

Jessica had forgotten Superman was a mama's boy.

"Where is Trish?" he asked.

"Where do you think? The moment that ship appeared in London she ran to the station for an emergency broadcast of 'Trish Talk'. You know, one of these days she is going to annoy you for an interview."

Clark smiled. "What, she is going to go to the roof of the station's building, smoke a cigarette and meet Superman there?"

"Or, you know, you could call her," Jessica suggested. "Half of the interviews she does are done like that."

"I'll think about it."

They stayed in silence after that, as Jessica changed channels to find something decent to watch. She would never admit it, but she missed this. It was one thing to stay in silence alone, it was another thing completely different to share a comfortable silence with someone else. People tended to annoy Jessica, always did, but Clark somehow made her relax; maybe that was why she broke into his apartment so much.

"Thor and Steve are coming to New York tomorrow night," Clark said, suddenly. "I invited them to go out, drink a couple of beers or something. Want to come?"

She honestly thought she had misheard him.

"When you say 'Thor and Steve', you mean the God of Thunder and Captain America?" she asked.
"How many people you know called Thor and Steve?" Clark asked, chuckling.

"Well, I really don't know any Thor, but I'm pretty sure I know some Steves," she answered. "But never mind that. Clark, how exactly are you doing this?!"

He frowned. "Doing what?"

Jessica rubbed her temples. "Let me put it like this… Every day when you go out wearing a pair of glasses and nobody recognizes you, a portion of my trust and respect for humanity dies," she said, dramatically, and Clark rolled his eyes. "But there is no way that a guy, that kinda looks like Superman wearing glasses, is going out with a guy who vaguely remembers Captain America and another dude that sort of looks like Thor and nobody is going to notice. It's just not gonna happen!"

Clark seemed to be considering that for the first time; then, he shrugged. "We'll work something out."

Jessica sighed, exasperated. "Fine, I'll go, just to laugh when this blows up in your face."

"That's the spirit!" he joked. "I think I have some spare pairs of glasses somewhere, maybe they can wear them."

She gave him the finger, going back to eating her cereal. She flipped through she channels for a while, but nothing good was on, so Jessica glanced at Trish's DVD piles.

"You're going to Smallville now or do you want to watch some Firefly?" she asked.

Clark thought for a bit.

"Let's watch Firefly."

In ancient times, people believed the heavens were filled with gods and monsters and magical worlds. Then, as time passed, those beliefs faded into myth and folklore. But now they knew the stories were true. All the worlds with names like Asgard do exist. And beings once revered as gods, like Thor, had returned, leaving humanity with more questions.

And an enormous mess to clean up.

Nobody on Earth understood that better than agent Phillip J. Coulson, or simply Phil Coulson to friends. He'd had seen with his own eyes the destruction Thor and the Destroyer left behind in New Mexico. He'd seen up close and personal the devastation Loki caused, being able to count himself amongst the God of Mischief's victims. And while he was not in New York when the Kryptonians invaded, he had seen what was left of the parts of town affected by the Black Zero Event and, after that, all the destruction caused by Superman and Zod.

While the destruction in the Old Royal Naval College at London was but a shadow of those other incidents, it was, nevertheless, a giant mess that SHIELD would have to clean up. The reason for that was simple: alien technology. The place was filled with remains of it. Energy rifles, grenades that created singularities, pieces or even entire sets of armor, remains of crashed ships, even some dead Dark Elves. Nothing could stay behind.

A single piece of that advanced technology in the wrong hands could be catastrophic. Those weapons were more powerful than anything they had on Earth, the very material they were made of was already something they couldn't replicate. That's not to say of the technology found on the crashed ships. The big one had been taken to Asgard, thankfully, but the remains of the ones they
dropped in the battle stayed behind and any part of them was worth *a lot*; the metal of their hulls, their engines, their weapons, their fuel, their cloaking device, the very programing language of the ship's computers… Nothing like that could ever be allowed to fall into the hands of SHIELD's enemies. And they were here to guarantee that it wouldn't.

Coulson pulled out from his thoughts when agent Grant Ward turned a whole box of debris on the floor.

"Don't say I never gave you anything," he joked, as Leo Fitz, one of his team's scientists, approached to scan it.

"Checking for alien spectrographic signatures one teeny rock at a time…" Fitz sighed, his thick Scottish accent permeating every word.

"Necessary precaution," Ward explained, before Coulson could. "We don't want anything alien getting in the wrong hands."

Exactly, Coulson mentally agreed, allowing his team to continue their work.

"Still, this is definitely the type of work a monkey could easily do," Fitz complained.

Ward just smirked. "You're our little monkey."

Not the words Coulson would have used to explain the necessity of their job, but it would do. Sometimes he missed working in the main leagues, side by side with the Avengers, but he knew the job he and his team were doing was just as important, if not as flashy. Scanning pieces of rock might be boring, but at least it was safe.

No one ever got impaled by a magical spear wielded by the God of Mischief while scanning rocks.

Unconsciously, Coulson rubbed the point where the blade had pierced him, vividly recalling that day as if it were yesterday. It was a blink of an eye and he was down; and he would have stayed down if not for Fury and Project T.A.H.I.T.I, a project based on alien technology that could heal even the most serious of injuries; a project so secret, that he, a living proof that it worked, had to conceal his "resurrection" even from the Avengers.

The prices he paid for being a secret agent… Compartmentalization, that should be SHIELD's key word. Everybody knew exactly what they need to know and nothing else. Paranoid, perhaps, but when dealing with the things they usually dealt with, Coulson could definitely understand.

Leo Fitz could complain all he wanted, but maybe the next tiny rock he scanned revealed the secrets for another SHIELD project that would eventually save someone's life. Not that he would know about it, if he ever did.

"You know, Coulson, you guys may think it's old news, but it's new… *news* to everybody else," Skye quipped, passing behind him with a bunch of debris on her arms. "So, Asgardians are aliens from another planet that visited us thousands of years ago—"

"Or more," Coulson added, following her.

"—And because we couldn't understand aliens, we thought they were gods?" she finished.

"That's where our Norse mythology comes from," Coulson agreed. "Complete with Asgardians, giants and elves."
"Wow, that's too crazy! Do you think other deities are aliens too? I mean, take Superman, I would totally worship him if I didn't know any better!"

His young, very young, protégé… Still thinking with hormones most of the time. Coulson had complete faith in his new addition to the team, her hacking skills were incredible and, more important than anything, she was brave and willing to learn. He would still make a proper agent of her yet.

It didn't mean he enjoyed the way her conversations sometimes went.

"I'm just saying, alien or not, I wouldn't mind praying to him a bit, you know?" she added, smiling dreamingly.

"I don't want to know," Coulson deadpanned, then sighed when he saw the amount of debris still left unanalyzed. "It'd be nice if, for once, Thor and his people sent down the 'God of Cleaning Up After Yourself'. They probably have a magic broom for this kind of thing."

"I just wished they'd left their alien ship behind," Skye said.

"So we can clean that up too?" Melinda May asked, stopping by their side.

That was a pragmatic view Coulson could share. Melinda May, his old friend and second in command, definitely understood something dangerous when she saw it; being "something dangerous" herself, maybe she had a healthier point of view than Skye's happy naivety.

"So we could go inside, take a peak under the hood, maybe take it for a spin!" Skye explained, excitedly. "Come on, you're telling me piloting an alien ship isn't on your bucket list?!"

He rolled his eyes. "I can't think of a single time when anything alien in human hands ended well."

His healing aside, that was very true. But by the little smile on Skye's face, he'd failed to get his point across.

"I wouldn't mind getting my human hands on Superman," she said, happily. "And Thor! Preferably at the same time." She sighed. "They are so dreamy…"

Coulson rolled his eyes again.

"Sure, they may be handsome, but—"

"No," Melinda interrupted, "they are dreamy," she said in her no-nonsense tone that left no room for further discussion.

Et tu, Melinda?

"We found something!" the excited voice of Jemma Simmons, with her British accent, called.

Coulson turned to the direction of the voice and walked fast, just in time to see Fitz grabbing a piece of metal to scan it properly; the beeping machine indicated it was indeed alien.

"Fitz, is that, um…?" Jemma asked, staring with interest.

"Definitely not from here," Fitz completed. "Another piece of the ship–Hey, what are you doing?"

Ward took the piece from his hands, sterilized it with his spray, and tossed into one of the security containers.
"Out of sight," Ward said, closing the container, "out of mind. That's why we are here. To keep everything under control."

And to keep every piece of alien technology away from the wrong hands, safe under SHIELD's protection. Coulson knew no better way to guarantee the safety of their planet.

Alexander Pierce cleaned his glasses as he gazed through the window of his office in the Triskelion. The world seemed so small from up there, so peaceful… He, better than anyone, knew that was a lie. There was no peace. The world was swirling into chaos and if nobody did anything about it, if nobody brought order to it, soon they wouldn't have a world to worry about anymore.

Fury's call to inform him about an alien invasion in London earlier that day was proof of that. Gone were the times when terrorists and organized crime were their main concern; now, they had threats from outer-space to deal with. Threats which they simply weren't prepared to deal with. Earth's nations needed to stop fighting amongst themselves, they needed direction and unity.

Earth needed HYDRA.

It was easy to dismiss an organization so vilified over the years, even Pierce himself had committed that mistake. After all, HYDRA grew strong inside the Nazis, under the command of Johan Schmidt, the Red Skull, archenemy of Captain America, the greatest hero the free lands had.

But what if they weren't wrong at all? What did the Red Skull wanted, beyond unity, beyond all Earth's nations following a single banner? A world with no more wars, a world full of order. Was that so bad?

Sacrifices, of course, had to be made. Nothing worthwhile ever came without effort. And there would always be those who would fight to their deaths to stop that from happening, so stuck in their ways that even changing for the better scared them. Good people, valuable people, but in the end, people who needed to be removed if they ever intended to create the world they deserved.

Nick Fury was one of them. He was Pierce's friend, he was the best Director he could've picked for SHIELD. A strong man, a man willing to do almost anything necessary to achieve his goals. Unfortunately, Pierce knew he would never take the last necessary step towards greatness and for that, he would need to go.

Steve Rogers, the famous Captain America, was another. Pierce didn't care that he was the one who got closer from defeating HYDRA for good, he didn't even care that he killed their supreme leader during WWII. He was a man worthy of respect, honorable, the ultimate soldier. But like Fury, he also didn't have what it took to accept HYDRA and would have to be dealt with eventually.

They just couldn't understand that now, more than ever, their world needed HYDRA's guidance. The universe was gazing at them, testing them, measuring their worth. First with Loki and the Chitauri, then with Zod and the Kryptonians and now with Malekith and the Dark Elves. All three times they escaped complete annihilation not because they were prepared, but because of the bravery and strength of a few people.

That needed to change.

The Avengers, the elite team Fury had gathered, couldn't be responsible for Earth's security. Sooner rather than later they would fail and Earth would fall. Pierce was sure of it, not because he thought little of them, but because no man alone should carry the world on his back. The Avengers
were deserving of every bit of respect he had and Alexander Pierce would be the first to admit that the world, and HYDRA, owed them everything. If he thought for a second they would accept, he would extend an invitation for them to join HYDRA.

He knew, however, they were too unruly for that. They would never bow down to the new order. So it would be with a heavy heart that HYDRA would discard them when the time arrived.

HYDRA needed to prepare the world for the new era. They needed to be ready to face what was beyond. Threats of the likes they'd never faced before and for that, more than ever in humanity's existence, they needed to unite. HYDRA was the only way to do that. But it would not be easy.

Humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom. But when that freedom was threatened, humanity tended to resist to its last breath.

Blood would have to be shed. A lot of it, from people Pierce had come to respect, but it was inevitable. Humanity would resist and because of that, HYDRA had to be prepared; something they had been doing since the end of WWII. SHIELD was taken from the inside by HYDRA. Their resources were HYDRA's resources. Every single piece of information, influence and knowledge they had belonged to HYDRA.

Even the alien attacks proved to be blessings in disguise. Technology of the kind they would take centuries to develop had simply fallen from the sky. And HYDRA used it to grow stronger. Asgardian, Chitauri, Kryptonian, Dark Elven… Every battle they won made them even more powerful.

Maybe powerful enough to finally challenge beings such as the Asgardians. Beings such as Superman.

The Scepter was maybe the most valuable piece of technology they had acquired and Baron Wolfgang von Strucker was making good use of it. It was a well of infinite knowledge and HYDRA was drinking from it since the Battle of New York. The Scepter was responsible for, amongst several other things, providing them the means to create an army of enhanced soldiers, soldiers that would carry their banner across the globe when they were ready.

But the first blood spilled in the war would be provided by Pierce's Project Insight.

It would most likely be the first bullet fired and, hopefully, the last as well. HYDRA would rid the world from any who would resist them, a few millions at a time, breaking the foundations of any force willing to fight back. Arnim Zola's algorithm would guarantee that. If everything went as planned, the Helicarriers would rain fire over HYDRA's enemies.

Alexander Pierce, however, was under no illusion it would end the war immediately.

After the first shot was fired, people would indubitably resist, as they always did. Those who were too blind to see HYDRA's superiority would try to fight back. Fury, a part of SHIELD, the Avengers… Superman.

He smiled, putting his glasses back. HYDRA would be prepared; they would not.

"Alright, try the glasses," Clark suggested to Thor, knowing very well what Jessica would say about that.

It was the day after the battle in London. Clark had spent the night in Smallville, being interrogated by his mother about what happened on Asgard and in London for a long time before
being allowed to actually sleep, and then he came back to the Avengers Tower. Thor, Steve and
Darcy had taken the Bifrost there, from London, and were waiting for him.

Tony was there too, Clark could hear him talking with Pepper on another floor, but he still hadn't
the chance to talk to him about the apartment. Depending on what he had to say, that could go
either way; Clark could end up thanking him or taking him for a quick fly without the suit.

He didn't quite know yet.

"As you say, my friend!" Thor smiled, grabbing the glasses and putting them on. "How do I look?"
Like the God of Thunder wearing glasses, Clark thought, imagining Jessica rolling her eyes.

"I don't think that will be enough," Steve mentioned, hesitantly.

"Yeah, me neither," Clark admitted.

"You should take you shirt off," Darcy suggested, leering; everybody turned to look at her. "Look,
he is pretty cut, I've seen it before. No one is going to notice his face if he is not wearing a shirt."

She looked at Clark and Steve.

"You two should too!" she added; Steve blushed.

Clark sighed. He could already see that Darcy would be no help at all. It was a pity Jane stayed in
London to work, because he was sure she would be useful. At least she had dressed Thor in Earth's
clothes, a simple shirt and jeans, which was something; Asgardian armor and a red cape would be a
lot harder to conceal.

"How about a hood?" Steve asked. "Or a hat. The long hair is a problem."

"Why is my hair a problem?" Thor questioned, suspicious.

"Guys don't usually have long hair," Clark explained. "Not anymore at least."

"Well, that is too bad!" Thor said, defensively. "But the hair stays!"

"Yeah, stay away from the hair!" Darcy agreed. "But seriously, take your shirt off."

"Okay, try the hood!" Clark interrupted, throwing him a hooded jacket.

He did and… Clark sighed. He looked like the God of Thunder wearing a hooded jacket.

"Perhaps that and the glasses?" Steve suggested.

Steve himself was wearing a cap, jeans and a simple blue shirt. Not the greatest disguise in the
world, but as long as he didn't go performing super-human tasks he was pretty sure no one would
make the connection. The problem was Thor and his very Viking appearance, boisterous way of
talking and general lack of knowledge about humanity.

And the flying hammer, of course, Clark couldn't forget the flying hammer. If for some reason
Mjölnir decided to follow Thor when they went out, things would become interesting indeed.

"Hood and glasses!" Thor exclaimed, looking himself in the mirror. "I feel like a human!"

"We are generally smaller, Point Break," Tony quipped, arriving at the room with Pepper. "But
you're already faking sight problems, so you are getting there. Steve, Clark... And who are you?"

Tony greeted them, smiling, then pointed at Darcy.

"I'm Darcy."

"That doesn't explain anything," Tony answered.

"She is a friend, Tony," Thor introduced her, happily. "Jane's servant!"

"I'm not a servant, I am her assistant!" Darcy exclaimed.

"What's the difference?" Tony asked, being promptly smacked by Pepper.

"It's nice to meet you, Darcy," Pepper smiled. "And it's nice to see all of you again as well! Clark, how is the apartment?"

Clark's eyes widened. Did Pepper know about that?! He was ready to bet all his money that this was Tony's fault! Looking at her eager, happy face, Clark felt any traces of the anger he had left disappear; he couldn't possibly be mad at Pepper, she was too kind.

"It's great!" he said, smiling in a way he hoped it seemed real. "Really, really great!"

"That's amazing!" Pepper cheered. "We weren't sure about doing it, but Tony wanted to surprise you. And, well, he did buy the building."

"Why did you buy the entire building?" Clark asked, looking at Tony.

He just shrugged. "It seemed simpler. I'm actually buying several buildings in Hell's Kitchen, so I can renovate them, make sure they are safe, so I can rent the apartments at a reasonable price later. The Battle of New York was not kind to that place."

Clark was truly surprised at the answer. Maybe Tony had done what he did on a whim, but he was actually trying to do something good. Steve and Thor noticed that too, mainly seeing Tony's rare embarrassment.

"You really are helping to renovate Hell's Kitchen?" Steve asked, surprised.

"Why, Cap, good actions weren't trademarked by you yet," Tony countered. "I'm actually trying to, but the patent office said I have to perform at least 50 before I can."

Steve rolled his eyes, not insisting on the conversation anymore; Thor didn't quite catch that Tony was embarrassed.

"That is great!" he exclaimed. "And you are also helping the parts of the city destroyed by Zod! That is a very good thing you are doing, friend!"

Clark almost laughed when he saw Tony grow even more embarrassed, his vision able to clearly see the blood running to his cheeks at an alarming speed.

"Yeah, well, enough about that!" Tony said, turning to Clark. "Just wait until the whole apartment is done, I spared no expances. It won't be, you know, an Avengers Tower, but it will be a hell of an improvement." He stopped, thinking. "Not that this is something to be proud of, really, your apartment was one step away from being a hobo's card box."

Pepper smacked him again, then smiled at Clark. "And don't you worry about the furniture, I
already ordered everything new!"

"Speaking of that, where is my furniture?" Clark asked.

"Where it belongs, in the gar–"

She smacked him for the third time. "It was a little… older than the norm–" she started, tactful.

"Older than the norm'" Tony exclaimed, interrupting her. "The fridge was actually from the Soviet Union!"

"A little older than the norm," Pepper repeated, almost roaring, "so we donated it and bought you some new ones!"

"Oh, you are going to love it, the TV is actually the size of your entire wall!" Tony said. "They only sell it in Japan, but I know a guy. We used to have one, but it hurt my eyes. Not a problem for you, of course, so go crazy!"

Clark smiled, imagining Jessica's reaction when they watched Firefly on that. It was a good thing she also healed faster than normal. Shaking his head, he tried to remember the important thing.

"Tony, I appreciate what you are doing, but–"

"No, no 'but'!" Tony stopped him. "It is a gift, accept it."

There were actually two problems in Clark's mind: one, he didn't like when people wasted money with him, especially that kind of money. And two, the small fact that he did all that without asking, basically throwing him out of his own apartment.

He just didn't know how to say all that without hurting Pepper's feelings.

"Tony, I appreciate what you are doing," he started again, "but it really wasn't necessary. And, you know, I also don't have a place to stay!"

Tony clapped his hands, excited. "Of course you do! Here! Bruce is already living here, he has an entire floor to himself, and it's going to be awesome! We can play games, we can test my suits in my lab/arena, we can prank each other… The other day I managed to finally catch Bruce with the cellophane wrapped toilet!"

There was a brief silence when all of them imagined the man who could turn into a green rage monster being caught in that prank.

"You made the Hulk pee in a cellophane covered toilet?! Are you some kind of imbecile?" Darcy exclaimed.

Clark wouldn't use those words, neither would Steve, but they had to agree with Darcy on that one.

"Hey, if someone can't take being covered in his own urine, by surprise, when peeing in the middle of the night, without turning into the Hulk, then that someone can't really function in society, can he?" Tony argued.

Nobody there was really sure how to answer to that.

"So what are you three doing there?" Tony asked, changing the topic since no one had anything else to add about that. "Why are you dressing up Thor?"
"We are going out for a drink!" Thor said, smiling brightly.

Tony turned to Pepper, his eyes sparkling.

"Don't even think about it, Tony," Pepper warned. "It took me an entire week to set this meeting! You are going!"

"But, Pepper, they are going out for drinks!"

She sighed. "You'll go to the meeting and if you behave and things work out well, we can leave early. Now I'm going to change, get ready to leave."

"Yeah!" Tony exclaimed, turning to them. "This is going to be awesome!"

Clark wasn't so sure about that; with Tony, there would be no way for them to pass unnoticed. Maybe they could go back to drink at the Tower.

"How long are you staying?" Tony asked Steve and Thor.

"I leave for Washington tomorrow. Natasha and Clint are already back to work," Steve said. "You arrived this morning?"

"Yep," Tony answered. "Had to fly at night, since I don't have a Bifrost to take me around. And what about you, Thor? Are you really going back to London?"

"Tomorrow," the Asgardian said. "Darcy came to visit her family and Jane will be waiting for both of us tomorrow."

"Really? Why would you go back to England?" Tony whined.

"What is wrong with England?" Thor asked, puzzled. "I like there."

"What is not wrong with England would be the right question," Tony corrected. "Tell him, Cap!"

Steve looked really lost.

"I like England too," he said, slowly. "I spent a lot of time there during the war."

"How could you?! You fought for our independence! They took away our tea!"

Captain America rolled his eyes. "I'm not that old, Tony."

"How old are you again?" Tony questioned, getting a bowl of blueberries from the fridge. "Civil War?"

"I haven't fought the Civil War either."

"Oh, well, give it a few more years," Tony said, catching a blueberry in his mouth after throwing it up. "The way things are going in this country, that's only a matter of time."

"Say, where is Bruce?" Clark asked, finally realizing he couldn't hear the scientist in the Tower.

"Another unpatriotic heathen that stayed in London," Tony mumbled. "He is helping Selvig with some stuff, he'll come back tomorrow."

"Everything alright there?" Clark questioned. "With the cleanup, I mean."
"Should be," Tony shrugged. "We fought the war, let SHIELD clean up the mess. I think that's fair, isn't it?"

"Tony!" Pepper yelled from another room. "It's time to go!"

"Coming!" Tony looked at them. "Alright, don't you dare go back home before I leave the meeting!"

And with that he was gone, following Pepper to the elevator. The three of them stared at each other for a second.

"I don't see how that would end up well, do you?" Steve asked.

No, Clark didn't.

"Come on, Matt! Just a drink!" Foggy whined. "We got our office today, we have to celebrate! It's not even because I want to, it's because we have to!"

Matthew Murdock wasn't so sure about that, but he could see Foggy really wanted to celebrate that night. Well, "see" was a figure of speech; Matt couldn't really see anything, being blind since he was a kid, but there were other ways to notice just how much Foggy wanted to go out for drinks.

His body temperature rose a bit, his blood was pumping fast from his heart, his muscles were stretching as if he couldn't wait to run to the bar. There was also the high-pitched noise his voice acquired when he was excited and, of course, the faint smell of adrenalin.

Yeah, it seemed they were going out, after all.

Foggy exploded in cheers when he nodded. "Yeah, that's it! Nelson and Murdock, are prowling the night looking for babes! Or, more likely, Murdock is prowling the night looking for babes and Nelson is gonna get drunk!"

Matt chuckled, as Foggy started to fix his hair in front of the mirror, his comb scratching his hair. He could listen to every single strand of hair touching the comb, each with a different kind of sound, just as easily as he could hear everything happening in Hell's Kitchen all around them. Cars, people talking, laughter… But also gunshots, yelling, fighting.

He didn't know exactly how his senses got so enhanced, just that it had something to do with the accident that had taken away his vision. As a child, he had saved a man from being hit by a truck, but somehow the cargo the truck was transporting fell; a bunch of chemicals spilled all over his face, burning his vision out.

It wasn't all it did, however.

Matt didn't understand or really cared much about the how, but the chemicals, while blinding him, also enhanced his other senses, far much than what they used to be. He was blinded, yes, but somehow, as his other senses got better, that didn't really matter anymore. Obviously, he missed it, a lot, but truth was his lack of vision hardly impaired him.

He could hear everything, taste the very air on his tongue, smell each different component present in a perfume from miles away, his sense of touch was so developed that he could read just by touching the paint on the pages of a book. It was like he lived in a different world all together, a world that he could not see, but feel in its entirety.
Of course, with all that, also came the unpleasant parts.

He could taste absolutely anything on his food, even things that should not be there at all, which happened with alarming frequency as the people who prepared food touched it without gloves, something that made Matt very selective as to where he ate. His nose was constantly assaulted by different smells, from the smoke of New York to tiny pieces of rotten food forgotten all around the city, completely undetectable to normal people. His sheets felt like sandpaper on his skin and he had to spend money to buy only the finest, so he could have a little bit of comfort.

But the worst was what he could listen, all the time.

People getting hurt, yelling for help, suffering, dying… Every single day, for all his life, a never-ending symphony of pain from which he could not escape. And there was only so much a good man could take before he had to do something.

Matt didn't think of himself as a hero, but to a lot of people, that's what he was. One day, he just couldn't take anymore and he decided to act. And he never stopped. When people asked for help, someone should listen and that someone was usually him. Unconsciously, he took his hands to his bruised arm, the pain making him remember the night before, when he fought and beat to near death a bunch of men trying to transport kidnapped women at the port.

Taking his cane, Matt got up, breathing slowly to control his anger, so Foggy wouldn't notice anything. Things had got a lot better since Superman appeared, flying everywhere around the world to save people. They said all they had to do was ask for help and he would be there and honestly, that was almost true. But even being such a powerful hero, Superman was one person and couldn't be everywhere at all times. Matt, better than anyone, knew that.

That's why he did what he could and that's why he wasn't keen on going out this night with Foggy. What if someone yelled for help and he wasn't there to listen?

"That's really the best I can do with my appearance," Foggy piped up. "It's not much, but the ladies should notice the effort. Just try, for the love of God, to leave some poor girl to me, okay? I'm not asking for a top model, I'm not even asking for a pretty girl, all I'm asking is a chance."

Matt sighed, but couldn't help but smile at Foggy's enthusiasm.

"And how would I know if she is pretty, Foggy?" Matt asked, smirking.

"I don't know! But you can tell, somehow, and if there is a pretty single girl there you will end up noticing her," Foggy exclaimed. "She will end up noticing you and I will just drink. A lot. So please, let's be sportive today."

Matt chuckled. There was a lot of bad in the world, that was true, but Foggy was living proof that there was a lot of good too. He was his best friend and if his best friend wanted to go out for a drink at the day their very own law practice finally had an office, well, he would be there for him.

"To Nelson and Murdock?" Matt asked, raising a plastic cup of water.

Foggy opened a bright smile, filled a cup of his own, and also raised it.

"To Nelson and Murdock!"

Matt didn't know why, but he had a feeling this would be a very odd night.
Steve wasn’t sure of what to expect from this get together or, as Darcy had called, this “guys’ night out”. For one, he didn’t really know Thor or Clark that well. Sure, he fought alongside them, they laughed together, they talked, he was aware they were good guys, but saying he knew them was an exaggeration.

And, of course, they didn’t really have much in common.

Thor was the Norse God of Thunder. A thousand-year-old alien who inspired legends and myths all over Earth, the Prince of an advanced nation that supposedly kept all the Nine Realms safe since time immemorial. And Clark was Superman. Another alien from an advanced civilization, the last member of a race so powerful that Steve was pretty sure some people already believed he was even a god.

Steve was just a soldier.

A legendary super-soldier, yes, the very face of an era, but still just a man. Under all that star-spangled equipment, Steve still thought of himself as that little guy from Brooklyn who just wanted to help people, who had trouble talking to girls, who got beat up by bullies in alleys. While others might look at him and see only Captain America, the hero of WWII, Steve saw himself as just Steve.

So he had to admit that he felt a little bit overwhelmed in the company of Thor and Clark. He could only watch as the two of them talked as they walked the dark streets of New York, the words flowing so easily, and he was not so sure about how to do that. They were talking about Asgard and Krypton, remembering parts of a tournament they seemed to have participated, gossiping about someone named Sif… And no matter how much they tried to involve him in the conversation, Steve just wasn’t sure what to say.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t exactly uncommon. Being frozen for more than half a century wasn’t a great way to keep oneself updated on the news of the world. Sure, Clark and Thor’s conversation would probably baffle anyone, but the fact was Steve had trouble in maintaining any kind of conversation since he woke up, unless it was job related. He could barely follow Tony’s rambles, Bruce was patient, but a lot of what he said went over his head, Clint and Natasha seemed to have a dialect of their own…

He couldn’t help but remember something Natasha said to him a while ago.

“What are you doing after training?” she asked, her face drenched in sweat as she drilled him on new military tactics. “Any lucky girl you are going to surprise?”

Steve smiled, embarrassed, knowing very well she was aware that there was no “lucky girl”.

“I’m going to go home, take a shower and eat a steak. Maybe catch up on some movies on my list. No girl, lucky or otherwise, I’m afraid.”

She stared at him for a second. “Lucky guy then? The stories say you and Sargent Barnes were very close.”
Steve choked on his water, coughing desperately for a few seconds.

“No! Jesus, no! Is this what they say?!” Steve exclaimed, barely able to put into words his surprise.

Natasha had a little smile on her face. “No. But I like to see you blush.” Steve rolled his eyes, thinking that he would never get used to her sense of humor. “So no lucky girl, no lucky guy… What about a friend?”

Steve chuckled, humorless.

“Unfortunately, all my friends are either dead or in a nursing home. Somehow I think watching a movie by myself would be better.”

Natasha stared at him for a long moment, no sign of her usual mirth.

“You need to try to connect, Steve,” she said. “I know it’s hard—“

“Oh, you know?” Steve interrupted, surprising even himself when the words came out of his mouth.

She just kept looking at him, apparently not offended by his rude manners.

“I know,” she repeated after a while. “I may not have been frozen for half a century, but I grew up in a secret program that trained assassins. I had no family, no friends, no freedom… They took me as a child and made me a weapon. And for a long time that’s all I was.”

Steve was unable to say anything as he stared at her, shocked beyond words.

“I became so dangerous that soon I was on SHIELD’s radar and they sent someone to stop me for good.” She tilted her head. “Clint made a different choice and gave me a chance.” Natasha walked closer, grabbing the water bottle from his hands and drinking a bit. “That’s how I started to work for SHIELD.”

Her eyes looked around, as if she was showing him the building around them.

“How many SHIELD agents do you think I killed before that?” she asked, suddenly. “How many innocents? Do you think they received me with open arms? That I made friends? The few people who didn’t fear me, also didn’t trust me. But honestly, even if they did trust me, how many life experiences did we share? I might as well have been frozen all my life, because nothing here seemed to make sense to me. Sounds familiar?”

It did, almost painfully familiar, if Steve was honest with himself. He knew Natasha had a difficult past, but this? This wasn’t exactly what he had in mind.

“And how did you…” Steve whispered.

Natasha shrugged. “To be honest, I didn’t even know I needed friends. I wasn’t in SHIELD because of that. But one person was there for me all along.”

“Clint,” Steve guessed.

She nodded. “If he weren’t the one who beat me and spared my life, I would’ve thought he was an idiot. He wasn’t afraid of me. He trusted me. And even after numerous times I asked to be left alone, he ignored me. Before I realized, I’d made a friend.”
Natasha looked into his eyes.

“So yes, Steve, I know it’s hard. You feel like you are in a complete different world, hearing a different language, living a different culture. But trust me, if you allow yourself to hide, you are going to regret it. You lost your old life and that was awful, but the alternative was death. You have a new chance. Don’t waste it by thinking too much.”

Steve thought about what Natasha said for very long time. She was right, he knew that; sadly, it still didn’t make things any easier.

“Steve, my friend!” Thor exclaimed, suddenly, surprising him. The big Asgardian grabbed his shoulder as they continued to walk. “Kal was just telling me that you were the leader of an elite force during your days in the army!”

“Oh! Yes, the Howling Commandos,” Steve answered, imagining how the conversation got to that subject.

“My Father used to have an elite force as well!” Thor said, smiling brightly. “The Valkyries! They were disbanded years ago, but let me tell you, the stories about them are impressive.”

Valkyries… Steve wasn’t the best in mythology – or history, apparently – but he had heard the name before. Hard not to, when he spent so long frozen inside the bomber plane that the Red Skull named “Valkyrie”; it didn’t bring good memories.

Thor didn’t even notice his silence as he went on.

“I used to want to be a Valkyrie when I was younger, before I realized they were all women… Regardless, it is truly a pity that there are no Valkyries anymore.” He looked at Steve. “Tell me about your Howling Commandos, Captain.”

Clark was smiling. “I would like to hear about them too. My father was a huge fan.”

And despite his earlier reservations, Steve started to tell them all about his brothers in arms, the words flowing as easily as when he used to talk to Bucky. It was a good feeling, he realized, as the conversation went on. Natasha was right, he needed friends.

It was just a bit weird, Steve caught himself thinking, that when he was finally feeling comfortable in a conversation, the people he was talking with happened to be two super-powered aliens who liked to fly around wearing red capes.

Well, his life was always strange.


Clark, Thor and Steve grabbed their mugs happily. Luke’s bar was full that night, the loud music and the voices of the customers filling the place, even when their table was pretty much isolated from the rest of the bar, at the corner.

“We’re good. Thanks, Luke,” Clark said, loudly so he could be hear, smiling to the owner of the bar.

“Ahhh! Cold as Jotunheim itself!” Thor exclaimed, drinking the entire mug in one go. “ANOTHER!”
Clark grabbed Thor’s hand at the very second the Asgardian tried to smash the thing against the floor, praying to whatever deity who would listen that his poker-face wouldn’t show anything. Apparently, by the very wide eyes on Luke’s face, he didn’t succeed.

“Another beer, coming right up,” Luke finally said, turning around with a sigh. Clark was sure this wasn’t the first ‘peculiar’ client he had in that bar.

“Thor, for the love of god, don’t throw things! Jane was very emphatic about that!” Clark harshly whispered.

He at least had the decency to look sheepish. “Apologies, I forgot!” Thor glanced at Luke. “Big man, that one. I fought bigger, but he is almost Asgardian sized!”

Steve nodded, sipping his beer; Clark was sure it wasn’t everyday he met someone larger than him after the Super-Soldier Serum.

“Yeah, Luke is a giant,” Clark agreed. “Makes me pity the people crazy enough to start something in this place.”

“Do humans have brawls in taverns as well?” Thor asked, excited.

“Not today,” Steve interjected, fast.

Clark thanked him silently. No, the last thing they needed that night was a brawl. Hiding Thor from the public was already a hard enough task, especially when he kept saying stuff like “Jotunheim” and trying to smash things. The cap and the glasses were working remarkably well, surprisingly, but if they actually got into a bar fight Clark was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to stop people from noticing something unusual was happening.

“Oh my god, can I have your autograph?!” a voice he knew well exclaimed.

He saw Steve’s eyes widening in barely concealed surprise and Thor’s expression was not unlike the face of a kid caught doing something he shouldn’t; Clark sighed, pulling the chair by his side as invitation.

“Could you not?” he complained, as Jessica sat down, smirking.

“Why, is not everyday I see the famous reporter Clark Kent walking amongst mere mortals!” she countered. Then, glancing at Steve and Thor, she sighed. “I can’t believe you gave glasses to the God of Thunder.”

“Hey, it’s working, isn’t it?” Clark defended himself.

“No, it isn’t! He doesn’t look like any less of a god!”

“Thank you, my lady,” Thor smiled, very pleased.

“I-I’m sorry, who is this?” Steve interrupted, a bit alarmed, before Clark could go on; he probably did owe him an explanation.

“Steve, Thor, this is Jessica Jones,” Clark introduced, lowering his voice. “Jessica, these are Steve Rogers and Thor Odinson.” He looked at Steve. “Don’t worry, she is a friend. I trust her.”

Apparently, that was enough for all of them.

“Good to meet another friend of Kal!” Thor said, smiling at Jessica.
“Nice to meet you, miss Jones,” Steve said, politely.

Jessica snorted. “Miss Jones… Jesus. Chill out, dude. I mean, you should be good at the ‘chilling’ part, right, Capsicle?”

Steve didn’t answer, but he did look at Clark with a blank face that was worth a thousand words.

“I swear I only mentioned it once,” Clark defended himself, quickly, while Thor laughed loudly. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

“Nothing better to do, so I thought ‘what the hell’… So, what are you kids drinking tonight?” she asked, looking at the mugs. “Beer? Seriously?”

Before any of them could answer, Luke approached the table with Thor’s beer, glancing at Jessica for a moment.

“I’ve seen you before,” he said, smiling at her. “Good to see you finally in here. I didn’t know you knew Clark.”

Amazingly, Jessica’s quick tongue seemed to have disappeared. Clark only watched as she stared at Luke in silence.

“Jessica is my neighbor,” Clark answered, when it became clear she wouldn’t.


“Sure,” she mumbled, nodding, as Luke gave her a mug.

Clark waited for Luke to go away and smirked.

“What was that?” he needled. “Does someone have a crush?”

“Your mom has crush!” Jessica snarled, making Clark chuckle and Steve gasp. “Fuck, I can’t believe we are drinking beer. This thing is practically water!”

“Every Midgardian drink is practically water,” Thor said, getting a small silver flask from his pockets. “That is why I brought this!” He lifted the flask so everybody could take a look at it. “This, my friends, has aged for a thousand years in barrels built from the wreck of Grunhill’s fleet!”

Clark stared at the small flask with caution, knowing very well by now that Asgardian liquor wasn’t to be trifled with.

“And what are we supposed to do with the three drops inside that tiny flask?” Jessica asked, not impressed.


“The flask is small, Thor,” Steve mentioned, glancing carefully at Jessica. “And maybe not supposed to be consumed by normal humans?”

“Hey!” Jessica complained, glaring at Steve.

“Not to worry! This flask is magically linked to the storages on Asgard!” he explained, happily. Then his eyes acquired a pained look. “My brother enchanted it for me, when we were younger.”
Clark and Steve turned to look at Thor, feeling his sadness. Neither of them liked Loki, that was true, but Thor was their friend and Loki, for good or ill, was his brother; they didn’t like to see him in pain.

“That Loki guy?” Jessica asked, not noticing the somber mood. “Are you sure he didn’t fill it with poison?”

Thor snapped out of his bad mood in his surprise. “Oh, he did once! It made me sick for three days, I could not stop puking! But I made him fix it.”

That didn’t exactly reassure any of them, but Thor was already pouring the golden liquid. He stopped at Jessica’s mug, frowning.

“Maybe you should stick with the Midgardian drink,” he said. “This is not meant for mortals.”

“Just fucking pour it in, blondie!”

The Asgardian looked at Clark, not knowing what to do. He shrugged. Jessica wasn’t a normal human, as long as she didn’t drink a lot there wouldn’t be a problem. Or at least he hoped.

Tony was focusing every ounce of his force of will to stop himself from dozing off; it wasn’t working. It wasn’t his fault, his force of will was extraordinarily strong, he knew that. No, the reason Tony couldn’t stay awake was simple: the meeting Pepper forced him to attend was boring as hell.

Pepper poked his ribs when his eyes closed and the pain jolted him awake for a moment. The man was still talking. How? How was that possible? Didn’t he breathe? And that voice! It was almost as if he was singing lullabies instead of talking about business, the boring tone droning on without end.

Breathing deeply, hoping the extra dose of oxygen would do something against his sleepiness, Tony looked around the room. Aside from Pepper, he didn’t know anyone there, not even by reputation. All self-appointed successful businessmen delivering their sales pitch; nothing against them, but Tony wasn’t exactly interested in listening, not when his mind was already made.

“Oh, okay, okay, enough talking!” he exclaimed, suddenly. There was absolute silence in the room as everybody turned to look at him. “I’m afraid I won’t wake up again if this goes on.”

Pepper kicked him under the table.

“Let’s summarize: you people and your companies and associates are the proud owners of a large portion of the buildings in Hell’s Kitchen. I want to acquire them.” Everybody began to talk at the same time and Tony sighed; then, very hard, he slapped the table. There was silence again. “I’m open to negotiation, but remember: Hell’s Kitchen is destroyed. It’s falling apart. The only good thing I have to say about it, is that it’s faring better than the portion of the city affected during the Black Zero Event. So be realistic.”

Tony stood up, looking at them.

“I’ll wait for an offer outside.” And saying this, Tony grabbed Pepper and left the room.

“Well, no one has ever accused you of being polite,” Pepper sighed, as they closed the door, glaring at him.
“Oh, come on, Pepper! Another hour there and I would have to stick an arc reactor in my chest for the sole purpose of keeping me awake! And don’t give me that look, I caught you closing your eyes too.”

Pepper blushed a little bit and Tony smirked at his small victory; against Pepper, they were rare indeed.

“Still, you could’ve been politer,” she said, ending the conversation.

Of course he could’ve been politer, but that rarely worked anyway, Tony thought, watching as Pepper grabbed a cup of coffee; for someone who claimed he ended the meeting too abruptly, she sure was getting her fill of caffeine. He turned around when he heard steps.

“Can I help you, Mr. Stark?” the woman asked. “Is the meeting already over?”

He just stared at her. For the life of him, Tony couldn’t remember the lawyer’s name.

“Jeri Hogarth,” she provided, tiredly, almost rolling her eyes. “You can read the name of the firm if you have problem remembering again.”

Tony smirked; he liked her. “Sorry, I have a problem with names. And yes, you can help me. I have a feeling those people will stay in that room for the rest of the week if no one does anything. Can you speed things up?”

She nodded. “Let’s see what I can do.” Hogarth entered the conference room, stopping just a moment to greet Pepper.

“I like her,” Tony announced, when Pepper approached him with a cup of coffee. “Very no-nonsense lady. How did you find her?”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “That’s the fifth time you met her, Tony. She did some work for us already and she is familiar with many of the companies in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Huh… Fifth time?”

“Fifth time.”

“How unusual.”

“No, not really, Tony. You do this all the time.” Pepper finished her coffee.

“No, I don’t. I just have problem remembering names. And faces. And boring situations.”

“I’ve seen you naming every single piece and component of one of your suits. How can someone with this kind of memory not remember people’s faces?”

“That’s different, I like my suits. They are always in my mind. But I just can’t remember people unless they are remarkable. Or do something remarkable.”

Pepper rolled her eyes again. “Well, make sure you remember her next time, it’s getting embarrassing already.”

“Can’t make promises I can’t keep.”

She seemed to think for a second, then leaned closer and whispered. “I caught her staring at my ass once.”
Tony’s eyebrows shot up. He opened a huge smile. “Well, 
this I won’t forget!”

Pepper slapped him playfully. “Pervert.”

Yes, he was, no point denying it. He looked around for a second. “Say, there is no one here right 
now. I know several ways we could use to spend time.”

It was a joke, kind of, but he was caught between laughing and kissing Pepper when he saw the 
brief moment when she considered his proposition.

“Are you really thinking about it?!” he exclaimed, holding her close.

“Don’t be an idiot!” she answered, but her blush said otherwise. He laughed. “Oh, shut up! And we 
are not alone, anyway.”

Now that she mentioned it, Tony really was hearing steps approaching again. Damn it! He was 
sure he could’ve convinced Pepper if he had more time or at least it was good to fantasize.
Groaning, Tony turned to see who was entering the room.

Another lawyer, or so he thought. At least he had the look of one. Well dressed in an expansive 
suit, a pair of glasses and a briefcase in his hands. More than that, his expression made Tony think 
he had something to do with lawyering business: intelligent eyes and a practiced smile.

The kind of look commonly found in lawyers and very successful criminals; sometimes they 
happened to be both.

“Mr. Stark, Miss Potts, I’m James Wesley,” the man introduced himself, smiling.

“Do I know this one?” Tony mock-whispered to Pepper; she rolled her eyes, shaking the man’s 
hand.

“No, neither of us know Mr. Wesley, Tony,” she answered, smiling at the man.

“Oh, good, because apparently I have a problem remembering unremarkable people,” he said, 
shaking the man’s hand too. “So if we meet again, make sure to remind me.”

“I certainly will, Mr. Stark,” Wesley answered, not bothered at all.

“Are you looking for Hogarth? She just went in,” Pepper said, pointing at the door.

“Oh, no, I’m here to see you two,” Wesley said, opening his briefcase. “My employer is also very 
interested in the renovations in Hell’s Kitchen. In fact, we had an understanding with most of the 
people in that room before you showed up, Mr. Stark, to acquire their buildings.”

Tony smirked. “Yeah, I do that. It’s amazing how quickly people can be convinced when you 
show them a pile of money.”

“That is certainly true,” Wesley agreed, looking for something inside the briefcase. He grabbed a 
file. “Which is why I think you will be very satisfied with this offer.”

Smiling, full of himself, Wesley held the file in front of Tony. Seconds went on as he expected him 
to take it.

“Oh, I don’t like being handed things,” he explained, not moving a finger to take the files.

Wesley smile began to drop, slowly, when Pepper took the files from him with a huff. Without
saying anything, she started to peruse them, fast, her eyes moving quickly from page to page.

“That… That is certainly a very generous offer for a small quantity of broken buildings,” Pepper finally said, looking from Tony to Wesley.

“My employer has history in Hell’s Kitchen,” Wesley explained in that proper way of talking he seemed to have. “He wants nothing more than to bring it back to what it once was before the Incident,” he glanced at Tony, “took place over there. He wants to have a part in the betterment of Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Your employer certainly has a lot of money, if he goes around throwing it like that for sentimental reasons,” Tony mentioned, glancing at the value offer in the files.

“Something you no doubt have in common,” Wesley countered.

Tony smiled; it was easy for even those who didn’t know him, to notice that his smile wasn’t exactly sincere.

“And who is this generous man?” Tony asked, running in his mind the list of people who had the cash for something like this.

“I am not at the liberty to say,” Wesley said, pushing his glasses up. “Suffice to say that you would be doing him and his associates a big favor. And he isn’t the kind of man liable to forget such a thing.”

He and Pepper looked at each other for a second. Well, would you look at that; the promise of gratitude and a veiled threat all wrapped into one. Ballsy, really. But who exactly would have the guts to do something like that? A criminal, really. But problem was that someone with that kind of money wasn’t likely to be a known criminal, so searching the database was futile. And maybe he wasn’t dealing with just one person, but an entire organization or several of them.

Curious indeed. But really, in the end, it didn’t matter.

“I can see here your employer is interested in this entire part of the neighborhood,” Tony mentioned, glancing at the files again.

“Yes. Originally, as you know, he was interested in renovating most of Hell’s Kitchen, to give the people their neighborhood back after such tragedy, but as long as he is able to at least renovate that part, he is happy.”

“Hummm… So you want me to, what, remove my offer for them?” Tony asked.

“You will be more than compensated for the kindness,” Wesley assured.

Tony looked at the files for a long minute, committing to his memory every single detail available. Then he looked at Pepper.

“Pepper, do me a favor, go inside and inform Hogarth of this change of plans,” he said and Wesley smiled again. Tony looked at him. “We will be offering five times the previous offer, as long as this buildings over here are a part of the package.” Wesley smiled disappeared. “I want to make sure Hell’s Kitchen is in good hands, after all.”

Pepper looked a bit worried, but nodded without saying anything and went inside the room. Tony was still staring at Wesley, no signal of his usual mirth anymore.
“This was a mistake, Mr. Stark,” Wesley announced.


Wesley smiled for one last time and turned to leave. Tony kept his eyes on him until he left the building, the micro camera in his watch capturing all the relevant details so Jarvis could analyze it later. Tony grinned; It seemed Clark’s neighborhood was even more exciting than he thought.

And that Wesley guy was someone Tony was sure he would remember in the future.

James Wesley was a very patient man. Those who thrived in his line of business had to be. Emotion clouded reason and those who allowed themselves to react based on feelings tended to be easily tricked.

That did not change the fact that he was fuming with anger as he left Hogarth, Chao and Benowitz. He made a mistake. Trusting Tony Stark to act like any other man of power was an error. Stark was a genius, an entrepreneur, someone who understood business like few people did; he was also stubborn, childish and prone to rash decisions. Approaching him to make a deal was not something he should’ve done, especially admitting how much his associates were interested in those buildings.

Any other person would’ve been amenable. The promise of profit alone would turn most heads, but the implicit suggestion that saying “no” would make them enemies usually sealed the deal. Of course, Wesley realized that doing this with Tony Stark was the last thing he should’ve done.

Instead of replying to his offer with a calm, rational decision, Tony Stark decided to go out of his way to show just how against that he was. Childish didn’t begin to cover what Wesley thought of him.

Now they had a problem. Outbidding Tony Stark was a folly. His boss and his associates had amassed an immense fortune over the years, but they were not in a position to compete against a man like Stark. Not only that, but playing that hand now would tip everyone of their intentions and that was not a good thing, especially if it brought the attention of the likes of Superman to them.

They had grown powerful in the shadows and that’s where they would stay.

But even Wesley’s boss had to answer to someone. It was ironic, but they had been offered pretty much the same Wesley had just offered Stark: the promise of profit or the end of a useful friendship. And different from Stark, Wesley knew what the right answer was. They had committed themselves to acquire those buildings and now they had to deliver.

Wesley entered his car and told the driver to go. Barely even acknowledging him, he grabbed his phone. Maybe they couldn’t buy or threat Stark, but there were options. Hell’s Kitchen belonged to them, as most of New York. Stark might’ve acquired the buildings, but that wouldn’t mean anything if his construction crews were unable to work.

It was crass, Wesley knew, but he couldn’t argue with results.

They needed to grip tighter, to squeeze Hell’s Kitchen just until it became uninteresting from a business point of view. Stark’s new change of heart, his sudden worry about the victims of the Incident, would pass. Soon he would forget all about his guilt and Hell’s Kitchen would be abandoned once again. Until then, they needed to force his hand.
The Russians would gladly help, that was just their style. Madam Gao and Nobu could be convinced to aid them as well, this was in their best interests. And they controlled, directly or indirectly, every minor gang in New York. This was feasible. First, though, before involving them, he could try something else.

“It’s me,” he said, as his call connected. “There was a small setback, but don’t worry, I’m handling it.”

There was a tired sigh on the other side.

“I knew Stark would be a problem.”

“Stark is too concerned with matters far above this,” Wesley said. “He will forget about Hell’s Kitchen as soon as the Avengers need to deal with some problem or another.”

“Make sure not to underestimate that man. Stark might be impulsive, but that doesn’t make him any less dangerous.”

“I won’t,” Wesley assured, taking the advice seriously. “I believe I have a solution for our problem, but I’ll have to make use of our… less than noble associates.”

“Do what you think it’s best but do not call attention to us. The last thing we need is the Avengers turning their eyes to Hell’s Kitchen.”

“I will make sure they are discreet, but it’s not as if they don’t have bigger problems to worry about. I’ll keep you updated,” Wesley said, hanging up. He called the driver. “Go to Hell’s Kitchen.”

Nodding, the driver turned the street, but Wesley wasn’t paying attention anymore. Instead, he was thinking about his plan, trying to imagine every detail. It was very possible that he wouldn’t even need to acquire the help from Madam Gao or Nobu, he considered; the Dogs of Hell were very efficient at what he needed done.

And, really, there weren’t a lot of people who cared about Hell’s Kitchen anyway. What were the chances of his thugs running into someone like Superman there?

“They were surrounded by the Asgardian gladiators, the crowd cheering, as Odin announced his sentence. ‘Faora-Ul, you will stand trial by combat!’ Odin said, his voice booming. ‘May you find mercy amongst the Kryptonian gods, because you will find none here!’ The Allfather finished.”

Clark, Thor and Steve could only watch, mouths agape, as Jessica read he story on her cellphone, doing her best not to laugh.

“Superman looked at his beloved and then faced Odin. ‘I will share the same fate Faora does. Our souls are entwined and our hearts beat as one.’ The Asgardian King remained in silence and then nodded: ‘So be it.’ The gladiators advanced and the fight for Faora’s life begun.”

Jessica couldn’t continue anymore, leaning over the table, the laughter erupting hard from her. Clark covered his face with his hands.

“Thor, friend of yours or not, I’ll have a serious conversation with Darcy about this,” Clark groaned, his voice muffled against his hands. “This abomination cannot go on!”

“Darcy wrote this?!” Thor exclaimed. “But why?”
“That girl that was with you?” Steve asked, looking from Clark to Thor. “The one in the tower?”

“That’s the one,” Clark confirmed, trying his best to ignore Jessica’s laughter.

“But… But where did she get the idea that you and that psychopath were in love?” Steve asked, baffled.

“I don’t think she believes in that, not really, she just… She is a very disturbed person.”

Thor snorted. “I like her story!”

Clark stared at him, not amused at all. “Yes, you do like stories, don’t you? Why don’t you tell us the time you fought that giant, Thrym?” Thor got pale. “Tell us the strategy you used to infiltrate the camp to recover your hammer, Thor. Something to do with a dress—“

“I get your meaning!” Thor interrupted, fast.

“Good!”

“Don’t you dare censor her!” Jessica joked. “She will be the next big thing in literature. And she is inspiring art! Look at the drawings her fans made about ‘Faora: The Path to Atonement’.”

Steve spat his beer when Jessica showed them the first picture, coughing desperately as he tried to breathe; whatever it was, Clark really didn’t want to see.

“Okay, Jessica, enough!” he said, grabbing her phone, hiding it from Thor’s wide eyes.

“Aww, I was just getting to the best part!” she swallowed her beer and pushed the glass to Thor. “Fill it up, blondie.”

“Are you sure you hadn’t enough already?” Clark asked, as Thor happily poured the drink, seeing the unusual flush on her cheeks; the easy laughs and how much she was talking were pretty good indicatives that the drink was stronger than she was used to, as well. Normal Jessica wasn’t a happy drunk, she was a depressed one.

“Nah, this is good stuff! When will I be able to drink Asgardian liquor again?”

“If you die from alcohol poisoning, never.”

She just ignored him, drinking the golden liquid fast.

“I’m drinking with two gods and Captain America,” she said. “I’m sure I’m pretty damn safe.”

“One god,” Clark corrected, smiling. “If you are seeing two Gods of Thunder then I have some news for you, Jessica.”

“Argh, I meant you!”

“Oh, no, don’t even start with that. I already have enough problems being an alien, let’s leave it at that.”

“Well, from what you’ve told me, Thor’s an alien too,” Jessica retorted. “So what gives?”

“It’s not the same thing,” Clark explained, knowing by now that arguing with a drunken Jessica was a stupid idea. “He is a thousand years old, his people originated an entire mythology. I didn’t.”
“So far! Give it some years and we’ll see how this will go,” Jessica said, sagely.

The way she said that alarmed Clark for some reason. “What are you talking about?”

She looked at him, incredulous. “Come on, aren’t you a journalist?! Don’t you keep up with the news?”

“I haven’t been around for the last few days, you know that!” Clark complained, his pride as a journalist harmed.

Jessica just rolled her eyes.

“Clark, people ask for help and you appear. Wherever they are, no matter how bad the situation is, they look up, shout out for Superman, and the Big Blue Boy Scout is there to save the day,” Jessica said, looking at him. Steve and Thor only watched, interested. “Do you even understand how powerful this is? What this mean to people? Hell, they are even building a statue of you right in the middle of Central Park!”

She turned to face him.

“You saved the world from being obliterated and you *stayed* to help ever since,” she continued. “Every day, every time things go bad, you are there to make things right. People can see you flying around, helping, saving lives. Little kids around the world are not praying to God anymore, they are praying to you. I guess the fact that you actually hear their prayer and do something about it makes it an easier choice about who to call.”

“I don’t actually hear people praying,” Clark mumbled, not knowing what to say. “I hear everything, just because I have good hearing.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jessica summarized. “They call, you answer. What do you think will happen some years from now? When these kids grow up? Do you think they’ll still search for answers hidden in old books and go pray at a church or whatever? Or do you think they’ll just look up to the sky and call for Superman when they need help?”

Clark didn’t know what to say in response to that. He never hid the fact that he had no idea about what he was doing, at least from the people he cared about. “Superman” wasn’t something he planned. He just wanted to help people, to use his gifts for good. And now people were looking at him as if he was some kind of god. Him, the guy from Smallville, who until some time ago could barely pay his bills and wanted to be a journalist.

Awkward didn’t begin to cover how Clark felt.

“It is not so bad, my friend!” Thor exclaimed, seeing Clark’s worried expression. “I had a lot of fun being worshiped. Offerings, statues, beautiful women… Those were good times.”

“How come people are not worshiping you anymore?” Steve asked, sipping his beer. “Or are they?”

“They are,” Jessica answered.

“They are?!” Thor asked, turning to her.

“It’s been all over the news since the Battle of New York. There weren’t a lot of pagans left anymore, but when a guy waving a hammer and literally controlling storms appears to help fight an alien invasion, well, you can’t ask for a clearer sign that they exist than that.” She snapped her
fingers. “About a month after, they arrested a bunch of women dancing naked in front of the Avengers Tower, doing some kind of fertility ritual for Thor.”

Neither Clark nor Steve knew what to say about that, but Thor was delighted.

“I knew I still had followers! That is amazing!”

“Fertility ritual?” Steve asked, looking lost.

“He was also worshiped as the god of fertility,” Clark explained.

“Oh, yes, I was!” Thor agreed, smiling brightly. Steve, wisely, didn’t ask for specifics.

“There was even a debate on a news channel this week,” Jessica continued. “Two nutjobs arguing, a pagan who was absolutely sure that Thor’s return to Midgard was proof that the old religions were right all along and the other who was basically there to say Kal-El was more of a god than any of the Norse gods, Thor included.”

“Hey!” Thor mock complained.

Clark just smiled. “Sorry. But I did kick your ass during the tournament, that is true.”

“It is not! The fight was interrupted!”

“Lucky you!” Clark joked.

“So there really was a tournament?” Jessica asked, grinning in a way that made Clark nervous. “Was it like in the story I just read? The way people are telling in those stories, and those drawings, it won’t be long until you are worshiped as a god of fertility too!”

Clark grimaced. He pushed his glass to Thor. “Fill it up, please.”

“I still can’t believe that Health Inspector closed Josie’s!” Foggy exclaimed, possibly for the hundredth time, as he and Matt walked through the streets.

“Seriously? You can’t believe an inspector would find anything wrong with Josie’s Bar?” Matt asked, the disbelief in his face clear even behind his red glasses.

“Well, we all knew the water was dangerous,” Foggy reluctantly agreed, “but I can’t believe Josie’s tap water was mixed with the sewage pipes! That’s gotta be wrong!”

Matt smiled, his cane tapping the way in front of him as he unnecessarily held Foggy’s arm so he could be guided.

“I’m not so sure the health inspector would just lie about that, Foggy.”

“Maybe it’s because of the Incident!” Foggy continued, barely listening to him. “I mean, Hell’s Kitchen was hit pretty badly. Maybe Josie’s simply got damaged in the crossfire and the pipes mixed.”

He looked at Matt, proud of his theory; Matt just kept smiling.

“Fine, be like that! But that’s the argument we are going to use when we defend Josie in court.”

“We are defending Josie? Really?”
“That’s why we became lawyers, Matt, to defend the little people!”

“I’m not so sure defending Josie’s sewage water fits that description.”

“Well, we’ll make sure she repairs the pipes,” Foggy relented. “I mean, we’ll go back there at some point, so we have to do that. What do you say?”

Matt pretended to think for a second, then nodded. “Alright, but I refuse to let that be our first case, so tomorrow we have to find one.”

“Yes! But enough about work. Tonight is for celebration!”

Saying this, Foggy pulled Matt towards a building, opening the door. It was a bar, he knew that even without Foggy telling him so, since he could listen to the music and the talking and smell the drinks and the food. He’d never been there before, but according to one of Foggy’s many buddies, it was a pretty nice place. And since they couldn’t very well go to Josie’s, they could try a new place.

“Hey, it looks pretty good,” Foggy said for his benefit. “It’s not Josie’s, but it’ll do for tonight.”

“Maybe we can even drink the water,” Matt joked.

“Nope, I’m afraid we are on an alcohol-based diet tonight,” Foggy answered, pulling his arm to guide him in. “You see, we–“

Whatever Foggy was going to say was interrupted by the massive man that appeared out of nowhere and stopped right in front of him. Matt didn’t even notice him coming, distracted as he mapped the bar in his mind, and as consequence Foggy clashed against the man’s back, falling to the ground as if he had crashed against a brick wall.

The man barely seemed to notice, but he couldn’t help but hear Foggy falling pathetically on the floor.

“Oh! Apologies, my tiny friend!” the man boomed, grabbing Foggy and pulling him up as if his friend weighted nothing. “I was distracted with this game of pool we are playing!”

Now that he said it, Matt noticed he was indeed holding a cue stick, in the same hand he was also holding a freshly filled mug. And by the sound he could easily pinpoint where his friends were playing, a few meters from where they were standing.

“Come on, blondie, it’s your turn!” a woman yelled from the table. “And try not to break anything this time! Luke it totally kicking us out if you make another hole in his wall.”

A hole in the wall?!! Now that she said it, Matt turned his attention to the walls; like the woman said, there it was, a hole shaped suspiciously like a billiard ball. How was that even possible? How badly – and how strongly – someone would have to miss to actually punch a hole in the wall like that?

“I have to go,” the man said, smiling at them. “Why don’t you play with us? I will buy you a beer as an apology!”

“No need, buddy,” Foggy stammered, unusually quickly and maybe a little shy, if that was even possible. “But we would love to play! We’ll be right there!”

With one last apology, the big man walked back to the pool table, his steps heavy against the bar’s
floor. It really was a good thing that the guy seemed to be genuinely nice, not one of those people who took advantage of his strength to intimidate others, because by his size Foggy would be doomed if he wanted to fight; and Matt couldn’t very well help him without giving away the fact that he didn’t need his vision to fight and fight well.

He was so distracted by the thought that he only noticed Foggy’s unusual shocked silence when he was grabbed and forcibly dragged to an empty spot by the counter.

“Matt, I think we just met Thor!” he frantically whispered.

Matt really didn’t know what to say in response to that.

From across the room, Clark closed his eyes and groaned.

“What do you mean you met Thor?” Matt asked, astonished.

“The guy, that big guy I just crashed against!” Foggy explained, speaking low and fast, his arms swinging madly. “That was Thor!”

As if he could actually see, Matt turned his head in the pool’s table direction. There were four people there: the big guy Foggy was sure it was Thor, two other guys nearly as big and a woman.

“Oh my god…” Foggy whispered, also looking at the table. “That’s Captain America!”

Clark closed his eyes again and shook his head, seeing the disguises they so carefully made crumbling before their eyes.

Again, Matt wasn’t sure what to say. His enhanced senses were much better than any human’s, but he was still blind. While he could certainly sense their general form, the shape of their bodies and faces, he had nothing to compare them to; he never had, after all, seen any of them on TV.

“Are you sure?” Matt asked, still stunned, turning to Foggy. “What would Thor and Captain America be doing here?”

“I don’t know! And yes, I’m sure!” Foggy said. “They are using a disguise, but it’s them!”

There was a brief silence.

“Are you really sure?” Matt asked again, uncertain.

Foggy rolled his eyes. “Trust me, okay?! Thor is using a hood indoors and a pair of glasses and Captain America is using a cap, but it’s them! There is no way I would get fooled by a pair of glasses!” He got closer and indicated subtly their direction to Matt. “They are playing pool with a very hot girl and another dude wearing glasses!”

If Foggy really was right and not just imagining things, then what were the Avengers even doing here? Were they in a secret mission? Undercover? But why would they send two of their most notable members? Sure, they weren’t Tony Stark, but it was a little difficult to believe that two huge blond, muscled men would remain unnoticed for long, no matter what disguise they used.

And seriously, glasses? Who would be fooled by that?
Well, a lot of people, apparently, Matt admitted, since they were still playing pool instead of being mobbed by every single person in the bar. Maybe he was overthinking his own situation by using a mask that nearly covered all his face.

“We are going to play with them!” Foggy decided, suddenly.

If Matt wasn’t actually worse when it came to self-preservation, he would’ve slapped Foggy.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea, Foggy?” Matt asked. “What if they are in the middle of a dangerous mission?”

“Here?!” Foggy retorted. “Plus, he invited us! Why would he do that if it were dangerous?”

There was that, Matt admitted. Still, he wasn’t sure if it really was a good idea to mix with them. The decision, however, was taken from his hands when Foggy grabbed him and advanced towards the pool table. Matt really needed to have a conversation with Foggy about safety one of these days; good guys or not, they attracted trouble and Foggy was defenseless.

The irony of his thoughts was the only thing preventing him to say anything.

This was bad, Clark thought, very, very bad. Thor and Steve had been recognized! Somehow, the guy that crashed against Thor had seen through his disguise and even noticed Captain America with them. Jessica would never let him hear the end of it… His own identity, however, remained safe and sound; if he didn’t know any better, he would really think his glasses were some advanced Kryptonian cloaking device, because it was working wonders.

At least they didn't seem inclined to make a scene, that was good. Even after finding out Thor and Captain America were there, both of them were whispering and careful not to draw any attention. Maybe, just maybe, they could go on without any major trouble.

“Hey, how are you?” the blond man said, cheerfully, as he approached, guiding the blind one. “I’m Foggy, nice to meet you.”

Thor smiled brightly to him and shook his hand – a little harder than he should have, by the face Foggy made – and promptly introduced himself.

“I am Thonald! Donald Blake!” he exclaimed, correcting himself. Clark, Steve and Jessica very nearly sighed. “This is Clark, the lady over there is known as Jessica and he is…”

This time, Clark, Steve and Jessica couldn’t help but to sigh; Thor obviously didn’t know what to call Steve and if Foggy already didn’t know who they were Clark would be very worried right now.

“James, James Barnes,” Steve introduced himself, fast, also shaking Foggy’s hand. “But you can call me Bucky.”

“Very nice to meet you guys,” Foggy answered, slowly then apparently remembered that he wasn’t alone. “Oh, this one is my best friend, Matt Murdock.”

“Nice to meet you,” Matt said, nodding at them.

“So, how do we do this?” Foggy asked, grabbing a cue stick. “The winners play against us?”

“Really?” Jessica said. “Are you sure you want to pair up with Stevie Wonder over there? That’s
not gonna be much of a game, will it?’

The tasteless joke flew over Steve and Thor’s heads, but Clark winced; he knew Jessica well enough to understand that her humor was dark and often very offensive, but at the same time he also understood that she didn’t mean half the things she said. She was just a caustic person.

Obviously, Foggy and Matt didn’t know that; to his surprise, however, both of them just smirked.

“Care to bet on that?” Matt asked, looking directly at Jessica. Well, not looking, he was blind, but Clark almost believed he was seeing her from behind those red lenses for a moment. He fished a one hundred dollars bill from his pocket. “If you are feeling confident, that is.”

“Stealing money from a blind man?” Jessica pretended to think for a second, then opened a predatory smile. “I’m in!”

Of course she was, Clark sighed. Jessica wasn’t one to discriminate against race, religion or disability; she was a dick to everyone equally.

———

Jimmy “the Bear” was a dangerous man. He was the president of the New York chapter of the Dogs of Hell, a Motorcycle Club with ties in drug trafficking, smuggling, guns trade, kidnapping, murder and every possible unsavory work one could imagine, as long as it brought profit. He was an intimidating figure, with a thick black beard, muscled arms covered in tattoos, eyes of someone well used to violence and the well-known leather jacket of the Dogs of Hell.

Somehow, all that meant absolutely nothing to the man sitting in front of him.

“I need you to be discreet,” James Wesley said, touching his glasses as he looked into his eyes. “No killing, nothing flashy. The last thing we need is the wrong kind of attention upon us.”

“Whose attention? The cops?” Jimmy scoffed. Those who couldn’t be bought were easily intimidated. And the ones who liked to play hero? Those didn’t get to live much anyway.

Wesley just shook his head. “The police is not a problem. But there are those above them that could be. You know what I’m talking about.”

“We ain’t afraid of anything!” Jimmy roared, understanding the needling for what it was, crushing his cigar on the table as he did it.

Wesley just watched in distaste as the cigar was turned into mush, not even a little bit intimidated; Jimmy wanted to punch him then. The man was the very opposite of everything his club represented, dressed in that immaculate suit of his, with perfect good manners and a calm demeanor. He just didn’t fit with the environment around them.

The club was dark and noisy, chaotic to the core, filled with members of the Dogs of Hell. There was music, yelling, gambling. The air was thick with the smoke of the cigars and the booze flowed like water. James Wesley, on the other hand, seemed like the very picture of a prissy politician. He didn’t belong there. He had no business ordering him around.

Except that Jimmy was very aware of who James Wesley answered to. And that was a man you just didn’t want to cross.

“Like I said, we ain’t afraid of anything.” Jimmy repeated, more to convince himself than to convince Wesley. “I said we can handle things, so we’ll handle things.”
“Oh? The Dogs of Hell aren’t afraid of anyone, is that right?” Wesley asked, raising a single eyebrow. “Because, from what I heard, your chapter here in New York apparently banned every illicit activity within a hundred miles from the city. My, you don’t even carry guns here anymore!”

If Jimmy was capable of blushing, the thick beard and the dark room would probably make it impossible to notice.

“That ain’t got anything to do with fear!” he denied, maybe too quickly. “Is it fear to dodge a bullet or just good sense? We can’t fight that damn alien! He made that very clear to us already! So why would we commit crimes right under Superman’s nose?”

And that was the real reason why Jimmy was taking orders from Wesley. The Dogs of Hell were autonomous, they could take care of themselves. Sure, they were available for hiring, but that was all it was. Superman changed that. It just wasn’t possible to work with that damn alien flying over the city!

Jimmy had no idea why that alien seemed to like New York so much. Maybe it was because that clusterfuck that happened with Zod; he had to contain a shudder when he thought about Black Zero Event. Superman probably felt guilty about what happened to the city then and because of that he seemed especially concerned about New York. And that was bad for business.

So they needed an extra; Wesley’s boss could provide that.

“If you fear Superman or not is not my problem,” Wesley said, after a while. “But at least you have the good sense to know he is a threat. Keep doing that and you’ll be fine.”

Saying this, Wesley got up.

“We’ll discuss new routes for your products if this works out,” Wesley added. “But remember, I want Hell’s Kitchen under our control.”

Then, without even looking at Jimmy again, he left; not for the first time, he had to stop himself from throwing a bottle against the man. Breathing deeply, Jimmy controlled himself. They would play ball, for now. Until they could get back on their feet again, after what Superman did to their business.

But that didn’t mean he had to like it.

Standing up, Jimmy kicked his chair to the middle of the club. The wooden furniture crashed against the pool table, turning into a thousand splinters; there was a sudden silence. The prissy son of a bitch wanted to grab Hell’s Kitchen by the throat? Well, that he could do.

“Let’s ride!” he yelled and his brothers roared in response.

“Son of a bitch!” Jessica yelled. “How did he do this? How did you do this?!”

Steve had to contain himself, for the thousandth time, so he wouldn’t reprimand Jessica for that filthy mouth of hers. It was unbelievable! And he was pretty certain that this had nothing to do, once again, with the different time he was living in. Sure, women were a lot more open now, direct, even to the point where Steve was actually a little bit scared when they approached him. But this?

This was all Jessica Jones.

Weirdly enough, even though his reaction was a lot more contained, he was probably as surprised
as she was by what he had just seen. Against everyone’s will, Jessica had accepted the bet Matt had proposed. And after Clark and she won the last game — mostly because Thor still hadn’t acclimatized his Asgardian strength to the delicate game — Foggy and Matt stepped forward to play.

To everybody’s astonishment, Matt decided the game alone.

He just wouldn’t miss. Before each round, Foggy would tell him where the balls were located and, blind or not, the man simply bounced the balls around the green table potting one after the other until only Clark and Jessica’s were left.

Superman had just lost a game of pool to a blind man. Sure, he didn’t even have the chance to play, but it was incredibly impressive.

“Seriously, I want to know how you are doing this!” Jessica insisted, staring at Matt Murdock. “How the fuck does a blind man play so well?!”

Matt, completely unbothered by her rage, just smirked.

“People always ask me this. This and how I comb my hair,” Matt said, shrugging. “You just… Hope for the best.”

There was a brief silence that Steve was sure it wouldn’t last.

“Bullshit!” Jessica exclaimed loudly, making him wince.

“Jessica—” Clark started.

“Jessica—” Clark started.

“No, I refuse to lose a hundred bucks to a blind guy, Clark! This is all your fault anyway, why did you let him go first just like that? We are playing again. Double or nothing!”

“Are you sure?” Foggy asked, his glee barely contained. “I mean, we were a pretty good team during college. That’s how we paid for drinks.”

“This was most impressive!” Thor agreed, his expression still surprised. “I look forward to facing you two!”

“Like you can win, mister ‘I break walls’,,” Jessica mumbled, tossing her cue stick to him. “I need a drink.”

“Jessica, you already had enough…” Clark said, quickly following the tipsy woman to counter.

“So, how do we do this?” Matt asked when they left, approaching the table. “Are we betting?”

“But of cours—” Thor began.

“No betting, let’s just have fun,” Steve interrupted, before the Asgardian could cost him a great deal of money. He wasn’t poor anymore, but old habits did indeed die hard.

“Fine by me,” Foggy chirped happily. “Let’s see if I get to play this time.”

Foggy and an overly enthusiastic Thor began to prepare the balls for the game as Steve readied himself to play for the second time since 1945. He couldn’t help but to think about Bucky and the Howling Commandos; they loved to play every single game they could find in the pubs back then. It was weird to play a game like that without them, even weirder when he considered the fact that his partner was a Norse god.
“Are you from here?” Matt asked, suddenly, and Steve took a moment to realize he was talking to him. “Do you all come to this bar often?”

“No, no, it’s my first time here,” Steve answered, looking at the man’s red lenses. “But I’m from New York.”

“Really? Which part?”

“Brooklyn,” Steve answered, remembering fondly of his old neighborhood.

“Hell’s Kitchen, born and raised,” Matt said back, tilting his head.

“Yeah?” Steve said, looking down for a second. “Were you here during the Battle of New York?”

Sensitive topic for the Avengers, that one, but he had to know. Steve, better than most, understood the consequences of war. It was a battle that had to be fought, everybody knew that, but that didn’t make the innocent people caught in the crossfire any less important.

“I was,” Matt answered, after a while, sighing. “Bad day, that one.”

“Tell me about it…” Steve breathed.

“But we are dealing with it,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard. “The people of this city always bounce back, no matter the circumstance.”

“It’s… It’s good to know,” Steve said, sighing.

He knew that, it was true even back in the day, but it was good to be reassured. Especially now that New York had suffered two alien attacks that claimed so many lives.

“I haven’t been here for a while,” Steve said, suddenly. “Living here, I mean. It’s nice to know that some things remained the same.”

The blind man nodded and sipped his drink, as both of them remained in silence, watching Foggy and Thor finishing preparing the table.

“All set!” Foggy exclaimed, clapping his hands. “So, the blind guy begins again?”

“Let’s flip the coin!” Steve hurried to say.

“Another one?” Luke asked, grabbing Jessica’s empty glass.

“Yep. Don’t know what happened to all the others,” Jessica answered.

He snorted; Luke had never seen a woman drink as much as she did. It was a lot of booze for such a small person.

“I’ve seen you around before, you know,” Luke said, as Jessica sat by the counter, “but you never come inside.”

She shrugged. “I buy my alcohol in bulk.”


Jessica raised her eyebrows. “You serve coffee?”
“No.”

He was surprised by how much he enjoyed her laugh. Jessica was a beautiful woman, but her face seemed to be frozen into a perpetual scowl for some reason; seeing her laughing, relaxing even if for just a while, made her even more beautiful. That was the reason that made him think she was dating Clark.

When he was close to her, her face relaxed just as it did now, when he made her laugh.

“Are you sure you and Clark are not dating?” he asked again, just to be certain, looking at the man in question as he went back to the pool table. He liked the guy, it wouldn’t be cool to hit on his girlfriend.

Jessica groaned. “Again with this! No, we are not dating! And why the hell does it matter, anyway? You interested in him?”


That gave her pause. It was brief, a moment of hesitation, but it happened; he imagined that she wouldn’t have reacted at all if she hadn’t drunk that much.


“Why? You an expert in flirting?”

“Me?” she snorted. “I don’t flirt. But you do. Not for sport, it’s got purpose. Like getting customers to drink more, tip more.”

Luke leaned closer. “What if I’ve flirted just because I think you’re hot?”

She leaned closer too, staring at him.

“Well, you do seem to like women.” She looked at him all the way from his feet to his face. “And they like you.”

Jessica’s face got really close from his, her eyes still staring nonstop at his, her breath tickling him. And then, suddenly, she pulled back.

“But, unfortunately for both of us, I’m sure, I’ve decided to give up men for a while, “Jessica said, looking at his body again. “No matter how stupid this decision seems now…”

Luke, very discretely, shook himself out of his stupor. Damn, that girl was really messing with his head, it seemed.

“Bad breakup?” he asked, trying to find a reason for the rejection. Not that Luke had never been rejected before, he had, but with the risk of sounding arrogant, he had to admit it was a rare occurrence.

The dark, tense frown was immediately back on Jessica’s face.

“Something like that,” she said, getting up. “Thanks for the beer.”

Luke sighed, stopping himself from going after her. Well, that was great. Not only he failed to hook up with her, he also, somehow, offended her; that didn’t bode well for his chances of having a “coffee” with her in the future. Shaking his head, he accompanied her with his eyes until she was back at the pool table, with her weird friends.
To be fair, not all of them were weird, Luke admitted. Clark was a pretty normal guy, he stopped at Luke’s occasionally to eat a burger and talk; he liked him. The other blond guy, with the cap, was just a bit quiet and maybe too polite. The big one, however, wearing a hood and a cap in doors… That one was weird as hell. Not in a bad way, Luke knew a lot of bad people in his life and the guy didn’t seem to be one. But he was weird. Maybe a foreigner?

And what to say about the two others that joined them? The blond one, that for some reason called himself Foggy, was clearly a people’s person. The guy just wouldn’t stop talking, to anyone that would listen, and he moved like a hamster on cocaine. But surprisingly enough, Foggy wasn’t the weirdest from the bunch.

Matt Murdock, the blind man who was massacring people at the pool table, was.

How did a blind guy play so well? It was uncanny. For a moment, Luke wondered if the guy really was blind or if he was trying to make easy money, but he seemed to be. He just was unnaturally good at playing pool.

Sighing, Luke turned to take an order, taking his tray with him. These days, a blind guy who could play pool was way down in the “weird scale”.

Captain America was very good at pool, Matt realized, a bit surprised. Bouncing that shield around was probably good practice, because the Super Soldier was doing unnaturally well at their game. Thor on the other hand… It was easy to see why the God of Thunder was having so much trouble: he was too strong. Maybe when he got used to the weight of the balls he would be better than Steve and even him, but right now? Right now he was the only reason they were still in the game.

“Be gentle, Tho-Donald,” Clark coached. “It’s all about muscle memory. Just a little bit of… too much!”

Matt winced when the cue stick clashed against the ball, the sound echoing in the closed bar. And the ball… The ball flew over the table, faster than a professional baseball player’s pitch, right in the direction of Foggy’s face.

Clark’s hand moved almost as fast as a bullet and closed around the ball midair, right in front of Foggy’s nose. There was a long silence.

“Oh my god, my life just flashed before my eyes!” Foggy breathed, seemingly frozen in place. “Thank you!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Clark answered, smiling, putting the ball back on the table, leaning forward to explain to Thor what he had done wrong.

“What is going on?” Matt asked, since he supposedly couldn’t have known what had happened.

Foggy, of course, launched himself in a long explanation that Matt barely listened, his mind still trying to understand what had just happened. How did Clark move so fast? How did he react even before Matt or even Captain America could? How didn’t he hurt his hand? It didn’t make sense and now that he was actually thinking about it, nothing about this whole thing made sense.

The Avengers here, in this bar, playing pool, he could roll with it. It was unusual, but he supposed they weren’t always saving the world. But who was this guy hanging out so casually with two Avengers? Who was this guy giving tips to Thor about how much strength he should hit the ball? How could a normal person possibly have any notion of how to control the amount of strength they all knew Thor had? The more Matt thought about it, the more questions he had.
“Hey, Mr. Magoo, shit or get off the pot!” Jessica Jones barked, arriving at the table with a new beer mug. “It’s your turn now and I still have to get my money back.”

Matt sighed, looking in her direction, his line of thought completely forgotten. Now, that one was a one of a kind. Matt always wanted, expected even, to be treated normally by people. Sure, he was blind, but he, least of all, wasn’t an invalid. He got his wish; Jessica treated him as badly as she treated anyone else. It was refreshing, if nothing else.

Incredibly annoying too.

“Jessica, stop badmouthing people!” Clark reprehended.

“Why?” she responded, sounding really confused. “Because he’s blind? Are you some kind of racist?”

“Blind people are not a race,” Clark defended himself.

Jessica gasped; it was so fake that not even a child would be fooled.

“I can’t believe you just said that!”

Before Clark could answer her, Matt decided to interrupt. “It’s okay, really. And it is my turn, she is right.”

“See?” she said, smug, as he approached to play.

“You two are dating?” Foggy asked, no doubt curious about their conversation.

Clark and Jessica groaned in unison.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” Foggy added, smiling. He got up and got closer to Jessica. “So that means you’re single?”

Matt couldn’t see which expression Jessica made, but he could picture it in his mind by the movements her face muscles made; if he was right, Jessica was looking at Foggy not unlike anyone would look at a particularly disgusting bug.

“There is a bigger chance that I guess the winning numbers of the lotto three times in a roll than there is for us to go out on a date,” Jessica said, brutally.

Foggy just stared at her, frozen; then his face almost glowed. “So you’re telling me there’s a chance!”

Jessica groaned again, as the rest of them laughed.

“We are neighbors,” Clark explained, as Matt began to play. “We live near the bar, really.”

“You are from Hell’s Kitchen too?” Foggy asked, excited.

“Well, I’m from Smallville,” Clark said. “I arrived in the city not too long ago.”

“Yeah? What do you do?”

“I’m a journalist. Or I’m trying to be one.”
“Wait a minute!” Foggy exclaimed, suddenly. “Clark Kent… You’re the guy who wrote that piece about the mutant factory, aren’t you?!”

That gave Matt pause. He looked at Clark, waiting for him to confirm it.

“It’s him,” Jessica said, before he could. “He was able to pay rent for three months with that money.”

“I could’ve made it last a lot longer if you didn’t steal my food all the time,” Clark retorted.

“Man, do you know how many lives you saved?!” Foggy asked, excited, interrupting them. “That was amazing! Well, not the part about a mutant factory killing and torturing people right in the middle of New York, the part about you saving them!”

“I just did my job,” Clark said, clearly embarrassed.

Matt actually agreed with Foggy, even if less enthusiastically: what he did was amazing. He couldn’t believe a place like that even existed, much less in New York. To find that out, save the victims and be responsible for a bunch of arrests was no small thing, especially considering how high up in the government some of the people involved were.

Matt had no idea if his theory about Clark being Superman was correct, but in his eyes he was already a hero.

“What is a mutant factory?” Thor asked, confused, interrupting Foggy’s never ending compliments.

“You, huh, don’t have mutants where you’re from?” Foggy asked, a little embarrassed, probably because he knew very well from where ‘Donald Blake’ was from.

“There are no mutants in Asg-New Mexico,” Thor answered. He frowned. “As far as I know.”

“They are people born with abilities,” Steve explained. “No one knows why, really, but some humans are born like that. This ‘factory’ Clark helped close was an underground facility trying to force these mutations on ordinary humans.” He stopped talking for a second. “A lot of people died there.”

“That is terrible!” Thor exclaimed. “Why would they do this?”

“Mutants are feared and hated by a lot of people,” Matt said, as everyone looked at him. “Not many can accept abilities that they don’t understand. But a lot of people still think they are valuable as weapons.”

Matt wasn’t a mutant, but he was different and he knew very well what would some people think if they ever found out. He’d be a freak, dangerous even, treated badly simply for being what he was. He would defend the mutant cause simply because it was the right thing to do, but the fact that he felt so close related to them gave him an extra boost.

“Such foolishness!” Thor boomed. “In Asg-New Mexico we would never do that!”

Nobody really knew what to say about that, so they remained quiet, trying not to look at the very unconvincing Donald Blake from the apparently very pro-mutant New Mexico.

“So what do you two do?” Clark asked, probably more to refocus the attention over the squirming Thor over curiosity.
“Oh, we’re lawyers!” Foggy answered, promptly. “But don’t worry, we are good guys.” Jessica snorted. “Yeah, the word ‘lawyer’ and the words ‘good guy’ don’t go together.”

“No, really!” Foggy insisted. “Me and Matt are here to protect the little guy!”

“Which little guy?” Thor asked, confused.

“The… You know, the little people,” Foggy explained, lamely.

“We only take causes of people who really need help,” Matt answered, hitting another ball as he did so.

“Or we will, as soon as we take our first case!” Foggy added.

Jessica snorted again. “Yeah, good luck with that. You’re probably gonna die hungry. ‘Little guy’ equals ‘little pay’.”

“Not everything is about money,” Foggy defended them.

“Say that when you can’t pay you electricity bill,” Jessica countered.

“What do you do, Miss Jones?” Matt asked.

She groaned. “For Christ’s sake, don’t call me that… I’m a P.I.”

“Ah, that explains why you’re so cynical,” Matt said. “Worked for many lawyers?”

“Enough to know exactly what they’re like.”

“Well, we aren’t like that,” Foggy said, again. “We’ve even quit a big lawyer firm to open our own, just so we can do what is right!”

For some reason, Jessica looked at Clark when Foggy said that.

“Yeah, stupid thing to do,” she said. “But, oh, well, at least you’re going to be the good kind of stupid if you can survive the winter.”

From her, that was a compliment of the highest order.

“I think it’s a good thing,” Clark said too. “God knows how much help the little guy needs in this city.”

“That’s true,” Steve agreed.

Foggy opened his mouth to say something back to them, but Matt wasn’t listening anymore; something outside called his attention. Engines roaring, a lot of them, making the air smell of smoke. It was still too far for the ordinary human to hear, but Matt could detect them easily, running at full speed.

Running right in the direction of the bar they were at.

Clark noticed the noise way before anyone else did, but it was only when the bikes finally stopped in front of the bar that he knew something was about to happen. Too many motorcycles together, the loud voices, the laughing, the sound of heavy boots… Discretely, Clark turned towards the
door, right at the moment it was opened.

The man who opened the door wasn’t gentle; he pulled the door with such strength that it clashed against the wall, as he entered, looking around. A tense silence fell over the bar.

The man who entered was menacing. He had in his eyes the coldness of someone unbothered by violence and his whole appearance screamed he wasn’t one to follow the law; a thick beard, tattoos on his muscled arms, biker clothes and, most importantly, a Dogs of Hell jacket.

Clark knew who they were, of course, it wasn’t the first time he’d encountered them since he became Superman. The Dogs of Hell were a Motorcycle Club or, more accurately, they were a biker gang that controlled some parts of New York’s underworld. They used to traffic drugs and weapons all across the country and were famous for their brutality.

Needless to say, Clark took offense to that.

It didn’t take long for him to break most of their operations, it wasn’t like they had the means to face him, but he knew full well they were not beaten yet. Clark, however, wasn’t omnipresent, no matter what people may think; so while they weren’t flat out murdering people and bringing weapons and drugs inside New York, he could very well let the police deal with them while he took care of things the police wasn’t equipped to deal with.

Or so he thought, at least, but apparently he was wrong. What were they doing here? Clark and everybody else watched as ten bikers entered, following their leader, everyone of them moving like predators. A quick x-ray scan showed they weren’t carrying guns, but they were armed with knives, brass-knuckles and even chains.

This wasn’t a friendly visit.

“Nice little joint you got here,” the man leading the bikers said, walking slowly through the bar, the silence absolute. “How’s the beer?”

Nobody said anything for a few moments, the steps of the bikers the only sound around, as they spread in all directions of the bar. Clark could smell tobacco and alcohol in their breaths.

“The beer is good,” Luke’s calm voice answered, from behind the counter. “But I don’t think you’ll appreciate the place that much.”

“Oh, I disagree!” the biker answered, his voice deep and rough. “Booze, hot girls, even a pool table! It’s like we’re back at home!”

The other bikers laughed at the joke, still walking around, circling, like wolves surrounding their prey. None of them would pose any threat to Clark or his friends, but they were more than enough to hurt any civilian, especially when he considered the fact that they were used to violence.

Putting the tray back on the counter, Luke walked around it and went in the leader’s direction. Clark could hear his breathing and heartbeat and, surprisingly, they were as calm as ever. The leader of the bikers turned to him, opening his arms as if questioning Luke.

“Still, I think you can find a place more suited to you,” Luke said, stopping right in front of the biker; the man was big, but Luke still towered over him. “So I’m gonna have to ask for you to leave.”

The biker smiled like a shark, approaching Luke and staring at him.
“Is that so?” he asked.

Luke met his eyes, unbothered.


There was a thick, tense silence. Clark was ready to move, his hands closing around a pool ball. Around him, he could hear Thor and Steve moving closer to the bikers as well. Jessica, nonsurprisingly, also moved towards one of them. Her movement, probably because she was more than a little drunk, was noticed almost immediately by the biker.

“Hey, boss, I think we should stay!” the man said, eyeing Jessica lecherously. Clark closed his fists as the bearded man approached her. “Look at this hot chick here!”

The leader didn’t look, still locked in a staring contest with Luke.

“So, what do you say, girl?” the man asked, leaning over her, unbothered by his leader’s silence. “Wanna have some fun?”

“Hey, man, look,” Foggy started, approaching them carefully. “You don’t have to do this. We—”

“Shut up, I’m talking to the girl!” the biker snapped, roaring at Foggy, then looking at Jessica again. He smiled. “What do you say?”

To anyone else’s eyes, Jessica probably seemed frozen in fear, but Clark knew for a fact that she was anything but afraid; if anything, she was pissed because she had now, effectively, lost one hundred bucks to Matt that she would never see it again. Slowly, she lifted her hand and touched the man’s chest. The fat biker laughed, his companions joining him when he turned to look at them, probably feeling very sure of himself at that moment.

Or he was, until Jessica’s hand went up and closed around his beard; and she pulled.

The immense biker was simply forced down as if the sky itself had fallen over him and his head clashed directly against the table by his side. A terrible, loud noise, echoed, and the man fell down, knocked out. There was a second of silence.

“TAVERN BRAWL!” Thor boomed.

Then all hell broke loose.

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Jimmy the Bear was not prepared for the kind of resistance they met in that bar; it wasn’t like he was expecting any, to begin with. The plan was just stop there, drink some beers, feel up some chicks, and then wreck the place, hurting anyone who got in the way. Just a bit of fun on a very unpleasant night, with the added bonus of spreading the word that the Dogs of Hell were back and everyone wise should be very afraid, something that would help them to regain control of Hell’s Kitchen.

The risk was calculated; but man, they were really bad at math.

The owner was a huge, black behemoth of a man. Nothing Jimmy hadn’t faced before, but certainly an added difficulty, if the man decided to take offense about what they were going to do; and surprisingly, he did.

Jimmy was not used to being challenged and that was exactly as he took when the owner stopped
right in front of him and told him to leave. Was the man crazy? Did he have a death wish? Usually Jimmy would be more than happy to comply, but he didn’t want to kill anybody, that called the wrong kind of attention, so he couldn’t just stick a knife in his stomach.

Well, if the man needed a lesson, he was more than happy to provide.

Both of them assessed each other, without blinking, staring at each other’s eyes. And suddenly, Jimmy wasn’t so sure of himself anymore. Jimmy was a scary son of a bitch, he didn’t get to where he was by being nice. He fought and he killed before. But this black dude… He just didn’t show any semblance of fear. It was unsettling.

He heard Fat Johnson calling him from the other side of the bar, saying something about a girl, but he didn’t pay any attention, too busy staring at the owner. Someone else said something in response and Fat Johnson snapped at him; there were laughs.

And then, out of nowhere, there was a loud crash.

Turning fast, Jimmy saw Fat Johnson sprawled on the floor, passed out right in front of a tiny girl. What the fuck had happened?! What did that obese idiot do?! Whatever it was, Jimmy had no answer, because another big dude yelled:

“TAVERN BRAWL!”

The yell made everybody snap into motion. Roaring, Jimmy turned, fist already closed, and unleashed the strongest punch he could right in the owner’s face, set on defeating him quickly. He certainly didn’t expect feeling as if he had punched a concrete wall. 

CRACK!

“ARGHHHHH!” Jimmy yelled, feeling the bones in his hand break.

He fell down to his knees, clutching his hand desperately, the pain making him scream nonstop; that was when the owner’s hands grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him up. Jimmy was a big man, but he certainly didn’t feel like that at the moment, when his legs were dangling desperately in the air as the owner lifted him.

But it wasn’t the pain or the fact that he was being held like a toy over the owner’s head that took away his voice in surprise; it was what was happening all around. It was supposed to be easy, a bar full of drunk civilians was an easy mark, he told himself. Well, what the fuck was going on then?!

His men were being beaten up like unruly children all around. He saw when the big blond man, the one who yelled and started the whole thing, launching himself against two of them, tossing them against the wall with such strength that they made the whole place tremble. He saw another blond man drop two of his bikers with simple jabs, his punches flowing fast and precise and deadly. He saw a big guy wearing glasses bitch-slap two others and fucking knock them out with that. He saw what looked to be a fucking blind man hit one of the bikers with a cue ball, right at his forehead, god only knew how. And worst of all, he saw a damn woman, a fucking woman, grab his two still standing men by their throats and simply bash their heads together, as if they were dolls.

For the first time in his very long career, Jimmy was truly afraid. Desperate, he looked down, unable to free himself from the steel like hands of the owner; Jimmy’s eyes stared at his, completely wide. And then the owner tossed him down, strongly.

Jimmy the Bear didn’t see anything anymore.
“FREEDOM!” the woman yelled, for the hundredth time, making him want to claw his eyes out.

Not for the first time that night, Officer Brett Mahoney was regretting having answered the emergency call for a bar fight. Bar fights were usually easy to handle, just drunk people doing stupid things, nothing he would need backup for; that was what he was thinking when he answered it. Now, however…

“It’s the fucking Avengers!” he exclaimed, looking at Foggy Nelson, as he pointed to the holding cell of the precinct. “I arrested Thor and Captain America!”

“Now, now, I see why you are thinking that,” Foggy said, serenely, probably to try to calm him down. “But think, Brett, why would the Avengers be involved in a bar fight? Those two are just lookalikes.”

Brett looked at him with his lips pursed.

“Don’t even start with this bullshit, Foggy!” he exclaimed, more than a little incensed. Normally, Brett was the picture of calm, but not today. “I arrested Captain America, Thor, a drunk girl and some mild-mannered reporter who probably just got caught up in the middle of this huge clusterfuck because the Dogs of Hell decided to pick a fight with the Avengers!”

“FREEDOM!” Jessica Jones yelled again.

“SHUT UP! SHUT UP!” Brett screamed back, stress oozing out of his skin.

This was terrible. He would be known forever as the police officer who arrested Captain America and Thor. At best people would laugh their asses off, at worst he could get fired. Why didn’t he check their ID’s? How could he be fooled by glasses, caps and hoods? Why didn’t he listen when Nelson and Murdock told him that he should just call someone to take the Dogs of Hell and leave, without taking the rest of the people involved in the fight as well?

“Listen, Brett, we both know you will gain nothing doing this,” Murdock said, his low voice making his nerves calmer. “You didn’t book them. Couldn’t even if you wanted to, we both know that. Sooner or later a SHIELD agent will appear and order you to release them anyway, but the more they stay here, the bigger the chance of other cops noticing. And when word gets out…”

“I’ll be a laughingstock,” Brett finished.

Matt didn’t agree, but he didn’t disagree either.

“The best thing for us to do is to let them go. Now, before other cops notice just who you put in that cell.”

Brett looked at the holding cell, ignoring the constant yelling of “freedom” from the drunk girl; then he looked back at Nelson and Murdock. He frowned.

“And how exactly are you two involved in this?” he asked, suspiciously.

“Innocent bystanders,” Foggy answered, immediately.

He continued staring at them, not buying his explanation one bit.

“Sure. You just happened to be drinking at the same bar the Avengers were and then that same bar got attacked by a biker gang.”
Murdock sighed. “Believe it or not, that’s exactly how it happened.”

Brett didn’t believe it, not for one second. The Avengers had way more important things to do than to drink at sleazy bars and fight bikers. It was probably a mission of some kind, something critical to global security. He just didn’t know how Nelson and Murdock fit into that.

And if he was right, well, he was interfering with matters of planetary defense. He couldn’t do that.

“The clock is ticking, Brett,” Foggy remembered him.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Fine! But take them out through the back,” he relented. “And if either of you talk about this to someone, if you even whisper it to someone, I will make you pay!”

Neither Foggy nor Murdock seemed threatened in the least.

“Thanks, Brett,” Murdock said.

“I’ll buy those cigars for Bess as a thank you!” Foggy promised.

“Stop buying cigars for my mother!”

“She’ll outlive us all!”

“Well, that was an interesting night,” Clark mentioned, when he, Steve, Thor and a slumbering drunk Jessica resting on his arms were far away from the precinct. “Certainly didn’t think I would ever be arrested, I’ll say that much.”

Well, it wasn’t like it was an official arrest, but still. Clark made sure Kelex had deleted each and every footage of them, not only in the precinct, but in every camera they passed by. He couldn’t very well erase Matt and Foggy’s minds, but their identities would remain safe from the computers at least.

 Weirdly enough, he wasn’t worried. Matt and Foggy seemed to be legitimately good people, he was pretty sure they wouldn’t babble to the news about this. And they were, after all, the ones who got them out of jail before a SHIELD agent appeared.

He couldn’t even begin to imagine all the jokes and teasing they would have to endure if Natasha appeared there. Or worse, Tony. They really did owe Matt and Foggy one.

“You have never been in the dungeons, Kal?” Thor asked, smiling brightly, way too excited about everything that had happened.

“You have?” Steve asked, also smiling for some reason.

“Dozens of times!” Thor exclaimed, as they walked the empty streets. “Father could be terribly unreasonably sometimes.”

“I’m sure you had nothing to do with that, Mr. ‘Tavern Brawl’, ” Steve countered.

It was at that moment that everything that had passed that night finally dawned on them; and for some reason, they began to laugh. Slowly at first and then, gradually, their laughing became stronger and stronger until it was almost incontrollable. Three drunk men, laughing like idiots, and a passed out drunk woman who couldn’t handle Asgardian liquor.
Whatever Clark imagined his night would end, it hadn’t been like this. Still, he couldn’t have wished for a better one.
Chapter 30 – The Pied Piper

Reality itself seemed to twirl around her, like melted glass, and for a moment everything she could see was a spiral of lights and colors. Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over; the world stabilized again, the colors faded and reality took form once more. The heat was the first thing she felt, her eyes still closed, as the sun caressed her skin. The dry air, full of new smells, was the next.

And when Lorelei opened her eyes, a desert appeared in front of her eyes.

Traveling through the branches of Yggdrasil without the Bifrost was uncomfortable, to say the least, but it wasn’t like the possibility to travel through the Rainbow Bridge existed for her. The Bifrost was one of Asgard’s greatest strategic resources and as such it was used only by those Odin himself allowed.

It went without saying that a fugitive, like her, would not be granted such privileges.

How things changed, she thought, not without considerable bitterness. Lorelei was once loved on Asgard, respected, envied… But soon Asgard was not enough and she traveled to other realms, acquiring worshipers as easily as she breathed, basking in their adoration. Kingdoms and empires were made in her honor, monarchs bowed to her, offerings filled her palaces from bottom to top… And for that, for being loved more than the Allfather himself, she was punished.

For that, she was locked in Asgard’s dungeons, her voice sealed, tossed in a cell like a common criminal. And there she stayed, rotting, for 600 years. Until the Sacking of Asgard. Until the Dark Elves woke up from their slumber and attacked the Realm Eternal, unleashing a Kursed one inside the dungeons. A Kursed who promptly tore apart the cells, trampled the Einherjar, made a trail of destruction within the palace and almost killed the Queen.

But more importantly, a Kursed that had, intentionally or not, released her from her cell.

Escaping the palace amidst the chaos was not difficult, not when every soldier was busy fighting off the invasion; escaping from Asgard, however, was trickier. Yggdrasil’s branches were all connected, entwined around the Nine Realms, and those who knew the paths could use them as a way of traveling between the Realms. But new branches grew or changed position, older branches ceased to exist, and the Nine Realms and the Yggdrasil itself were in constant movement.

All it took was one wrong turn and a person could be lost forever amongst the branches of the World Tree. Luckily, Lorelei was no fool and even though 600 years was enough time for the paths to change, she had found her way to Midgard.

It seemed, however, that the branches of the Yggdrasil were not the only things that had changed in these 600 years.

To put it simply, Lorelei had no idea where she was. She knew in which Realm she was in, of course, but Midgard was vast and all she could see around her was a desert. An arid, filled with sand, hot desert. Lorelei could not hide her frustration. Walking was already a task she considered beneath her; walking through that place, under the sun, over the uncomfortable sand was something she had never, in all her long life, thought she would ever do.
Lorelei was supposed to be a Queen! An Empress, adored and worshiped by her subjects, with golden palaces in every Realm, fortune beyond imagination, glory and the love from all beings all around the universe!

She deserved nothing less, she knew it. Lorelei was not only the most beautiful goddess in all Nine Realms, she was beauty personified; her fiery red hair, her bright ivory skin, her emerald green eyes and her lustful body had thrown entire planets into war for the mere privilege of worshipping her. Her mind put scholars to shame, quicker and smarter than the greatest geniuses from all Realms.

And her magical abilities, honed for centuries, were so powerful that few beings would dare to meet her in combat.

Lorelei did not simply believe that ruling the Nine Realms was her right, she believed that the Nine Realms should be honored to kneel before her. But worthy subjects, like children, needed to be taught and the lessons were sometimes difficult to learn. Some would struggle, others would try to close their eyes and there were those who flat out refused guidance.

She learned that the hard way, on Asgard, and she paid the price for her mistakes during 600 years of silence and darkness; she would not commit the same errors again.

More than worshipers, Lorelei needed armies. Powerful armies, to unify all Realms under her command. Armies strong enough to face even the full might of Asgard. And a champion strong enough to gift her the head of the Allfather himself.

That was the real reason why she was on Midgard. Lorelei could, after all, reach any Realm she desired through the Yggdrasil. Realms that were far more advanced than Midgard, with its lower life forms. But Midgard now had something no other Realm had: the last Kryptonian.

Lorelei listened to tales told of this Kryptonian battle against his own people while she was in her cell. She listened to how he defeated General Zod himself, the feared military leader of the now destroyed Krypton, and all his soldiers when they attempted to take Midgard. She listened to how he fought against Thor Odinson during the Convergence Tournament and how he was as powerful as the God of Thunder, maybe even more so. She listened to how he battled against the Dark Elves, side by side with Thor, finally doing what not even Bor Burison could when they defeated Malekith.

If there was one being in the universe Lorelei needed to have so she could conquer the Nine Realms, it was Kal-El. With him leading her army, she would be unbeatable. With him as the tip of her spear, she could defeat and acquire Thor as well. With his strength, combined with Thor’s, not even Odin would be able to resist her.

And one way or the other Lorelei would take him, that she promised.

With her goal in mind, Lorelei walked through the desert, cursing Odin at every step; imagining her new champion taking the Allfather’s head off proved to be quite an enjoyable distraction, she admitted, but even that lost its novelty after a while. What place was this? In her travels to Midgard in the past, Lorelei had never stepped on such horrid location. The heat was beginning to annoy her; the sun couldn’t burn her Asgardian skin, of course, nor make her sweat, but it was incredibly inconvenient nonetheless.

Her heart almost burst with relief when she heard something approaching.

Whatever it was, it was moving fast, filling the silent place with a very loud sound. For a few
moments, the sound was all the evidence something was approaching, but soon Lorelei saw a cloud of dust in the distance; it had to be some kind of vehicle. Ignoring her reluctance in performing any kind of tiring activity, Lorelei ran in its direction, her Asgardian’s muscles well prepared for such task despite her lack of will.

She managed to intercept the vehicle right at the moment it would pass her; there was a screech as it stopped abruptly in front of her, getting terribly close from hitting.

Lorelei did not recognize the weird metal chariot, but humans were bound to have learned something in her 600 years of absence, she thought, as she analyzed the contraption. It was not a flying vehicle, that much was clear by its incapacity of defying gravity, but it was better than walking. Before the could draw any more conclusions, two doors opened and a man and a woman got out.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” the woman inquired, running to her.

The woman was her inferior in every aspect, Lorelei noticed immediately, taking great satisfaction in that fact even if it was very much expected. A mortal, not even a particularly beautiful specimen, clad in a ridiculous white dress that even the poorest Asgardian would not be caught wearing.

“Are you lost?” the woman asked again, when Lorelei didn’t answer. “Do you need help?”

Not even glancing at the woman again, Lorelei turned to the man, relishing at the wide-eyed look he was giving her. Sure, the man was hardly impressive, even the simplest of Asgardians possessed more beauty, but it was a long time since someone other than the prison guards had looked at her like that.

“What is this horrid place?” Lorelei finally asked, her eyes still fixed on the man.

Her exclamation seemed to surprise them.

“Oh! This is Death Valley,” the man answered immediately, still staring at her.

Fitting name, she thought, briefly looking around at the desolate land.

“How do you not know where you are?!” the woman asked, apparently worried for her; Lorelei almost scoffed. “How did you get here?”

Lorelei ignored her.

“I am looking for Kal-El. Where can I find him?” Lorelei questioned.

To her surprise, she received only two pairs of puzzled looks. How could these vermin not know about the Savior of Midgard?! Were humans this stupid?

“Kal-El… Wait, isn’t that Superman’s name?” exclaimed the woman, turning to the man; he was still staring at her, mesmerized, but the question seemed to awake him. He rapidly nodded. “Yeah, I thought so!”

“Superman?” asked Lorelei, confused.

“That’s how they call him,” the woman explained. “Because he is, well, super!”

Yes, humans apparently were that stupid, Lorelei concluded.

“Where can I find this… Superman?” she demanded.
Again, her question was met with a set of baffled expressions. How could that be?! A man such as Kal-El, with that much power, should have an entire kingdom at his feet! He ruled Midgard! Was it too much to ask for the location of his main palace? The capital of his empire?

“He goes everywhere, really,” the woman finally answered. “He flies around the world, helping everyone that needs help.”

“He does seem to like New York, though,” the man added. “Probably because of all that mess during the invasion.”

“New York? Is that the seat of his kingdom?” Lorelei requested.

“Ahhh…” the woman started, but Lorelei had no more patience.

“Take me to New York!” she ordered.

Unbelievably, the two mortals did not obey her instantly, they only stared at her.

“We… We are not going that way,” the woman said, hesitantly. “I mean, not even a little bit! We are going to our honeymoon!”

She said that with a very pleased expression, blushing lightly as she glanced at the man.

“Honeymoon?” Lorelei repeated.

The woman smiled at her and grabbed the man’s hand.

“We just got married,” she said, almost glowing with happiness. “Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie, forever together!”

Lorelei raised a single eyebrow.

“Is that so?” the Asgardian asked, smiling as well; her smile, however, had nothing pleasant about it. Reaching with her own hand, she touched the man’s shoulder, allowing her magic to flow. “Tell me your name.”

“J-Jimmy!” he answered, not looking at his wife anymore. In fact, he barely seemed aware that she was even there now.

“Well, Jimmy… Do you love your wife?” Lorelei asked, eyes fixed on his, her voice magically seductive. “Would you do anything for her?”

“Yes, of c-course,” he stammered, glancing briefly at his wife. “I love her more than anything!”

The woman seemed to melt when he said that, but Lorelei just smiled.

“Loyalty… I admire that in a man,” Lorelei praised. “But do you love her more than me?” she finally asked.

Jimmy Mackenzie, still wearing the same clothes from his wedding, holding his bride’s hand, opened his mouth to answer; except no sound came out of it. He just kept staring at Lorelei, mouth wide open, incapable to say anything whatsoever as Lorelei’s magic spread through his mind. His bride turned to look at him, her hands pressing his, but not even that seemed to break the trance he was in.

“No,” he finally said; his wife let go of his hand, staring shocked at him. “I love you more than I
Lorelei almost laughed at the astonished — and wounded — expression on the woman’s face.

“I seek passage from this ‘Valley of Death’ to a more bountiful land,” Lorelei said, her voice sweet like honey. “I need you to take me to New York, Jimmy. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes!” he answered, without hesitation.

“Jimmy! What are you doing?!” the woman exclaimed, tears beginning to ruin her makeup. “This-this is not funny!”

Jimmy turned to look at his wife for a second, but his glassy eyes barely registered her; and then, as if he couldn’t help himself, he stared at Lorelei again, almost as if his head was moving on its own.

“Then we shall go now, Jimmy,” Lorelei stated. She glanced at the woman. “But first I need you to get rid of her.”

Lorelei barely paid any attention as her newest slave choked the life out of the previous love of his life, too busy exploring the vehicle’s interior to care.

Clark flew over New York’s buildings, following with his eyes the van running dangerously fast through the streets, relentlessly pursued by the police. Bank robbers, he knew, using his x-ray vision to confirm that the van was full of armed bandits and sacks of stolen money. Did they really expect to successfully flee after a stunt like that? Even if he wasn’t there, the probability of success was almost null.

That particular fact didn’t seem to deter the robbers, apparently, because the driver clearly thought he could solve all their problem by going even faster.

It didn’t take a genius to realize that a speeding van running thought a packed street couldn’t result in anything other than an accident. Almost as soon as the driver tried to turn, the van crashed against a car and flipped over, bouncing against the asphalt violently and without control.

Right towards the sidewalk, where a woman and a little boy eating an ice-cream were.

Without hesitating even for a second, Clark dived, gaining speed so fast that the air boomed around him. He could see the van crashing without control against the ground, leaving pieces of it behind as it advanced; the woman and the kid were frozen in place, both staring wide eyed at the approaching vehicle, knowing there was nothing they could do to escape in time.

And when the van finally reached the sidewalk, ready to crash against the pedestrians, Clark arrived between them.

Using his entire body, he shielded both the mother and her kid, his arms grabbing the van with his Kryptonian strength and actually stopping it midair; he didn’t move an inch, but the metal of the vehicle felt the impact, bending as it touched him.

“Look, it’s Superman!” he heard the kid yelling happily, to the still shocked and frozen woman. “I knew he would save us!”

As much as Clark appreciated the confidence the boy had in him, it had been a close call; he didn’t need to know that, though. Carefully, Clark put the van down, hoping the crash hadn’t hurt the men inside too much. They were criminals, of course, but Clark preferred they arrested rather than
dead or crippled.

Moving fast, he went around the van and ripped the door out, releasing the driver from the bent metal, doing a quick x-ray scan on him to confirm he wasn’t too harmed.

“S-Superman?” the man slurred, clearly concussed. “You’re supposed to be in China!”

He rolled his eyes. “Sorry for interrupting your robbery, I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Superman can fly very fast!” the kid piped up from the other side of the car, happily informing the driver and every bystander.

Putting the man on the street, not before disarming him, Clark moved to release the other men trapped in the back of the van, just as the police cars began to arrive. Distracted, he opened the doors, frowning when one of them actually shot him on the chest.

“Really?!” he complained, looking at the confused and terrified robber who shot him. “I’m trying to help you and you shoot me?!”

He didn’t know if it was what he said or the fact that he was Superman, but the man quickly tossed the pistol away, looking more baffled than ever.

“Sorry!” he slurred, trying to get up. “I-I didn’t know! I thought you were in China!”

Again, Clark rolled his eyes, pulling the man out of the vehicle.

“Superman can read minds and see the future!” the kid yelled once again to everyone that could listen. “He is always there to stop the bad guys!”

“You can really read minds?!” asked a third robber, as Clark helped him get out of the van so the cops could take them.

“I bet you feel really stupid for thinking what you were thinking right now, huh?” Clark asked, seeing the man pale; of course he couldn’t read minds, but the guy obviously wasn’t thinking anything flattering about him right now. He turned to the fourth and last robber, still in the van. “And you, over there, put the gun down and come out slowly. You all robbed a bank, caused an accident and almost killed a woman and a kid. Shoot me again and your stay in the hospital will be a while longer, believe me.”

The robber, shocked and afraid at how Clark could’ve know he was reaching for a gun, quickly put it down; maybe he couldn’t read minds, but he could see through things. As he turned, Clark was greeted by a crowd of people, everyone holding a cellphone to film everything that was happening, as if the whole thing was a show instead of an arrest.

The cops, at least, were doing their job, even if everyone of them stopped from time to time to gawk at him.

“I trust you guys can take it from here?” he asked the closest cop, making him nod fast.

“Thanks for the help, Superman!” he said, actually shaking his hand. “N-not just today. Crime has been real slow since you showed up.”

“That’s because Superman is always there to fight for good!” the kid yelled again, beaming at him.

Clark was flattered, he really was, but what exactly had people been talking about him?
“Thanks, Superman,” the woman he saved said, still pale, but smiling now. “You saved us!”

He couldn’t help but smile back, patting the kid on the head as he did it. The compliments were still a little weird, but he was doing this to help them, after all, and it was nice to see things working out.

As soon as he thought that, still surrounded by bystanders madly taking pictures, Clark heard a very familiar sound in the distance; quickly, he turned around, focusing his vision so he could see through the buildings and far away. And what he saw made him smile.

The Bifrost was glowing in the distance.

Sif had maybe five seconds to ground herself after the overwhelming Bifrost travel before she heard something landing behind her. Or, more accurately, someone. She smiled, turning.

“I was expecting you would show up, Kal, but not that fast,” she said, greeting the Kryptonian.

“Sif! I thought it could be you!” Kal said, walking to her and actually embracing her; Sif took a second to hug him back, surprised — but not in a bad way — by the gesture. “I’m really glad you came to visit!”

This reminded Sif the real reason she was there; her excitement in seeing her friend lowered considerably.

“I am afraid I am not here to visit, Kal,” she said, her voice serious. “We have a big problem.”

“You have a beautiful home, Kal,” Sif said, looking around at the room.

She meant what she said, but Midgardian homes were still weird to her. Why did they all live in towers? Kal could fly, that was how they got here, so it was practical for him, but she did not understand Midgardian’s obsession with these tower-like buildings. And such small places! Midgard was so much bigger than Asgard, why did they all choose to live side by side, packed like stored pieces of armor in a box? Even the animals on Asgard had more space!

At least it was better than the wood cabins they used to build a thousand years ago.

“Actually, it’s not mine, it’s from my friend’s sister. Well, my she is my friend too,” Kal said, as she explored the bright room. “Mine is a lot smaller and not nearly as fancy… And it’s being renovated right now. Against my will…” he added in a lower voice.

He shook his head for a second, as if dispelling that line of thought.

“Anyway, would you like to drink something? Eat something?” he asked, opening the cabinets. “We have… Soda and cereal. Yes, she ate everything I bought to make a sandwich…”

Sif did not know who “she” was, but it did not matter right now.

“I do not want anything, Kal, I do not have time to lose,” she said, approaching him. That seemed to draw his attention. “A fugitive, a dangerous fugitive, has escaped from the dungeons during our battle against the Dark Elves. Heimdall was able to track her here, on Midgard.”

Kal was suddenly serious now. “Do you know where he is?”

“She,” Sif corrected. “And no, she has cloaked herself from Heimdall’s vision using some kind of
magic. All I know is that she is here, in this land.”


“Not here, in this city, but to the East of this continent,” Sif explained. “I will search for her trail soon enough, but I wanted to speak to you first.”

“Do you need help?” Kal asked, always eager to lend his strength.

Sif shook her head. “That is exactly why I needed to speak to you first: you cannot, in any circumstance, help me. You are not to approach Lorelei.”

Kal’s surprised expression, despite the seriousness of the situation, at least made her smile.

Before Clark could ask Sif to explain that, he heard steps coming from the outside corridor; he sighed. Well, that would be great.

“Before you go on,” Clark started, “my friend just got here. She is… weird, so just ignore her.”

Sif frowned, obviously not understanding what Clark meant, but then turned to look at the apartment’s door opening. And there was the reason for Clark’s warning: Jessica Jones. She entered the apartment with her head lowered, visibly tired because of a long night of work, smelling like the cheap alcohol she had undoubtedly mixed in her coffee. She locked the door and turned; that’s when she saw them.

Clark could imagine the weirdness of what Jessica’s eyes were seeing. In the middle of Trish’s apartment, standing out completely from the normalcy of a common day, were Superman and a woman dressed in plate armor, complete with a sword and shield. Not exactly what people would think to find in their homes at 10 am or, really, any other time.

“What the—” Jessica whispered, looking at them wide eyed. “What the hell, Clark? I can’t leave for half a day and you’re already doing some freaky roleplay sex thing in my sister’s apartment?!”

He sighed again, looking down, just waiting for her to finish whatever she had to say fast.

“What’s the scenario here?” Jessica continued, tossing her bag over the couch and walking to them. “Let me guess: she is an Amazon warrior and you fell on her island. Is that it? Are you stuck in the middle of an island full of warrior women wanting a piece of Superman? Is that your fantasy?”

Clark turned to her.

“No… But I’m beginning to think it’s yours,” he said and before she could go on — because she would and that would probably offend Sif at some point — he explained: “Jessica, this is Lady Sif of Asgard. Sif, this is Jessica Jones. Sif here was just explaining to me that we have an Asgardian criminal on the loose.”

That cut Jessica’s speech short.

“Oh, fuck, not again! Another Loki?!” she exclaimed. “Hell’s Kitchen is not ready for that again!”

It was a good question, so Clark looked at Sif, eyebrows raised.

“Lorelei is not Loki,” Sif began again, still glancing curiously at Jessica, “but she is dangerous in her own way.” She turned to Clark. “Especially with you here.”
Again, Clark didn’t understand what that meant. What did this criminal — Lorelei apparently — had to do with him?

“Kal, Lorelei is a powerful sorceress, “Sif started, her voice carrying a very serious tone. “That, by itself, is reason enough to be wary of her. But the true reason I want her far away from you and Thor is because of what she can do with her magic: Lorelei’s voice bends and shape the wills of men to her own purpose.”

Enslave people with her voice? Was that even possible? Clark was surprised by what Sif said, but before he could ask for any clarification, Jessica interrupted.

“She can control people by talking to them?” she asked Sif.

Clark looked at Jessica, searching her expression; the reason he did that was because of how she sounded. Jessica didn’t sound skeptic or even dismissive, like she normally sounded about most things.

She sounded afraid; that wasn’t something Clark had seen her demonstrate before.

“Lorelei is a master when it comes to controlling minds,” Sif confirmed, nodding. “It takes but a word and most men fall to their knees in adoration. If that fails, a single following touch will undoubtably enthrall them.”

“I’m not most men,” Clark said, not appreciating the fact that Sif was basically forbidding him to help her.

“No, you are not, Kal,” Sif agreed. “You are one of the most powerful men I have ever met. And if Lorelei is able to enthrall you… I truly do not know how we can stop you.”

Sif looked deeply into his eyes, trying to convey exactly how serious that situation was.

“600 years ago, Lorelei began a quest to conquer the Nine Realms,” Sif told them. “Entire civilizations were dominated by her, pitted against each other, as she gathered the armies she needed to face Asgard. Empires fell, families were destroyed, brothers fought against brothers, fathers killed their sons.” The Asgardian closed her eyes for a second, breathing deeply. “The things that woman has done, Kal… I lack the words to describe how much I despise her. And the last thing I need is for her to control you.”

“Can she?” Jessica asked, her voice still strangely serious. “Are you sure about that?”

“I have never seen her fail to command a man,” Sif answered. “Her voice and her touch can work on anyone even remotely attracted to her, but men possess an inherent weakness that women do not share. Even if Kal was not attracted by women — and I know for a fact that he is — Lorelei could use that biological weakness against him. And then she would unleash him upon this Realm.”

Clark felt cold by the mere thought of that. He couldn’t even imagine what he would feel if someone forced him to hurt people, to destroy, to kill. To make him her weapon, nothing more than sword that she would use to carve Earth and then the other Realms.

His worry probably showed on his face, because he felt Sif’s hand lightly touching him.

“I will not allow that to happen, you have my word,” Sif promised, looking at his eyes. “But I will need you to swear not to approach her.”

“I would be an idiot if I did, after what you just told me,” Clark replied.
“Yes, you would, but rationality and emotion are not the best match,” Sif retorted. “I need your word that you will not interfere even if Lorelei tries to draw you out. Even if she starts to hurt people. Even if she uses them to lure you.”

He felt another shiver at the thought of what Sif described. Could he promise something like that?

“Do you think that bitch will do that?” Jessica asked. “Start torturing people if Clark doesn’t show up?”

Sif’s eyes became glassy for a second.

“I have seen Lorelei commanding husbands to kill their wives simply to prove that they loved her more. I have seen her ordering fathers to slay their sons and daughters, just because she could. There is nothing that this monster would not do.”

She raised her head and looked at Clark again.

“But I will not allow it,” she repeated. “Not again. I was the one who brought her to justice 600 hundred years ago and I will do so one more time.”

“Are you going to kill her?” Clark couldn’t help but to ask.

“I would like nothing more than to take her head off, but the Allfather ordered me to bring her to Asgard alive, so she can rot in her cell for all eternity. I will not fail him.” She turned to Clark again. “But I need your word that you will not interfere. I can defeat Lorelei. I cannot defeat her and you together.”

Clark looked down for a long while. He didn’t like this, he didn’t like this at all. The thought that a monster like this was roaming the Earth right now was enough to make him sick, but it was worse than that; it was worse because Sif was asking him to not do anything about it. Could he promise that? To stay away, while that woman hurt innocent people?

Before he could stop, Clark nodded, giving Sif his word; he might not like it, but he trusted her enough for this.

“What about Thor?” Clark asked. “Did you warn him?”

“Thor is safe for the moment, he is in another continent. And Lorelei is not looking for him, not right now at least.”

“Why does she want me so much?” Clark asked and his question was met with a pair of incredulous eyes.

“You made an impression,” Sif summarized. “You defeated Zod and his soldiers, you fought Thor to a standstill and you had good chances of defeating even him. Do you know how many people can do that?” He shook his head. “Not a lot. If she manages to enthrall you, Kal, she could take entire worlds with ease. She could use you to help her enthrall Thor. With both of you… The level of destruction she would bring is unquantifiable.”

Sif touched his shoulder again.

“That is why I will stop her.”

Saying that, Sif started to walk towards the window, no doubt to shout out for the Bifrost. Before she could, however, Jessica grabbed her arm.
“I want to help you.”

Neither of them knew what to say in response to that. Sif, obviously, had no idea how a human could be of any help against an Asgardian that dangerous and Clark… Clark was baffled that Jessica even cared about that at all. He knew she wasn’t a bad person, in fact she was quite the opposite, but he would have never expected her to be so bothered by Lorelei. Jessica corrected evil when she saw it, but she rarely went out of her way to actually do something about it.

“Look, this bitch is bad news for everybody,” Jessica started, glancing at him, “especially Clark. If she has her way, Earth is fucked. Superman can’t help, for once, and neither can blondie. But I can.”

Sif stared back at Jessica, in silence. “I commend your bravery, Lady Jones, but Lorelei is above mortals. You would get hurt for no good reason.”

Instead of saying anything back, Jessica simply pressed Sif’s arm with her hand, hard; a look of surprise crossed Sif’s face.

“I know I can’t fight an Asgardian,” Jessica admitted, in rare moment of modesty, “but I’m not just any human. Plus, you said it yourself, that bitch will have thralls with her. I can at least beat them up, to let you focus on the real threat.”

Sif looked at Clark, as if searching for his opinion on the matter; he just shrugged.

“It’s not my decision,” Clark said, looking at both of them. He frowned. “I don’t like being left out, but I trust both of you.”

Still clearly undecided, Sif looked at Jessica. She looked deep into her eyes, measuring her will; Jessica didn’t falter. After a few seconds, the Asgardians sighed.

“Very well, you may help me,” she said and only after that Jessica released her arm. Sif took something from her belt and presented to Jessica. “But you are not going unarmed.”

Clark and Jessica watched, confused, as Sif revealed a small metallic cylinder to them, not much bigger than a dagger would be; they had no idea what that was, until the Asgardian fumbled with it and activated some kind of button. In front of their eyes, the cylinder grew to the size of Clark’s arm, the opposite side ending in a spiked, metal ball, clacking with some unknown energy.

It was a mace.

Jessica seemed delighted, her fascinated expression glowing like a kid on Christmas day; Clark, however, was a little bit worried.

“Are you sure you want to give her an Asgardian mace?” Clark asked, as Jessica grabbed the weapon to test it out. “She can already do a lot of damage without it.”

“Fuck you!” she pointed out, hitting the air.

“It is not Asgardian,” Sif explained, as if that was the problem, “it is Thanagarian. It is made of Nth-Metal, a metal only found on Thanagar. I took it from a Thanagarian foolish enough to challenge me.” She looked at Jessica. “It has a lot of interesting properties, such as negating gravity around it and, more relevant to our problem, the ability to disrupt dimensional energy. It can negate magic.”

“I can’t wait to bash that bitch’s head with this!”
Yes, it was a dangerous idea to give that to Jessica, no doubt. Before he could raise any additional concerns, however, Kelex began to ring, as it transferred a call from his cellphone; he raised his eyebrows at the familiar number reproduced on the Liquid Geo’s surface.

“Clark, SHIELD has just picked up a Bifrost opening next to New York. Do you know anything about that?”

A sudden idea occurred to him as he heard Natasha’s voice; Sif and Jessica needed all the help they could get.

Lorelei was bored as the strange vehicle crossed the Valley of Death. There was absolutely nothing to see, anything to distract her but the ramblings of her newest thrall, Jimmy. She sighed, feeling the wind caressing her skin; if she had no more use for him, this little man would already be dead. Were all Midgardians so boring?

Kal-El would not be, she knew it. A god such as him would fully entertain her, she was certain of it, if not by speaking, then by using his body in different ways. Ways that she had longed for in those 600 years alone. Lorelei had never seen him, that was true, but the descriptions she heard certainly seemed to paint an enticing figure.

She was distracted by the images playing in her mind, that she only noticed the vehicle leaving the road when Jimmy was already turning; a strange building appeared by their side, full of men clad in black clothes, with a sign that said “Rosie’s Desert Oasis” on its top.

“I just gotta grab something real quick,” he said, looking lovingly at her. “I’ll be right back, my love.”

Lorelei could not stop her tired sigh as he left the vehicle. Still, at right now she had something to distract her. Looking around, the Asgardian sorceress opened the door and left the vehicle, stretching her long legs as the wind made her green dress flutter. She could feel all eyes fixed on her and that made her smile.

“Hey, darlin’,” one of the men said, approaching; he was obviously entranced by her beauty, but his will seemed stronger than Jimmy’s. “A gal like you can have any man you want. Why’d you marry that little dude? He loaded?”

As if she would ever marry someone! Lorelei almost scoffed, as she assessed the man in front of her. He was certainly a lot more impressive than Jimmy, handsome even, as far as mortals could be. He was wearing a leather jacket with a boar’s crest on its back, with the words “Dogs of Hell” on top of it. Was it a clan of some kind?

“He is not my husband,” Lorelei finally answered. “I took him from his bride earlier today. I needed him to provide safe passage.”

“You in trouble?” the man asked. “Cause if you need a place to lay low for a while, this is as good as any.”

It was adorable that he thought she needed a mortal to defend her, but before she could say anything, one of those weird two-wheeled vehicles parked all around roared.

“Oh! It roars like a beast,” she mentioned, impressed.

“It’s a 1987 Heritage Softail,” the man answered. “You can hop on mine if you want to feel it roar.”
He guided her closer to the vehicle that belonged to him, obviously trying to impress her. And despite the primitive technology in front of her, Lorelei was impressed; it was quite a beautiful machine.

“How grand!” she said, touching it, feeling the cold metal under her skin. She glanced at the man. “What is your name?”

“My men call me Rooster,” he answered, pointing at the name printed on his jacket.

“You have men?” Lorelei asked, pleasantly surprised. “You are their leader?”

Rooster chuckled, basking in her attention. “Last time I checked, yeah.”

Lorelei smiled at him; then, allowing her magic to flow through her hand, she touched his shoulder.

“You and your men now serve me,” she decided, hitting the man with the full might of her voice.

She did not know how impressive him and his men were, but they could not be possibly worse than her current thrall.

“This guy bothering you?!” Jimmy asked, alarmed.

She rolled her eyes; speaking of him, there he was.

“No,” she answered, softly. “He is with me now.”

“What? No! I’m with you!” Sometimes being adored was such hard work, Lorelei thought. “You said we’d be together forever, remember?”

“I said we would be together until the end,” Lorelei said to the pathetic man, staring at him. “It is the end.”

Saying this, she slapped his chest with her Asgardian strength; Jimmy’s mortal body was simply no match to her. She felt his ribs caving and he flew away, clashing against his own vehicle. He was dead the moment he hit the metal.

Everyone was looking at her with awe and fear.

“Who are you?” Rooster asked, fascinated by her more than ever.

“I am Lorelei,” she answered, smiling, as she grabbed his hand and walked with him towards the other men. “And soon enough I will be the Queen of this Realm.”

——

“What do you still want to do this?” Clark asked Jessica.

The three of them were waiting side by side on a deserted runway of the nearest airport, searching the sky for any approaching aircraft. He glanced at Jessica again.

“We are going to deal with SHIELD,” he continued. “They might not make any questions right now, but they’ll certainly add you to their files when this is over.”

She just shrugged. “You can always delete them.”

“I can and I will, just as I made it impossible to link our faces and fingerprints to whatever database they might have.” He raised a single eyebrow. “But I can’t erase their memories. They’ll know you
exist and what you can do. Are you sure you still want to do this? Don’t you want to use a mask or
something?”

Jessica met his eyes, completely serious. “No, I’m not hiding who I am. And yeah, I still want to do
this. Just… make up some name or something and we’ll deal with it later if it becomes a problem.”

Clark nodded; he thought for a second. “I’m going to call you ‘Jewel’. ‘J’ for short.”

That made her turn fast. “No, you fucking won’t! How do you even know about that shit?!”

“Trish talks a lot when she is drunk,” Clark chuckled, amused. “Oh, come on, you would look
awesome wearing that uniform she made for you! Perfect to fight crime!”

“Yeah, if I wore that thing you wouldn’t call me ‘Jewel’, you would call me ‘Captain Camel
Toe’!”

Clark actually choked on his own saliva when he heard that.

“I do not understand,” Sif interrupted, frowning. “Was your battle suit shaped like a camel? Does
that animal have some significance in Midgard?”

He thanked all the gods he possibly could when a Quinjet appeared in the sky, preventing him to
have to explain Jessica’s filthy vocabulary. The aircraft flew above them unbelievably fast, turning
midair to start its descent.

“Kal, something I just remembered,” Sif began, as the Quinjet approached the ground, “do you still
have that book the Allfather gave you? The one about Kryptonians?”

“Of course!” he exclaimed, as if he would toss that away; it was one of his most prized
possessions. “I read it almost every day.”

“Did you already try your hand at Torquasm-Vo?” she finally asked.

He widened his eyes when she said that, understanding why Sif made that question immediately.
Torquasm-Rao and Torquasm-Vo were both sides of a Kryptonian martial art, one to strengthen the
body and the other to strengthen the spirit. Sif herself had helped him learn a bit of Torquasm-Rao
before the Convergence Tournament and, as she had demanded, Clark had been training by himself
every day.

Torquasm-Vo, however, was trickier. It hadn’t anything to do with the body, but with the spirit; in
short, it was a magical discipline and Clark had no teacher to show him how to do that.

That didn’t mean he hadn’t tried. He had read the book Odin gave him several times already and he
took special care to learn everything he could about Torquasm-Vo, even if he could understand just
the theory. And according to the book, Torquasm-Vo wasn’t meant only for attacking, but for
defense as well.

Especially, the defense of the mind against any external influence, something that would serve him
well now.

“I tried to learn by myself,” Clark answered, finally, “but aside from a few meditation exercises, I
haven’t got that far.”

“Nothing in how to defend your mind?” she asked. “That would be useful.”
“I agree. And yes, I know how to do it. Or, at least, I know the theory,” Clark said, sighing. “The book compared the magical intrusion of the mind with poison. In short, the more ‘poison’ in your body, the less control over yourself you have. So you need a way to flush it out; Kryptonians can do that by using the energy we gather from the sun.”

The Quinjet finally landed, vertically, like a helicopter would, but only Jessica was paying any attention.

“In theory, Kryptonians can force the energy inside us to flow through the body, disrupting any foreign energy in it.” Clark continued. “That way, the magical hold is broken or at least weakened. The problem, however, is that you need to have control over your own mind to attempt this, to begin with, and if you are actually being controlled then how could you force yourself to escape?

“I presume the book says how?” the Asgardian questioned.

“It does,” Clark sighed, “but I’m not anywhere near being able to do that. The book teaches, via meditation, to create a small shield around a part of your mind. And inside that protected mindscape, you would keep enough memories and force of will to be able to fight off any control. So even if your mind was taken, a small part of it would still work enough so you could escape.”

“Can you do it?” Sif asked, going straight to the point.

Clark shook his head. “I can control the energy inside me to flush any magic out, it’s really not that different from flying, but I have no idea how to create this protected mindscape inside my own head. I tried, believe me, but without someone to show me how is too difficult. So even if I can fight off any magical control, if I was being controlled I wouldn’t want to fight it and, because of that, I wouldn’t be able to escape. I rather not depend on this particular skill, to be honest.”

Sif sighed, as the doors of the Quinjet opened.

“Hopefully, you will not.”

Saying this, she looked at the aircraft, just as a familiar redhead was coming out, her long hair fluttering with the wind. Walking like she was a top model in a fashion show — and she could very well be one, Clark admitted —, Natasha crossed the distance to them, fully clad in her black skinsuit and carrying a lot of guns; she was prepared for battle, clearly.

“Hey, Natasha, how are you doing?” Clark greeted, smiling at her.

Her face lost the serious expression for a second as she smiled back.

“Could be better, without the mind-controlling alien galivanting through the planet, but not bad at all,” she said, looking at Jessica and Sif. “Lady Sif, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Sif said, respectfully. “You fought well against the Dark Elves, it will be an honor to fight by your side again.”

“Thank you,” Natasha replied, smiling. “I’m glad to be able to fight alongside such great warriors.”

“Thank you,” Sif said, bowing her head slightly. “I hope we will be able to fight together again.”

Natasha bowed her head slightly, obviously surprised by how much Sif was honoring her; Thor most likely told them several tales from Loki’s invasion, Clark considered. It wasn’t every day a group of mortals managed to keep up with a god and the Avengers went even beyond that.

Finally, she turned to look at Jessica.

“Jessica Jones, it is a pleasure to finally meet you,” she said, nodding again; Jessica, in turn, looked perplexed. “Though I wish it were under better circumstances. We should go out sometime to
“You know who I am!!” Jessica finally exclaimed.

Natasha tilted her head slightly. “You’re Clark’s neighbor and you already met Stark. Of course I know.” She stopped for a second, assessing Jessica. “Didn’t know you were enhanced, to be honest, but don’t worry, your identity will remain confidential, as will Clark’s.” Natasha looked at him. “We owe you that much.”

It meant a lot to Clark that Natasha was willing to do that for him.

“Well, that’s a lot better,” Jessica said, glancing at him. “You won’t have to call me that name ever again.”

“Actually, if you are talking about an alias, it would still be better to use it,” Natasha advised. “I won’t tell anyone about who you are, but as much as I trust the team we are about to meet, they probably will when they are debriefed.”

“Great…” Jessica mumbled.

“And you should wear this,” Natasha continued, grabbing a small case from her waist.

Opening it in front of them, the spy took what seemed to be a gelatinous membrane from inside, not that different, in Clark’s opinion, from a very thin and transparent scaled skin. It looked as if someone had skinned a fish so efficiently, that the skin taken from it was translucid. He had no idea what that was.

“May I?” Natasha asked, approaching Jessica’s face with it.

Jessica glanced at Clark for a second, as if asking what the hell was going on, but Clark nodded, trusting Natasha not to harm her. Very delicately, Natasha placed the weird gelatinous thing over Jessica’s face, making sure to spread it perfectly over all its surface. Then she took a step back, looking at her work.

As if activated by itself, the membrane glowed blue for a second and then they weren’t looking at Jessica’s face anymore.

“Incredible!” Clark whispered, finally realizing what the thing was.

“What?!” Jessica asked, unusually nervous as to why the three of them were staring at her, only to be even more surprised when the voice that came out of her mouth wasn’t hers.

“It is a Photostatic Veil or, a Nano Mask, for short,” Natasha explained, before Jessica freaked out and ripped the thing off. “It can make you look and sound like anyone. Very useful for us in the espionage business.”

Before Jessica could even ask, Natasha picked a small mirror from her belt and held it in front of her face. And reflected there, was a face that didn’t belong to Jessica. To be honest, it wasn’t that different from her, now that Clark was paying attention, but it was more than enough to trick anyone.

“Don’t you have some alien tech that does this, Clark?” Jessica asked, touching her own face. “It even feels like a real face…”

“Not that I know of,” he answered, amazed by it. He looked at Natasha. “Thank you.”
She just smiled, as if she hadn’t done nothing that meaningful, but it meant a lot to Clark that she went so far just to protect one of his friends. And, of course, to protect him. If someone managed to find out Jessica’s identity and link her to Superman, it wouldn’t be that difficult to find out who he was. Before he could say anything else to her, a very loud noise appeared in the distance; a big aircraft, no doubt.

“I think whoever you called to help us is approaching,” Clark said, looking up and far away, to where a huge black plane was flying; he turned to Natasha. “Who are they?”

Natasha followed his eyes to try to see what he was seeing, but her eyes weren’t that good.

“They are a small team inside SHIELD who mostly operates alone, in cases SHIELD has not yet classified,” Natasha said. “If anyone can help us find this alien fast, it’s them.”

“Tony could help,” he suggested.

“Stark could also meddle and end up mind-controlled,” Natasha retorted immediately. “I rather keep the Avengers out of this one, for our safety. The damage the team could cause if compromised is immeasurable, that’s why they are being kept out of the loop and watched.” She glanced at him. “If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be here either.”

“Thanks,” Clark said, sarcastically.

“I mean it, Clark. This isn’t the first time we deal with an enemy capable of controlling people,” she said, completely serious. “When Loki attacked, he used that Scepter of his to turn Selvig and Clint hostile. The damage they caused was tremendous and they were only humans. Can you imagine what would happen if you were controlled?”

Clark sighed and looked down, not wanting to have this conversation again. Luckily for him, he didn’t have to, because Sif interrupted.

“What do you mean Loki controlled people?” the Asgardian warrior asked. “As far as I know, his magic is not capable of that.”

“I don’t how he did it, but that Scepter did exactly that,” Natasha answered. She also looked down. “It cost us a lot of good people.”

The air was suddenly taken by the incredible noise of the big SHIELD airplane they were expecting; the team they were waiting for had arrived.

“I can’t believe we’ll work with Superman!” Skye exclaimed, almost jumping out of her hospital bed. “And Black Widow! This is like a dream come true!”

“Be quiet, I’m trying to treat you!” Jemma Simmons interrupted, forcing the young woman to lie down. “And you are not working with anybody, you’ll stay right here. You are not fit-for-duty yet.”

“I’m fine!”

“‘Fine’ is not the appropriate word to describe your state!” Jemma countered immediately, checking her wounds. “You’ve been shot twice, had your stomach perforated and a breathing tube shoved down your throat. ‘Better’ is the more accurate word and that’s only because anything is
‘better’ than the state you were!”

Skye sighed deeply, knowing by experience that arguing with “Doctor Jemma” wouldn’t get her anywhere. Still, there was nothing that could stop her giddiness that day, not when she would finally meet Superman!

“Stop feeling happy, it’s affecting my tests!” Jemma ordered, drawing blood for what seemed to be the thousandth time.

She rolled her eyes, ignoring the medical advice. Right now, Skye didn’t care about her wounds, regardless of how painful they were. Being hurt during a mission, well, it happened; it didn’t feel good, obviously, but the world wouldn’t end because of it. She was an Agent of SHIELD and being bedridden was not amongst her list of tasks.

Especially when Superman was visiting them!

When Coulson received a call earlier that day, none of them expected that it would be the Black Widow herself looking for him. For one, Coulson was supposedly dead, according to what she was told, and, well, people really don’t expect an Avenger to just call them! Apparently, there was a new alien threat on Earth, another Asgardian, and they needed help to find this new foe.

Skye wasn’t told much, since she wouldn’t be participating because of her wounds, but she knew that Superman and Black Widow would soon come aboard The Bus and they would start their very first mission with them. She could barely hold her excitement!

Jemma opened her mouth to no doubt chastise her again, but the infirmary door opened and both of them turned.

“We’re landing now, I thought you two would want to know,” Leo Fitz informed them, his Scottish accent permeating every word.

“Oh my god, we’re here!” Skye exclaimed, turning to Jemma. “Please, Jemma, you have to let me greet them.”

“Absolutely not!” the British scientist promptly denied. “Skye, you can barely walk!”

“Then help me! Please!” she shamelessly begged. “Come on, I’m not asking for much, I just want to see them, then I’ll come right back here. You just give me something to the pain and that’s it. It’s not like I’ll get shot again! There is nowhere safest than The Bus!”

That wasn’t particularly true, their airplane had been attacked several times already, but it wasn’t like someone would shoot her while Superman was there!

“Please!” she repeated herself, using the full might of her puppy-eyes. ‘Please!’

“Fine!” Jemma snapped. “But afterwards, you will come back here, immediately!”

“YES!”

Skye would’ve leaped out of the bed right then and there if her wounds weren’t hurting so much, but Jemma didn’t need to know that. Instead, she extended her arm so Jemma could inject her with some pain medication – that she took without complaining, even with the big needle – and allowed herself to be helped out of the bed, slowly. Then, with Jemma supporting a great deal of her weight, they walked out of the infirmary, following Leo.
The Bus was in the process of landing, they all could feel it, so that meant soon enough Superman and Black Widow would be here. She could hardly believe she would meet either of them; how strange her life had become since beginning to work with SHIELD!

Eventually, Jemma insisting they moved unbearably slowly, they arrived where the rest of the team was. Melinda May, looking as serious as ever, was standing with her arms crossed in front of her chest, waiting; Grant Ward, just as focused, was by her side. Coulson was not there, which meant one simple thing:

He was greeting Superman!

Coulson wouldn’t lie, he was feeling a little bit nervous. It had nothing to do with the current mission or the fact that they would meet Superman and the famous Lady Sif for the first time, nor it had anything to do with the fact that the alien they were seeking could control minds — even though that small fact didn’t exactly put him at ease.

No, the reason why he was nervous was Natasha Romanoff.

To put it simply, he had lied to her. Not only her, but all the Avengers. They believed he was dead and he hadn’t moved a finger to correct that misunderstanding, quite the contrary. And yet somehow, she had called him, directly, as if nothing had happened whatsoever. How? Did Fury tell her? Did everybody know he was alive? And if they did, what would they think about the fact that he faked his own death?

Coulson was an agent through and through, he understood better than most the necessity of lying during a mission. But that didn’t mean he liked to lie to his friends and colleagues and no matter how professional they were, he still considered Natasha a good friend.

And now he would have to face her.

Before he could think about anything else, the doors opened, allowing the sunlight in. And right in front of him were Natasha Romanoff, Superman, Lady Sif and a woman he did not know. There was a moment of tension, when nobody seemed to know what to do.

Then Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow, smiled to him.

“It’s good to see you alive, Coulson. Really good.”

Just like that, his worries evaporated; he smiled back, stepping forward to shake her hand.

“It’s good to be back from the dead to see you too, Natasha,” he answered. Then he frowned a bit. “But how did you—”

“Please, remember who you are talking to,” she interrupted, rolling her eyes. “You are good Coulson, but not that good.”

That was a real ego-booster, Coulson thought, sarcastically.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Clint does, of course, and I have no doubt Stark does too,” Natasha answered, not sparing his feelings in the least. “How he didn’t come looking for you, I don’t know, but Pepper might have something to do with it. And if he knows, Banner knows as well, you know how those two are.”
“So… everybody?”

She pretended to think for a moment. “I’m sure Steve and Thor are still in the dark.”

That was a catastrophic intelligence leak, but he supposed it was expected, considering the people with whom he was dealing with. Holding that thought for later, Coulson turned to the other people present there.

Superman was just behind Natasha, looking every bit as impressive as he imagined, clad in his blue skinsuit and red cape. By his left was a woman who definitely could only be Lady Sif, given the armor she was wearing and the weapons she was carrying. And by his right was another woman who Coulson didn’t know; that bothered him, but he supposed she wouldn’t be there if Natasha, Superman and Lady Sif didn’t trust her.

“Superman, it is an honor to meet you,” he said, stepping forward and shaking his hand. And it truly was, he wasn’t just being polite; it wasn’t everyday you met someone willing to fight his own race, condemning them to extinction, to save another species, just because it was the right thing to do.

Kal-El shook his hand with a smile.

“The honor is mine, I’ve heard a lot of great things about you, Agent Coulson.”

“Just Coulson, please,” he corrected, turning to Lady Sif. “Lady Sif, it is good to see you again. I’m sure you don’t remember me, but I’ve seen you battling the Destroyer in New Mexico. It was an amazing demonstration of your abilities.”

“Thor said you perished at the hand of Loki,” Sif said, as direct as only an Asgardian could be. “What kind of dark magic is this?”

That went well, Coulson thought. He hurried to explain when he saw her hand twitching in the direction of her sword.

“He was right. For a while, anyway. But Loki wasn’t the only one with some tricks up his sleeve.”

Project TAHIT was one hell of a trick, that was true, to bring him back after being stabbed in the back by Loki’s Scepter.

“In that case, it truly is something to celebrate,” she said, still eyeing him carefully. “Thor will be pleased to hear it. He considers you a friend.”

“I feel the same,” Coulson answered immediately, “which is why I’d prefer he hear from me, if that’s okay.”

“As you wish, Son of Coul.”

That brought a smile to Coulson’s face. He turned to the third woman, the one he didn’t know.

“I’m Agent Phil Coulson,” he introduced himself. “Might I ask who you are?”

She stared back at him for a long minute.

“No, not really,” the woman answered, finally.

He was not expecting that answer, he had to admit. Still without showing any emotion on his face, much less the surprise he felt, Coulson looked at the others.
“You can call her ‘J’,” Superman provided, with a smile. “It’s short for Jewel!”

Super-spy or not, Coulson couldn’t, for the life of him, tell if that was a joke or not.

“She is trustworthy,” Natasha mentioned. “And an enhanced. She can help us.”

Raising a single eyebrow, Coulson glanced at the woman again; that was interesting. What was her relation to Superman? And why exactly was Natasha protecting her identity?

Compartmentalization, Coulson reminded himself; everybody knew exactly what they needed and nothing else.

“J” it was, then.

“Understood,” he finally said, turning back to The Bus. “If you’ll follow me, we can start looking for that hostile Asgardian.”

Coulson had a feeling this mission would be something to remember.

Coulson’s aircraft, called “The Bus”, was impressive, Clark admitted. Of course, it wasn’t in the same league as SHIELD’s Helicarriers and it wasn’t an alien ship, but as far as human’s aircrafts went, it was pretty cool. According to Coulson and Natasha’s brief, but precise description, the Bus was a specialized Boing C-17 Globemaster III, heavily modified by SHIELD so it could act as a mobile command station.

In short, it had everything they needed to track Lorelei and to reach her before she could cause too much damage.

The explanation about the aircraft capabilities ended just when they reached the room where Coulson’s team was waiting for them; Clark wouldn’t lie, he was a little bit bothered by the intense staring he was subjected too as soon as he entered the room.

“Team, meet Agent Romanoff, Ka-El, Lady Sif and ‘J’,” Coulson introduced them as briefly and as professionally as he could, stopping in the middle of the two groups. He turned to them and pointed at his team. “Allow me to introduce my new team: Melinda May, Grant Ward, Leo Fitz, Jemma Simmons and Skye.”

Ma Kent had taught Clark not to judge a book by its cover, but it wasn’t hard to know which people did what on Coulson’s team. Melinda May was clearly a warrior. She was a serious-looking woman, with Asian traces, who reminded him of a cross between Natasha’s fierceness and Maria Hill’s brutal efficiency. Grant Ward, also, was a fighter, no doubt about that; not only he had the right body type — a big guy with trained muscles and the mannerisms of a soldier —, but Clark also noticed how he assessed everyone of them as soon as they entered the room, as if searching for the better way to defeat them.

Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz, on the other hand, were most likely scientists of some kind; Jemma was actually wearing a lab coat. She was a beautiful brunette, with a gentle expression, even when she was currently staring wide eyed at them. Leo Fitz, as Jemma Simmons, also didn’t seem like a front-fighter agent. For starters, he didn’t have the eyes of someone accustomed to combat, nor the body of someone trained for that. And there was also the fact that, next to the likes of Melinda May and Grant Ward, he just seemed as non-threatening as someone could possibly be.

And Skye… Clark really didn’t know what to think about her. She didn’t look like an agent at all. She was younger than everybody on Coulson’s team, pretty, with dark black hair, very pale skin and eyes that seemed to radiate emotion. Skye didn’t look like a warrior, but she had the wounds of
one; she didn’t seem to be part of the science team either, not the way she casually stood by the “fighters group”, something that Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz didn’t seem that comfortable to do. A consultant perhaps? She did look like a civilian.

“He is so much bigger than I thought!” Skye whispered to Jemma, excitedly, her eyes fixed on him.

Clark didn’t really know what to say about that.

“And he probably can hear you whispering,” Jemma answered, also whispering, a nervous smile on her face.

“We all can,” Grant Ward stated, tiredly and loudly, from a few meters away from them.

She blushed, but to Skye’s credit, that didn’t seem to deter her.

“I’m sorry, it’s just… I’m so excited!” she said, limping forward in their direction, eyes still fixed on him. “I’m a big fan, Superman!”

Clark grabbed her hand when she extended it, not only to be polite, but to hold her before she fell down; she really shouldn’t be walking around like that.

“It’s good to meet you too, Skye,” he answered, smiling courteously. “Are you sure you should be up?”

“She shouldn’t!” Jemma piped up.

“Nonsense, I’m fine!” Skye retorted, looking at her doctor and then back at him, the smile already back in place; she was still holding his hand. “Got shot a few times, part of the job, really.”

“That’s terrible!” Clark exclaimed; he knew she was wounded, but he didn’t pry with his x-ray vision to find out how. “I hope you are recovering well.”

“If it were up to me, I would be in this mission with you guys!” That was an obvious lie, but Clark didn’t confront her about it. “I mean, you’ve been shot before, right?”

“Well, yes, but it’s really not the same. I’m bulletproof.” He looked at her, kindly. “You should focus on getting better, I’m sure you’ll be back in no time.”

“Yeah, in no time…” she repeated, eyes fixed dreamingly on his.

She was still holding his hand.

“Skye… hand,” Coulson mentioned, seemingly avoiding a sigh.

“Oh, sorry!” Skye apologized, letting go of his hand; she was blushing a lot now.

Her team seemed embarrassed and exasperated at the same time, as they avoided to look at her. Jessica was incredibly amused, he could hear her holding a laugh. Sif was confused, frowning not unlike Thor when something weird happened. And Natasha… She was staring with an unreadable face at them, not a trace of amusement on her expression.

That’s right, they were wasting precious time, he remembered, assuming that was the reason of the unfriendly stare.

“I’m sorry, she is heavily medicated!” Jemma apologized, grabbing Skye by her shoulders and
helping her to move to a chair, as far away from him as she could without taking her out of the room.

“Shall we begin, then?” Natasha asked, raising a single eyebrow.

Clark didn’t know why, but he thought that look on her face was blaming him for something.

“Of course, follow me,” Coulson said, promptly, guiding them to a set of monitors. “Based on what you’ve told me, I’ve started a preliminary search on the west side of the country. We’ve been searching for anything weird, from energy readings to victims.”

“Did you find anything?” Sif asked, getting closer.

Coulson nodded. “We think so.”

He typed something and a picture appeared; a woman, still wearing her wedding dress, showed up on the screen. By the brutal marks on her neck, she had been choked to death.

Without realizing, Clark closed his hands into fists.

Lorelei was in a tavern of some sort. It was not even a good one, not anything like they had on Asgard, and the company was not any better. The man named Rooster had spoken the truth; he had men under his command. But instead of a general of some sort, as she previously believed him to be, he was clearly an insignificant bandit.

What had she done to deserve that, Lorelei thought, looking around the dark tavern. Where were the armies she needed? These men were not fit to rob even an Asgardian child crossing a road alone! And the comforts she so longed for were anywhere to be found; the chair she was sitting on managed to be even less comfortable than the furniture she had in her cell.

She needed to find her champion, soon, because her patience was at an end.

“My Queen, I brought you something!” Rooster yelled happily, entering the tavern with a huge black bag.

A gift? That improved her mood, even it just a little bit. She followed him with her eyes as he went to her, putting the bag over the table and opening it. Lorelei’s smile dimmed and she frowned.

“Paper?” she asked. “Green paper?”

Was Midgard so primitive that paper was still considered an expensive gift here?

“What? No, this is money!” Rooster explained, visibly desperate to please her. “These are dollars, they are the currency of this land!”

Lorelei sighed; then she grabbed Rooster’s face, holding him hard.

“Tell me, mortal, what use does a goddess have for money?” she asked, staring at his eyes. There was absolute silence in the tavern now, as everybody watched them. “Do you think I ever lowered myself to this? That I ever exchanged coins for goods?”

She pulled him even closer, her Asgardian strength making him bend with ease.

“I was worshipped! My subjects catered to my every need. Palaces were raised from the ground in all Realms, jewels were forged in Nidavellir to be gifted to me, clothes were brought from every
land to dress me and the best foods of every planet under my command always filled my tables.”

Her hand closed over the green pieces of paper.

“I have no use for this!”

Saying this, she released him, not gently; Rooster fell on his back, dizzy and in pain, but that was not the reason he seemed desolated. Lorelei knew the reason for his sadness and it was simple: he had failed his goddess.

Pathetic, she thought, not sparing a shred of kindness. Getting up and passing over him, she went to the counter of the tavern, grabbing a mug of that bitter and weak drink they served there. The silence in the tavern was still heavy.

That was probably the reason why her hearing focused on the only sound there, a tiny voice coming from a weird box on the wall, passing images on its glassed surface.

“… the bank robbery was foiled by no other than Superman himself!” spoke the woman on the screen, smiling happily. “And we were able to record everything for our viewers, even the daring rescue of a mother and her child!”

As she said this, the image changed. The woman was no longer on the screen and in her place there was a the footage of some kind of pursuit, involving several of those metal vehicles Midgardians seemed to like so much. The vehicles were running through a long street of some city, filled with high towers and people, something she had yet to see with her own eyes on Midgard.

And suddenly, the vehicle being chased toppled.

Lorelei watched with wide eyes as a blue blur appeared out of nothing, placing itself between the vehicle and the two mortals. That’s when she saw him for the first time, Kal-El, the champion she was searching. The Kryptonian grabbed the vehicle with ease, showing all his superior strength, saving the mortals from certain death.

“Where is that land?” she asked, urgently, pointing at the box. “Where is Kal-El?”

The stupid mortals took too long to answer, confused, and the only reason she did not kill them all right then and there was because she needed an answer.

“T-that’s New York,” Rooster stammered. “This happened this morning.”

This very morning? It was like her first thrall, Jimmy, had said: Kal-El ruled over a city called New York. That was obviously the seat of his empire.

“So this is Kal-El’s capital…” she whispered, still watching the images as they repeated themselves.

He was even more impressive than she imagined. The quality of that box’s image was lacking, but even there she could see how grand he was. Tall, handsome, strong; a fit champion to serve her.

“It might as well be,” Rooster spat, looking at the box with anger; no, Lorelei realized, looking at Kal-El with anger. “Since that damn alien arrived, the Dogs of Hell are being screwed day after day! The N.Y’s chapter is fucked beyond repair. They are so useless with Superman flying there every damn time that they managed to lose a bar brawl and get arrested!”

Usually, Lorelei would have ignored every word that came out of this mortal’s mouth, but she was
interested in the subject.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Your men are trying to usurp Kal-El?”

The idea was laughable, of course, but if it was true then why were any of them still alive?

“It was our city first!” Rooster complained. “He has no right to just appear out of nowhere and call the shots! What does he care if we sell guns and drugs?”

“He has every right to do as he pleases,” Lorelei corrected the mortal. “What confuses me is why you are still breathing. Why did he spare your men?”

Rooster looked at her with a baffled expression on his face. “Superman doesn’t kill anybody! He sure as hell doesn’t like criminals, but he just takes them to prison.”

That was unusual in a King, Lorelei had to admit. Odin captured people, but he had no qualms about killing them all until they surrendered themselves.

“He just goes around stopping crime and helping people,” Rooster continued, pointing at the image box, where Kal-El was again preventing the vehicle from hitting the two mortals. “Like that. He does that shit all fucking day!”

Could it be? A merciful god? A god that had the strength to rule entire Realms, just interceding to solve small grievances from mortals?

“He just… helps?” she asked, the very idea sounding strange to her.

The mortal stared stupidly at her for a moment. “Well, yeah. People just shout ‘Help me, Superman!’ and he comes flying to save the day.” He turned to the TV again, his face gaining an enraged expression. “They say he can hear anything that happens on this fucking planet and I’m starting to think it’s true.”

Unlike the mortal, Lorelei was smiling now. Maybe she would not have to chase Kal-El after all. Maybe he would come to her.

“She killed a bride?” Grant Ward asked, staring at the image of the dead woman.

“No,” Sif answered, her hard eyes fixed on the dead woman as well. “She most likely ordered the bride’s husband to do so. That is more like her. She is no stranger to sullying her hands with blood, but she rather use her thralls to do the dirty work, especially if she can prove to herself how much she is adored by forcing them to kill those they love.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone thought about her words.

“What’s her M.O?” asked Melinda May, finally asked. “What should we look for?”

Clark and everybody else in the room turned to Sif, as the Asgardian considered the question.

“Lorelei is cruel,” she started. “And arrogant. She believes herself to be better than anyone and her actions show it. She plans to conquer this Realm, but first she will look for champions.” Sif glanced at his direction. “I am certain she wants Kal more than anything.”

“What about after that?” Natasha asked, already aware of that part.

“After acquiring her strongest champion, she will use him to find others. Then she will try to
enthral one of the rulers of this Realm, so she can use his army to bring down entire nations for her. Eventually, she will conquer every other land, either by winning wars or by directly enthraling their leaders.”

“So right now she is looking for followers?” Coulson asked.

“Right now, Lorelei is probably learning how this Realm changed,” she corrected. “It has been 600 years since she set foot on Midgard and this Realm changed much. The dead bride was simply a victim of convenience. She needed something, someone, so she took it.”

Coulson sighed, rubbing his forehead.

“We need to secure the president,” he said, eventually. “If she manages to enthral President Ellis, we’ll have a war in our hands.”

“Already did it,” Natasha replied. “I have female agents monitoring him and his staff, as well as the leaders of other key nations. If she approaches them, we’ll know.”

“She can only control men?” asked Grant Ward, frowning.

“Women are highly resistant to Lorelei’s powers, even if they happen to feel attracted to her,” Sif answered. “Lorelei does not use lust as the conduit for her voice, she uses the instinct every being has carved in their DNA to reproduce. Since she is a woman herself, her powers are weak against other women, but very strong against any other male, despite of race or even sexual preferences.”

“That’s why the ground team will be composed only by women,” Natasha concluded, glancing at Melinda May. “Can I count on you?”

“Of course!” Melinda May answered immediately.

“Alright, hang on,” Jessica interrupted, finally saying something; Clark wasn’t used to her different voice or face yet. Everybody looked at her. “This is nice and all, but we are forgetting something important: that bitch uses her voice to control people.” She pointed at Clark. “Superman can hear everything. How is that gonna work?”

Every pair of eyes was on him now and he couldn’t exactly blame them. That was actually something he hadn’t considered as well and, as Jessica pointed out, it was a pretty big deal. Was he truly putting all of them at risk just by being there?

“Maybe he can wait deep under the ocean,” Natasha mentioned, visibly torn about not having considered that as well. “The water may block the sound if he goes deep enough.”

“Or in space?” Jemma Simmons suggested.

“Can you really hear everything?” Skye asked, getting up and approaching them.

“Well, not everything, but I have a pretty good hearing,” Clark answered, humbly.

“What if you just blocked your ears?” she suggested, putting her fingers in her ears to demonstrate.

“That wouldn’t work, believe me, I tried,” he sighed.

“I bet there are things you rather not hear,” Skye said, touching his shoulder to show support. “You poor man…”

It was nice of her to be worried, but it wasn’t needed, especially not right now. Before he could say
that, however, her hands were not at his shoulder anymore; they were wandering all over his chest, and Clark was pretty sure that it hadn’t anything to do with showing support.

“Skye… hand,” Coulson said again, sighing.

“Oh, sorry!”

Jemma approached and gently guided her away again; whatever drug she took for the pain, it really did a number on her.

“That will not be a problem,” Sif said, before anyone could speak about Skye being weird again.

“Even if Kal can hear her voice from far away, it will be only her voice. Time and distance matter in magic. While Lorelei’s voice can carry her magic, it will not carry far, not by itself.”

“What do you mean?” Jessica asked. “When you say ‘not by itself’?”

“There are artifacts that can be used to potentialize the user’s magic,” Sif explained. “Some kinds of magic are too strong to be sustained only by the caster’s own body, so they require outside help. Relics, rituals, anything that can sustain the magic when the caster’s own strength is not enough. Lorelei has none of that, at least not here and now.”

“Wait a minute, all this talk about magic is getting weird,” Leo Fitz interrupted. “Magic is just science we don’t understand yet! Not all this hocus pocus!”

All eyes turned to him; he was visibly intimidated.

“Do not allow your Midgardian’s sensibilities blind you to the real problem,” Sif warned. “Lorelei is quite capable of doing everything I said, no matter what your beliefs. Call it ‘magic’ or a branch of unknown science, I care not, but do not disregard my warnings.”

Leo Fitz shrank under Sif’s stare.

“We won’t, Lady Sif,” Coulson said, promptly. He glanced at his team member with a severe look, then continued. “Then we don’t have to worry about Superman listening to Lorelei from up here?”

“Without any artifact to empower her magic, we do not.”

“Well, that’s something,” Jessica whispered, relieved.

It was a feeling they all shared, Clark most of all.

“So how do we stop her?” Natasha asked; she looked at Sif. “You want her alive, don’t you? How exactly can we capture her if she has a power like that?”

“With this,” Sif answered immediately, grabbing something from her belt and putting it over the table. It looked like a metallic choker, Clark considered, as all of them watched the small object. “It prevents her from speaking and using any other power. She wore one for centuries while locked in prison. All we have to do is find her and put this around her neck.”

It sounded so easy when she put it like that.

“Can’t Superman just blitz her?” Agent Ward asked, turning his eyes from the magical choker to Clark. “I mean, we all know how fast and powerful you are.”

The words were used as a compliment, but Clark didn’t really hear a compliment on Ward’s voice; he heard a challenge.
But it wasn’t a bad idea. If he could end this fast, it would be better for everyone, wouldn’t it?

“Absolutely not!” Sif thundered, immediately, when she saw the expression on his face.

“You don’t think I can do it?” he asked. He wasn’t offended, it was a legitimate question.

“I do not know! And I am certainly not willing to risk it, not while we have other choices!”

“She might be killing people right now, Sif! Every second we stay here, is a second she has to wreak havoc!”

“Do not speak to me as if I do not know that!” she countered, furious. “I, better than anyone, know what Lorelei is capable of!” She stopped for a second, breathing deeply to calm herself. “Kal, we will not risk this. Maybe you are fast enough to stop her, but what if you are not? Could you stop her before she utters a single word? Are you willing to harm and possibly kill any thrall that puts himself between you and her? Do not forget that she is an Asgardian, Kal, and you know better than most how fast we are. Do not underestimate Lorelei. Those who do, do not last long.”

There was a very long silence after Sif said that. Clark didn’t like it, but he understood her point. It was too risky and the consequences if he failed were too vast to even contemplate. Doing nothing, however, was almost physically painful to Clark, especially when his friends would be in danger.

Coughing lightly to draw their attention, Coulson brought up a map on the screen.

“It’s mostly smalls towns around the location where we found the dead woman, Nicole Mackenzie,” he said, moving past Clark and Sif’s little disagreement. “I’ve issued a warning for their car, but nothing came up yet.”

“Let’s start looking for unusual activity within a few-hundred-mile radius from that area,” Natasha said. “Burglary, theft, assault, murder... This is a woman used to rule empires, I doubt she knows how to be discreet.”

Jessica had a headache that she could only compare to the pain of being hammered directly on skull. She looked around the airplane, rubbing her temples, ignoring everybody walking up and down the aircraft as they flew to the general area where their target was.

She didn’t like this at all. Being there, in the middle of all those government agents, made her skin crawl. Now, she didn’t have anything against them, other than the fact that they were nosy, but she just didn’t mix with that sort of people. But more than that, she was participating in a mission with them, a mission meant to stop an alien bitch that controlled people with her voice.

As if they already didn’t have enough assholes like this on Earth already.

It was a sick irony that she, of all people, would be there to help against such a threat, but life was nothing if not an ironic bitch, she supposed.

“Are you feeling alright?” Clark asked, in a low voice.

She didn’t hear him approaching, but his voice was so low that she wasn’t startled. Instead of answering immediately, she just kept her eyes closed while she massaged her temples; he sat by her side, on the floor of the empty room.

“I’m just… Stressed, that’s all,” she finally answered.
It wasn’t a lie; she was very stressed. This new foe brought memories that she wanted to forget and the fact that she was here for her friend — her only friend — made all that worse.

“Why are you here, Jessica?” Clark asked; the fact that he so casually said her name told her that the cameras and everything else capable of recording them were turned off.

Her eyes opened as he said that; she looked at him. “Do you want me to leave?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” he said. “It’s just, this is not your usual method of handling things. I honestly thought I would never see the day when you worked with the likes of SHIELD.” He stopped for a moment. “You seem worried.”

She didn’t answer for a long time.

“I’ve been thinking about something,” she finally said. Clark leaned forward in anticipation. “Something that Sif said.”

“What?” Clark asked when she took too long to continue.

“She said: ‘Even if Kal was not attracted by women — and I know for a fact that he is — Lorelei could use that biological weakness against him.’” He kept looking at her, expecting her to go on. Jessica stared at him. “What exactly does she mean with ‘I know for a fact that he is’?”

Whatever Clark was expecting her to say, by the shocked expression on his face, it wasn’t that. He just kept staring at her, eyes wide; then he saw her lips trembling slightly as she tried to stop her smile.

“You are deflecting,” he stated, pointing accusingly at her, absolutely sure.

“Yep!” she admitted, not wasting any time with denials.

“Fair enough,” he said, nodding, and she was certain he would’ve stopped there; surprising her, however, he continued: “We slept together while I was on Asgard. We were drunk, we had a lot of fun, but we decided to continue only as friends.”

Okay… She was not expecting that much information. Jessica didn’t ask this question to hear an answer, she asked to make him uncomfortable and shut him up! What was this new-found confidence Clark had? Unless…

“You are hiding your embarrassment to move on with the conversation!” she accused.

“Yes!” he agreed, also not wasting any time denying the obvious.

Well played, Jessica admitted, well played. Breathing deeply to steel her nerves, she looked down and said:

“I’m worried for of you.”

Clark was apparently shocked that his strategy had worked, because he wasn’t expecting her confession.

“Well, you are worrying too much!” he countered. He stared at her for a long minute. “It’s going to be fine.”

This time she remained in silence.
Instead of insisting, Clark just nodded. They kept the silence for a long time.

“You don’t have to tell me what’s bothering you,” Clark finally said. He touched her shoulder as he got up. “But I’m here if you want to.”

Without looking at him, Jessica nodded. And with a brief squeeze on her shoulder, he left her alone with her own worries.

“So, how is your second life treating you, Coulson?” Natasha asked, sitting by his side in the control room.

Both of them watched the computer screen for a moment, seeing SHIELD’s tools analyzing the patterns they hoped it would lead them to their target. Everybody else was preparing for the mission or using their skills to help with what they could while the airplane didn’t reach its destination.

Coulson turned to her after a few seconds, smiling.

“I can’t complain,” he said. He stopped to think for a second. “Actually, that’s not true, I have lots of reasons to complain, it’s been very busy. But I wouldn’t have it any other way, I suppose.”

“I understand,” Natasha said and she meant it. Their lives were filled with danger and responsibility, but she couldn’t imagine herself doing something else. “What about your new team?”

His smile widened. “I like them, Natasha, I really do. And we are doing good work here.”

“Ouch!” Natasha joked.

“No, don’t be like that, you know that’s not what I meant. I liked helping you guys, but here I can do more.”

“Saving the world wasn’t enough?” she teased.

“Oh, that was all you guys. I just helped a little bit,” he answered, humbly.

“You helped a lot,” Natasha corrected him. “You were the one who brought us together.”

“Glad to know my death wasn’t wasted!” he joked. “It’s a pity my Captain America’s cards were ruined, though. I’ll never forgive Loki for that.”

“I’ll get Steve to sign you some new ones, when you decide to stop faking your death.”

“Not up to me, you’ll have to talk to Fury about that,” he evaded.

Coulson’s “death” was still a mystery. Natasha was embarrassed to admit that she hadn’t found out about his return until he was back on duty, but even that much had costed her a lot of favors. Fury, for some reason, wanted to keep Coulson’s return from the realm of the dead a secret and he was the best at what they did.

The reason for that, however, was still unclear. Maybe it had to do with the method they used to save his life, because there was a reason even she believed he was dead: Loki had been brutal when he wounded Coulson. There was no way a normal treatment would’ve worked. Whatever Fury used was clearly a game-changer in the medical field and secrecy was advised when dealing with such things.
Regardless, she wouldn’t pry. It was enough to know that Coulson was alive. He was a good friend and she didn’t have many.

“What about the rest of the guys?” Coulson asked, after her moment of introspection. “How are they doing?”

She thought about it for a second. “Busy, really. You heard of that whole situation we had in London with the Dark Elves?”

“Heard about it?” Coulson repeated, fake-outraged. “I was the one that cleaned everything up!”

Obviously, she knew about that, but it was fun to tease him.

“You made your choice, Coulson,” she said. “You either save the world or you clean up after those who just did.”

“I’ll remember that, Natasha, you’ll see,” he joked. “Prepare your broom, you’re going to need it when my team saves the world.”

“It’s on,” she accepted the challenge. Natasha stopped for a second, thinking. “Despite our busy lives as heroes, things are mostly good. Steve is adapting. He started to deal with his situation better.”

“When you say ‘deal with his situation’ you mean his private life or is this work related?”

“Both, actually. Professionally Steve never really had a problem, to be honest, he can absorb knowledge like a sponge. His private life, however, was non-existent.”

“I remember.”

“Then you’ll be glad to know that he is making an effort,” she said, grinning. “He, Thor and Superman actually went out for drinks.”

Coulson raised both eyebrows. “You are kidding me.”

“No, they really did,” she confirmed, still finding the whole thing amusing. “They drank some beers, played pool, got in a fight… Got arrested.”

The surprised expression on Coulson’s face was unforgettable.

“I can’t believe this… Things really have changed after I left. Not sure if for the better, if Captain America is getting arrested now.”

“Oh, give it a rest, they fought a bunch of bikers. They had it coming.” She stopped for a second, thinking. “Stark is the same insufferable man you remember. Well, maybe a little less now. Seeing Superman helping people actually inspired him to try to do the same. I don’t know if it will last or if it’s all just a silly competition for him, but he is doing a lot of good things now.”

“That’s good to know. I always thought he had potential,” Coulson affirmed.

“You threatened to tase him once and watch Supernanny as he drooled into the carpet,” she deadpanned.

“I’m sure I wasn’t the only one.”

That was probably true.
“Clint is doing just fine,” she continued. “He found out about you not long after I did. I was very proud of him.”

“It’s good to know you take so much joy in destroying my work,” he said, in that serene way he usually spoke.

“Professional pride is a powerful motivator, Coulson, you know that. It inspires us to do our best.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“Bruce is doing alright as well,” Natasha went on. “Very calm and non-violent, if you can believe it, which means a lot, considering he is living with Stark.”

“It’s a wonder we haven’t seen more of the Hulk in the streets of New York then.”

“It’s a wonder Stark is still alive,” Natasha corrected him. “But I think Pepper keeps them in line for the most part.”

Coulson smiled. “I always liked Pepper. How is she doing?”

“Still with Stark, if you can believe it. I’m suspecting Stockholm Syndrome or early signs of dementia for having to put up with Stark for so long, but it could be love.”

“Poor woman, there is no cure for that.”

“So I’ve heard,” Natasha agreed. She looked at him. “What about your team? Just as unbalanced?”

That made him chuckle. “Well, we don’t have Stark, so I’ll have to say ‘no’, but almost there. Melinda May, like Pepper, keeps them in line for the most part.”

Melinda May, AKA “The Cavalry”; she had heard of her. Good agent, trustworthy and an old friend of Coulson if rumors were to be believed. She was happy for him.

“Grant Ward is one of the best agents we have,” Coulson continued. “Not as experienced as Melinda, but just as good. Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz are also impressive, it’s hard to find bright minds like these.”

“What about your young protégé? The one with the ‘wandering hands’,” Natasha asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Ahh, Skye…” Coulson sighed. “I’ll make an agent of her yet, but she does not make things easy for me sometimes. I blame her age for that. The young are too impressionable.”

Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Still, I have high hopes for her,” Coulson admitted, seriously now. “She is good, Natasha. One of the best hackers I have ever seen… And she is a brave one. Sometimes too brave.”

“The gunshot wounds?”

“Yes. Too eager to accomplish the mission,” he said, simply, but Natasha could see that Coulson had been worried sick for her.

It wasn’t unusual to see someone taking an apprentice in their line of business, but Natasha didn’t think Coulson ever would. Still, she was glad he had found someone to teach; he had a lot of experience to pass on.
“You always had an eye for talent, Coulson,” Natasha said. “I’m sure she’ll do just fine.”

They remained in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just watching the computer do its work. Then Coulson turned to her.

“What about Superman?” he asked. “How is he like?”

It wasn’t surprising that Coulson was curious, most people were. Clark caused quite the ruckus when he decided to start flying around, helping people.

“He is a good man, Coulson,” Natasha finally answered. “A truly good one.”

Coulson stared at her for a while. “He must be, if he has you vouching for him.”

Natasha didn’t disagree. She was a cynic, she wouldn’t deny it, and she tended to see the world through those lenses. So finding someone who truly desired to just do good was as unlikely as it was surprising; many claimed that, but there was always something else motivating them. That didn’t seem to be the case with Clark, just as it wasn’t with Steve.

No wonder Steve opened up when Clark and him spent time together.

Which was why the current situation was so grating. Natasha knew what Loki’s mind-control had costed Clint. Being unmade… It was a feeling she knew too well and not something she wished on anyone. Clint had been forced to kill people who worked with him, people who didn’t deserve to be killed, so he could help a crazy god to conquer the world. He was an agent, used to employing deadly force when needed, and that experience almost broke him.

Natasha couldn’t even imagine what would happen with Clark if he was put in that situation.

Clark wasn’t a killer, like they were. He couldn’t bear to hurt an innocent and he took no pleasure when he was forced to hurt the guilty, even if he always took the utmost care to not go overboard. He used his gifts to help and that was all he did.

What would happen if this Lorelei took control of his mind? Could he even come back from something like that?

The consequences for the rest of the world would be dire as well. Clark was incredibly powerful. Probably the most powerful being on Earth right now, together with Thor and the Hulk. The amount of destruction he could cause if he was forced to… Well, Zod gave them a little sample of what would happen.

She wouldn’t let that happen. Clark didn’t deserve that.

“We’ll stop Lorelei,” Coulson said, interrupting her musings. He looked at her seriously. “She won’t do what Loki did.”

Natasha sighed. “I hope you’re right, Coulson.”

“I’m always right.”

She smiled. “Yes, I had forgotten about that.”

Suddenly, the door to the control room opened.

“Hey, Coulson, I think I found something!” Skye’s voice came into the room before her. “I think… Oh! Sorry!”
His friend’s protégé was holding a notebook and limping towards them, only to stop when she realized Coulson wasn’t alone. Natasha evaluated her freely for the first time, not caring if it was clear as day what she was doing; the girl, Skye, was clearly uncomfortable, but she didn’t flinch.

Coulson wasn’t wrong, she was brave. Maybe she would become a good agent after all.

“I can come back another t–“

“No, come in,” Natasha interrupted. “I need to prepare myself for the mission anyway.” She looked at Coulson and touched his shoulder. “It really is good to see you alive, Coulson.”

He smiled as she turned and walked out of the room, allowing him to properly mentor his student.

Grant Ward had a bad feeling about this mission. It wasn’t a run-of-the-mill task to go after an Asgardian, especially one that could control people with a word, but it went deeper than that. Maybe it was the fact that he couldn’t actually take part in the mission, not against someone who could enslave men. Maybe it were the visitors in the Bus, something he didn’t particularly like.

Maybe it was the fact that Superman, one of the strongest beings on the planet – if not the strongest – could eventually turn on them if they failed.

There was something about the fact that he knew he couldn’t fight Superman, and win, that unsettled him. Something about standing by the side of such a powerful entity that made him feel small; Grant didn’t like that. It reminded him too much about his past.

The fact that Skye seemed smitten with him didn’t make things better.

So he went to do what he always did when he was nervous: check the armory for big guns. It made him feel better when he held a powerful weapon in his hands, even if he wasn’t going to use it. Except that his peaceful moment was ruined when he realized that he wouldn’t be alone there.

“Ward, you got here just in time to see my new beauties!” Leo Fitz greeted, opening his arms to show a vast collection of guns over the table in front of him.

He sighed. Not only Fitz was there, but Simmons, Melinda, the Black Widow and the cause for his grumpiness, Superman.

Regardless, he was still impressed by guns.

“These are all Night-Night Guns?” he asked.

“Night-Night Guns?” Superman asked; Grant forced himself to be polite.

“Tranquilizer weapons,” he explained, “but highly effective ones. Nothing like those things that shoot darts.”

The Kryptonian grabbed one of them, looking at it with an amazed face. “Why are these things not mass produced?”

They all looked at the creator of the guns, Leo Fitz.

“It’s expensive,” he answered, a little nervous. “And hard to make.”

“Well, let’s talk about this when this is over,” Superman said, putting the gun back, “we’ll see if there is anything in my alien ship that can lower the cost of production.”
Fitz seemed honestly amazed when Superman said that; wonderful, one more person on his team smitten with the alien.

“I will!” Fitz exclaimed. Then, after a second, he remembered that there were other people in the room; he coughed, embarrassed. “To answer your question, Ward, no, this aren’t Night-Night Guns. They are based on the same technology, but we are not calling them that anymore–”

“About time,” he mumbled.

“–They are called ICERs!” he concluded, too happy with the new name for his tastes. “‘Incapacitating cartridge emitting railguns!’

“Oh, great…”

“They are three times stronger than the Night-Night Guns,” he explained, not even noticing Grant’s mood. “They will put anyone to sleep, safe and sound, almost immediately. Quite useful when we are about to deal with people being mind-controlled.”

He had a point there. Shooting innocent civilians wouldn’t endear the world to SHIELD, that was certain. He reached for one of the guns, only to be beaten by Melinda when she grabbed it faster.

“Only girls today, Ward,” she said, her expression completely serious, but her voice playful.

Oh, yes, he almost forgot about that; it was no wonder this day felt horrible.

Natasha grabbed one of the ICER pistols, testing its weight. She wished she had one of those when Loki attacked; “recalibrating” Clint’s mind would’ve been easier, and gentler, if all it took was shooting him, instead of having to bash his head against a metal bar.

At least they had them now, she thought, glad that they wouldn’t have to kill mind-controlled people.

“We have something else too. And this is for the boys,” Simmons said, putting a few cases over the table. She opened them, showing a small circular device. “This is a ‘Sonic Blocker’, it’s made to protect field agents against sonic and ultrasonic attacks. Fitz and I tweaked them a bit, so they completely block all sound.”

“So we would be deaf?” Agent Ward asked, grabbing one of them.

“Essentially, yes,” Simmons answered. “Think of it as a last-line of defense. If it all goes wrong, this should at least protect you from Lorelei’s voice.”

“We couldn’t do anything about her touch,” Fitz said, “but I suppose that if she gets close enough to touch you, you’d already be dead.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Ward deadpanned.

A feeling Natasha shared, but unfortunately, she had a pretty good idea how strong Asgardians were; Fitz was right. If she got that close, they would already be dead.

“Unfortunately, it probably won’t work for you, Superman,” Simmons said, looking at Clark with an apologetic expression. “It works for humans, but–”

“Not for super-powered aliens,” Fitz completed.
“Thanks for trying,” Clark said, making Simmons blush when he smiled at her.

She almost rolled her eyes. At least Coulson’s protégé wasn’t there to make things even worse, still talking with him about some clue she’d found using her hacker expertise. The incredible thing about all this was that Clark probably didn’t even realize what he was doing to those girls. Natasha at least knew when she was using her charms, but he didn’t seem to notice.

Natasha grabbed two ICER pistols and a rifle, seeing Agent May doing the same. It was good that she was here, her skills would be helpful; “The Cavalry” was famous inside SHIELD. Melinda May was a force to be reckoned with and right now they needed every help they could find.

The moment she thought that, Sif entered the room, followed closely by Jessica Jones.

Lady Sif was already old news to SHIELD’s files, being one of the first aliens they catalogued. Natasha knew mostly about what she could do from reading the information and listening to Thor and Clark.

Jessica Jones, however, was an enigma.

She knew who she was, of course, she had personally researched everyone living in Clark’s building; Clark was bulletproof, but friends took care of each other. Jessica was a neighbor who quickly grew to a be a friend. An orphan, only survivor of the car accident that claimed her family’s lives, later adopted by Dorothy Walker so she could use this to advance her daughter’s career as a TV Star. A normal, if sad life.

Or at least that was what she thought, before Clark revealed earlier that day that she was an enhanced.

For SHIELD, that would change everything. No matter who she was, Jessica Jones would be added to the Index, the list SHIELD kept about enhanced individuals and powerful objects. Depending on her powers, she would never be approached; but she would be watched forever.

For Natasha, however, it changed nothing and that was surprising for her.

Once upon a time, her will and SHIELD’s weren’t that different. And for the most part that was still true. She still believed they were the good guys, otherwise she wouldn’t be working for them, but as Clark pointed out once, SHIELD was composed by a lot of people and some of those people weren’t very nice.

She didn’t trust the whole of SHIELD, but she did trust her friends, Clark being one of them. And for him, she was willing to disobey an order here or there.

Natasha could only hope Jessica Jones proved to be deserving of Clark’s friendship; she had to admit that being there, willing to fight an Asgardian sorceress, was a good indicative that she was, but time would tell.

“Gun?” Natasha offered Jessica, giving her an ICER pistol.

Clark’s neighbor raised both her hands as she refused it.

“Don’t even know how to use that,” she admitted.

“How exactly are you going in this mission, then?” Agent Ward asked, frowning.

Raising a single eyebrow, Jessica Jones slowly grabbed the ICER rifle from Ward’s hands; and in
front of their eyes, she twisted it not unlike a pretzel, the metal bending under her fingers like butter. Then, still staring at Ward, she just dropped the ruined gun on the floor.

“Like this,” she answered simply, walking to Clark’s side, leaving everyone gazing in shock at her and the weapon.

“That was... very expensive,” Fitz mentioned after a while, looking dejected at the destroyed weapon.

Everybody else was just looking at Jessica, no doubt wondering about her abilities. They had been informed she was an enhanced, but seeing was a different thing.

Before the scientist could complain again or Ward could lose the shocked expression on his face, Natasha decided to bring the conversation back to the mission at hand.

“What can we expect when dealing with Lorelei?” Natasha asked, suddenly, turning to Sif. “Other than the normal Asgardian superior physiology and the mind-controlling magic, I mean.”

“Spells,” Lady Sif answered immediately; she could hear the scientists whine. “Fire, frost, electricity, conjuration… She can produce all those at will. Lorelei is also a very skilled combatant, even if she so often chooses to ignore that ability. She killed many with a sword and her bare hands.”

“The ICERs probably won’t work on her,” admitted Fitz. “Asgardian physiology is largely unknown to me.”

“Let me deal with her,” Sif stated. “As long as you keep her thralls occupied, I can do it.”

It was a sound plan, Natasha thought, but what would they do if Sif was somehow incapacitated?

By the look on Natasha’s face, Clark could tell she had the same worry he did: if Sif failed, who else could face Lorelei? He knew there was no easy answer to that question. Asgardians were worshipped as gods in the past for a reason, after all. Maybe she wouldn’t be as powerful as Thor or as deadly as Loki, but if Sif considered her that much of a threat, then he knew Lorelei was someone to be feared.

It was made very clear to him that he couldn’t be there; but he could, at the very least, give them a hand.

“Kelex, are you close?” he asked, speaking close to the bracelet-form of his Kryptonian robot.

“ETA: ten seconds.”

He looked up, ignoring for the moment the questioning looks.

“Could someone open the cargo hold doors?” he asked, already moving closer to them. “I have a package arriving.”

The looks grew even more confused, but Leo Fitz nodded and walked to a panel, pressing a button. The doors of the armory, leading to the cargo hold, closed, to avoid losing pressure inside it; Clark, of course, wasn’t worried about himself, so he just walked out to the cargo hold.

Slowly, the doors of the cargo hold began to open, the wind howling. Ignoring it, he walked past Coulson’s red car – called “Lola” for some reason – that was stored in the airplane and waited by
the opened doors. He smiled when he saw the Kryptonian escape pod flying in the airplane’s direction, easily much faster than the Bus.

Kelex remotely flew the escape pod inside the Bus and, very carefully, it landed. Clark gave Leo a thumbs-up, telling him that it was okay to close the doors again.

“What is this?!” Leo asked, excitedly, eyeing the Kryptonian escape pod as if it was a Christmas present.

“Is this alien?” Jemma Simmons asked, then she blushed. “Of course it is, forget I asked anything!”

“What the hell is this?” Ward asked, eyeing the escape pod carefully. “Some kind of ship?”

“A Kryptonian escape pod,” Natasha answered for him, no doubt remembering the time she escaped Black Zero in one of those by the scowl on her face.

“Why did you bring this here?” Jessica asked, knocking on the round escape pod’s surface for some reason. “Is this plane about to fall?”

“Nope, well, I don’t think so at least,” he answered, opening the escape pod. “I asked Kelex to bring this here to help us. Or, more accurately speaking, to help you three. I have some stuff here that you’ll want to borrow.”

Natasha, Jessica and Melinda May raised their eyebrows in a synchronized fashion when he pointed at them. Deciding that showing them was better than telling, he turned the escape pod to allow them to see what was inside.

Clark knew facing Lorelei was dangerous and, since he couldn’t be there, his Kryptonian technology would have to do. So he asked Kelex to grab a few useful things, things that would help Jessica, Natasha and now Melinda May to survive.

“This is a Kryptonian rifle,” Clark said, grabbing the alien gun with a certain uneasiness. “I don’t like guns, but you’ll need something stronger if you are going to face an Asgardian. This thing here will hurt her, believe me.”

He knew that for a fact, having been shot by a Kryptonian ship right in the chest before; the ship’s weapons were undoubtably more powerful, but by the tests he made after he got his ship back, this rifle packed a punch.

Surprising no one, Natasha promptly grabbed the rifle from his hands.

“I’ve been shot at by these before, when I was escaping from Black Zero,” she said, casually, handling the weapon with ease. “They are quite powerful.”

“They are,” Clark agreed. “So be careful. You can lower its power here, if you want, but I wouldn’t shoot a human even in ‘stun mode’. Even under a red sun, Kryptonians are sturdier than humans.”

“The pistol works like the rifle?” Melinda May asked, grabbing one and studying it.

“Weaker, but faster rate of fire,” Natasha answered immediately, also taking one.

Clark was a little bit worried by their enthusiasm. Sif, of course, didn’t help.

“That is a sharp knife!” she exclaimed, taking a black knife from inside the escape pod. “May I
He nodded, seeing the Asgardian smiling happily as she put the knife in her belt; what use she would have for it, Clark didn’t know, considering she had a bunch of other blades hanging from her waist.

“How fast can this escape pod fly?!” Leo Fitz asked, as he kneeled to take a better look at the propulsors. “It easily caught up with the Bus!”

“What kind of fuel does it use?” Jemma Simmons questioned, also looking marveled at the pod.

“Maybe you two should wait over there,” Ward suggested, not so gently pulling Fitz to his feet and guiding him and Jemma to the armory. “Now is not the time for that.”

Clark was a bit relieved when they obeyed him and stopped asking questions. Shaking his head slightly, he turned to the pod and took three circular cases, of the size of a fist, with the symbol of the House of El on their surfaces.

“These over here are going to be especially useful,” he said, handing them to the three humans. They took them, looking curiously.

“What the hell is this?” Jessica asked, eyeing the small case.

“Touch the ‘S’,” Clark said.

Hesitating for a second, Jessica did it. Immediately, the entire case dissolved, enveloping her hands like liquid metal. Clark could see panic in her eyes for a second, but as he touched her shoulder with a reassuring smile, Jessica stopped fighting; she looked extremely uncomfortable, however. Natasha and Melinda May were watching the whole thing, tense, their muscles ready to propel them into action; their hands were twitching over their guns. Ward, Jemma and Leo were watching from a few feet away, eyes wide.

“Holy shit, it’s going everywhere!” Jessica exclaimed, looking desperately at Clark. “What the fuck is this?!”

“Calm down, it’s not going to hurt you and it will take only a second,” Clark said.

And as he promised, a second later it was over. Jessica was frozen in place, eyes darting everywhere; she didn’t dare to move. Without saying a word, Clark walked to her and grabbed her shirt; and without saying anything, knowing very well he would get slapped if he did, he ripped it off.

Jessica yelped like a little girl for a second – something he would never let her forget – before looking down; instead of seeing her own naked skin, Jessica’s eyes widened at the sight of the same blue suit Clark was wearing.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” she turned to him. “Is this a Superman suit?!”

“It’s actually called a skinsuit,” Clark corrected her. “The ‘S’ on the chest is because this one belongs to the House of El, my House.”

She looked down again, touching the tight skinsuit lightly.

“This is incredible!” Leo Fitz exclaimed, walking right back to where they were. “How does this work?!”
“It’s made from something called Liquid Geo,” Clark answered. “Almost every piece of Kryptonian technology is—“

“Is this how you get dressed?” Jessica interrupted, looking at him again. “I always wondered how you managed to fit into this tight thing so quickly! I thought you walked around with this shit under your normal clothes, because there was no way you could get dressed so fast.”

He chuckled. “How did you think I got dressed? In a phone booth? This isn’t the nineties. Kelex keep my suit stored for me and I can get dressed in a second when I need to.” Clark could see her blushing even behind the Nano Mask. He turned to Natasha and Agent May, seeing them still holding the cases in their hands. “It’s your choice to put this on or not, of course, but I advise you to wear it. These skinsuits are completely bulletproof, resistant to very high and very low temperatures, capable of enduring extreme G-Force, energy resistant and ‘knife-proof’. They can even mend themselves if damaged. And I also brought the helmets.”

Clark grabbed what seemed to be a metallic choker from the pod and walked to Jessica, who was still busy admiring herself, putting it around her neck; immediately, as if following his orders, the Liquid Geo formed the edges of a helmet, closing over her head with the transparent membrane that could, if Jessica wanted to, be darkened.

“There you go,” he whispered. “Now you don’t have to worry about being shot in the head.“ Clark stopped for a second. “Actually, since you are stronger than normal, you probably won’t have to worry about getting shot anywhere by a normal gun, but you two,” he added, turning to Natasha and Agent May, “should avoid the bullets. They won’t pierce the suit, but you’ll feel the impact. Might get hurt otherwise.”

Natasha glanced at him for a moment, then touched the ‘S’ of her case; she closed her eyes for a moment, no doubt reacting to the slight cold of the Liquid Geo as it slid over her body; Clark fought a blush when that image played on his mind, something that didn’t even occur to him when he gave the skinsuit to Jessica.

Suddenly, Natasha opened her eyes. And without warning, she zipped down her own black suit, revealing the blue skinsuit under it; Clark was absolutely sure he wasn’t the only one staring at Natasha when she did that.

“It feels comfortable, but a bit tight,” she mentioned, looking at her reflection on the glass. She turned to Clark. “How do I look?”

Clark actually took a few seconds to realize Natasha had talked to him, his mind frozen by the view; the image of her wearing that skinsuit was something he would never forget.

“Perfect! I-I mean, the skinsuit looks good, safe I mean!” he stammered, hoping that he didn’t sound like the idiot he thought he did.

The slight smile on her lips told him that he probably looked exactly like that idiot.

“This was well thought, Kal!” Sif said, watching Melinda May shiver as she put the skinsuit on. “Lorelei and her thralls are dangerous, this should give them more protection.”

“Don’t you need one?” Ward asked.

Sif scoffed. “I have my armor and my skin. No Midgardian weapon can hurt me.” She looked at Clark. “Kal also do not need it. Resistant clothing does not mean the same to us as it does to you mortals.”
“What does it mean to you?” Jemma Simmons couldn’t help but ask.

“It means they won’t end up torn to shreds in the middle of a fight,” Clark admitted. “The first time I tried to fly without this suit, well… Let’s just say I learned pretty quickly how fast I could fly while wearing normal clothes.”

“I would’ve killed to see that,” he heard a small whisper from the stairs coming to the cargo hold.

There was a brief silence, then Ward sighed: “You are not really whispering, Skye, we can all hear you.”

Her steps, and probably Coulson’s, stopped for a moment; he could hear Coulson also sighing, tiredly. Then they got all the way down.

“We have something,” Coulson said, looking proudly at Skye. “Skye was able to identify a pattern leading to a small biker bar called Rosie’s Desert Oasis. It’s a well-known meeting point between members of the Nevada chapter of the Dogs of Hell.”

Clark groaned. These guys again?! Wasn’t it enough to meet them in New York?

“That means armed resistance,” Coulson continued. “If Lorelei enthralled the Dogs of Hell, they will fight to the death for her and they have experience to do that. Our goal is to neutralize them and stop Lorelei. Is everyone ready?”

Natasha, Jessica, Sif and Melinda May stepped forward.

“Then let’s finish this!”

Jessica took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves, as the black SUV they got arrived at the small town. It wasn’t the imminent fight that was making her nervous, she was never really afraid of violence, but the possibility of failure. Things simply couldn’t go wrong. This alien bitch needed to be captured and sent back to whatever hell she escaped from, far away from Earth and Clark.

She knew all to well what these kinds of psychopaths could do when left unchallenged.

The three humans were wearing their normal outfits, over the Kryptonian skinsuit Clark lent them. Except for her, of course, since Clark had ripped her shirt off just for the laughs; he would pay for that one. The alien weapons he let Black Widow and Melinda May borrow were holstered, as were the tranquilizer ones; her Thanagarian mace was retracted, dangling from her waist.

And Lady Sif of Asgard was fully clad in her plate armor, her hand already closed around her sword. Quite the weird view when she was still sitting inside the car, wearing a seatbelt.

They were ready for whatever that bitch could throw at them, Jessica was certain of it; Clark had even lent her Kelex, now in its bracelet form around her left wrist. She had no idea what use the little robot would have in a fight, but Clark didn’t exactly asked her if she wanted it or not, he just ordered Kelex to go to her and help.

Being forced to stay back and watch was obviously not suiting Clark that well.

Melinda May stopped the SUV right at the entrance of the city; the four of them opened the doors and got out at the same time, looking around. What a shitty place, Jessica thought, seeing nothing but dry landscape and dust. The bar they were looking for, Rosie’s Desert Oasis, was visible from where they were standing, the bikes parked in front of it; she wouldn’t lie, Jessica was looking
forward to punching these Dogs of Hell assholes again.

The town, if it even could be called that, was tiny. There was the bar, a single street with buildings on both sides and tiny houses built around the place, further away. Why would anyone choose to live there, Jessica didn’t know, but she supposed that place was more of an outpost for illegal activities than a proper town.

There was just one problem: the whole place was empty.

The four of them were looking around, tense, searching for the Asgardian or her thralls, but there was nothing to see. Had she already left? Wasn’t SHIELD monitoring the surrounding area with satellites? There was no way she could leave that place without them knowing, Lorelei had to be there.

“Deploying drones,” Natasha said, pressing a few buttons on the device around her wrist.

As soon as she said that, the drones stuck on the ceiling of the SUV took off, flying high, in all directions of the town. Natasha and Melinda followed their progress through the screens of their devices, no doubt mapping the place and looking for hostiles.

“No sign of them,” whispered Melinda May, frowning. “Not one person.”

“Then she is certainly here,” Sif announced, grabbing something from her belt.

Without explaining anything, she pressed a button and the metal cylinder in her hands grew, taking the form of what seemed to be a big spear; then she pierced the ground with it, her Asgardian strength forcing the dry soil to be impaled by the spear. A soft hum started to sound.

“Anti-portals ward,” Sif said, as if that explained anything. “It will last for at least ten minutes and it should cover this entire area. She will not be able to flee through a portal while this is active.”

Saying this, apparently without caring about their still confused faces, she started to walk towards the bar.

Natasha and Melinda May seemed alarmed for the breach of protocol for a second, but they probably knew there was no sense in arguing with Sif, because they simply grabbed their ICER rifles and followed her; Jessica, breathing deeply once again inside her ridiculous helmet, hurried to catch up.

“SHOW YOURSELF, LORELEI!” Sif screamed, opening her arms like a gladiator walking in the arena.

It was as crazy as it was badass and Jessica’s respect for her grew at that moment; she would’ve even laughed, if bullets didn’t start to hit them out of nowhere.

“They are barricaded in the buildings!” Natasha yelled, jumping behind a parked car for cover; Melinda May did the same, both of them returning fire.

Snarling in rage, Jessica also looked for cover, her instincts making her protect herself even when wearing alien body-armor. Sif, however, simply stood there, ignoring the bullets that hit her armor as if they were nothing more than raindrops; she didn’t even flinch when one of them hit her forehead, falling pathetically on the ground as if it had hit a bullet-proof steel wall.

Which, considering the strength the Asgardians had, probably wasn’t that bad of a comparison.
“Always using others to do her dirty-work!” Sif spat. “If you are not coming out, I will force you out!”

Saying this, Sif dashed forward. She moved so fast that to Jessica’s eyes she became a blur; then she clashed against the wall of the bar. The wooden wall was simply no match to the armored Asgardian, breaking around her as easily as someone could break an egg. There were screams and gunshots and then a biker was sent flying, passing through the ceiling and falling over a car.

That snapped Jessica into motion.

Leaving Natasha and Melinda May shooting people behind, Jessica dashed forward as well, but not towards the bar; towards the groups of bikers shooting at them from the roof of one of the buildings. Yelling, ignoring the painful hits as the bullets hit her protected body, Jessica jumped, easily getting all the way up; the men seemed surprised for a moment, but they didn’t exactly had the chance to do anything, as Jessica started to punch everything in sight, her superior strength sending them unconscious with one hit each.

Who said violence didn’t solve things?

“Did you know she could do that?” Melinda May asked, aiming at a biker on the window; she dropped him with a single bullet to the chest.

“You mean Sif or ‘J’?” Natasha asked, unbothered as the bullets flew over her head, hitting a man on the roof of a building on her left.

The sounds coming from inside the bar were frightening as Sif probably beat everyone in sight and Jessica Jones seemed to get a taste for it as well, jumping from roof to roof to defeat the bikers trying to snipe them. It was actually easy for her and Agent May to pick their targets when they were being forced out of their covers so efficiently.

“The human… Never mind,” Melinda May said, dodging a bullet and reloading her gun.

No, Natasha didn’t know Jessica Jones was capable of that, she thought without answering, but revealing that to a SHIELD agent was asking for unwanted attention. She shared Agent May’s surprise at Jessica’s power; Natasha honestly didn’t think even Captain America had that much raw strength. Steve was still a lot faster and trained to exhaustion in every form of combat, but in a contest of pure strength he would be defeated, she had no doubt about that.

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, Sif broke another wall of the bar, falling in the middle of the street with an enraged face; Lorelei obviously wasn’t there. Without stopping for more than a second, Sif clashed against another building, no doubt searching for her prey there. By the shooting and screaming, the place was full of hostiles.

“There are too many people here,” Natasha mentioned, shooting three times consecutively and dropping three targets. “And not all of them are wearing biker’s vests.”

“Noticed that too, huh?” Agent May answered. “That’s not good news.”

No, it wasn’t. It meant Lorelei had enthralled more than just the Dogs of Hell. But how many more?

“They are drawing all the fire, let’s find high ground.”
“SHOW YOURSELF!” Sif yelled, kicking one of the thralls so hard he clashed against the others behind him.

There was no sign of Lorelei, just hordes of enthralled humans attacking them nonstop. Just like she used to do in other Realms, 600 years ago; entire cities were drowned in blood simply because she forced them to fight against her enemies.

Dodging a bullet, even if the projectile was not strong enough to harm her, Sif punched the last human in the building and jumped out, using her own body to pass through another wall and fall in the next building. She was greeted by more mind-controlled slaves, fighting with all their strength to protect their mistress; they truly were lucky that they represented no danger to her, which allowed her to hold back.

That had not always been the case, especially when Lorelei conquered Realms more advanced than Midgard.

Not allowing her memories to surface now, Sif unleashed a storm of punches and kicks against her enemies, putting them down as gently as she could. Outside, she could hear Kal’s friend, Jessica Jones, doing the same, even if in a clumsier matter. The other two humans, not possessing the former’s strength, were at the same time more graceful and deadly, as they shot the thralls from the buildings with incredible aim.

It was fortunate that Sif had found such people to aid her quest, but all that would not mean anything if they were not successful.

Clark watched the whole thing playing through the screens inside the control room of the Bus. Coulson, Ward, Skye, Leo Fitz and Jemma Simmons were there with him, their eyes fixed just as his were, on the images the drones and the satellites were capturing.

He closed his hand into a fist, feeling useless.

The Bus had landed a few miles away from the town, close enough for the ground team to reach it fast, but far enough to keep him away from Lorelei’s voice. He could, of course, hear everything going on, especially now that he was so focused on what was happening, from the conversations to the gunshots. His body was tense and he had to stop himself from flying there by reflex alone, but from this distance, according to Sif, Lorelei’s magic couldn’t control him.

It was torture to see all that happening and not being able to do anything.

“Do you think she got away?” Skye asked, taking his eyes from the screens for one second to glance at Coulson. “They should’ve found her by now.”

“There were no vehicles leaving the town since we found it,” Ward answered. “There is no way.”

“She is there,” Coulson said, his expression completely serious. “And she is planning something.”

“A trap?!” Skye exclaimed.

“It’s what I would do,” Coulson shrugged, noncommittally.

It made sense, Clark thought about it, but he trusted the ground team to deal with whatever situation it might arise; he had no option, after all.

“Man, that gear you lent them is insanely strong!” Leo Fitz mentioned, as they watched Jessica
being hit by a flurry of bullets and simply shrug them off.

“Or ‘J’ is the ‘insanely strong’ one,” Jemma Simmons added, seeing her tossing two bikers through a window.

Both were probably true, he admitted. Still, strong suit or not, seeing his friend being shot at was not something he enjoyed.

Jessica bitch slapped a particularly big biker and then launched herself over the remaining one, tired of getting shot at; the wooden wall behind him broke and both of them fell inside a house. Getting up with a groan, she dusted herself, glad for the suit Clark lent her, since she would full of splinters all over if not for it.

That was when she realized she was not alone in that room.

There was no time to move before something lunged against her from the dark. Usually, Jessica was more than strong enough to stop an attack like that, her strength far greater than a normal human’s; whatever hit her, however, lifted her from the ground and tossed her away like a ragdoll.

Jessica crashed against the wall and went through it, falling in the middle of the street. Shaking her head to stop the dizziness, she got up, ignoring the pain on her ribs, ready to fight whatever son of a bitch had done that. What came out from that house, however, was definitely not the run-of-the-mill son of a bitch, she realized.

Her eyes widened when a creature that seemed made entirely of stone walked to the street. What the fuck?!

The thing was taller than her, much wider, not unlike the Hulk would be if he was made of rocks instead of just green. It had a head but no face, just the general form of a strong human, the rocks pieced together by what could only be described as magic, runes glowing red all over its surface.

It was a mother-fucking golem!

The golem looked at her with its eyeless face and attacked, the ground trembling as it moved. Still too shocked to think, Jessica dodged at the last second, evading a punch from a stone fist of the size of her head. Roaring, she unleashed a storm of punches all over the creature’s side, her knuckles hurting every time they connected; the stone under her fists, however, cracked.

Apparently, the thing felt no pain at all, because it just turned and hit her with its fist; Jessica was pretty sure she would’ve been unconscious if weren’t for the Kryptonian helmet, she admitted, while flying away.

Things were escalating out of control, Natasha realized, seeing Jessica Jones flying after being hit by what she could only describe as a golem. First there were Asgardian sorceresses, then there were mind-controlled armies and now this? What was next? A dragon?

“Keep focusing on the humans,” Natasha ordered a stunned Agent May, as she switched her ICER rifle for her Kryptonian one.

Aiming from the top of the roof, she fired, just as the rock-giant was approaching a clearly dizzy Jessica. The blue energy blast clacked as it left the rifle, hitting the golem monstrosity right in the head.
Clark was right, the thing packed a punch.

The energy actually melted the surface’s rock from the monster’s head, cracking it, and the giant thing stumbled. Natasha kept shooting, taking great satisfaction in seeing the hulking monster being pushed back; right by the side of a parked car.

It took her less than a second to realize that wasn’t a good thing.

Ignoring the energy shots, the golem grabbed the car over its head and tossed it to the sky. The car made an arc, crossing the entire street from one side to the other, only to start its descent right upon Natasha and Agent May.

“Move!” she yelled, jumping from the building, Melinda May right behind her.

Twisting her body midair, Natasha fired a cable against the walls, the steel hook breaking the surface of the building to stop her fall; by her side, Agent May did the same. That was when the car hit the roof, the impact destroying it completely, as the whole thing caved in. They could hear the car breaking every single floor as it fell, the walls of the building cracking more and more. It wouldn’t hold.

As she thought that, the walls where their cables were stuck gave in.

Jessica watched the building collapsing as Natasha and Melinda May slid down, both of them disappearing in a cloud of dust. She could only hope they would be fine, but there was nothing she could do; not when the golem turned its attention to her once again.

Snarling, Jessica got up, feeling her anger burning inside her muscles; her hand closed around the Thanagarian mace Sif gave her.

With one movement, she extended the weapon, seeing the ball of spiked metal clacking with energy. And, yelling, she advanced towards the monster. The golem started to run to her as well, lifting its arm to unleash a punch; she met the hit with one of her own, the mace clashing against the stone with unbelievable strength.

Whatever energy that weapon emitted, it clacked once again when it hit; the golem’s fist cracked and its arm was pushed back. Every rune on its surface glowed red.

Without stopping, Jessica lifted the mace and brought it down, hitting again and again, the golem glowing red at each blow. The rock was cracking more and more, each powerful hit sending the monster back. Jessica just kept bashing it, yelling nonstop, trying to bring down that monstrosity.

Suddenly, without her even realizing from where it came, she felt blasts of blue energy passing by her sides, hitting the golem. Glancing quickly to her back, she saw Natasha Romanoff and Melinda May running towards her, their Kryptonian rifles firing a barrage of energy against the golem, breaking and melting it, making each blow from her Thanagarian mace hit stronger.

Then, there was a blur; they could only hear as Sif appeared out of nowhere, her Asgardian sword cutting the golem’s legs in a single stroke. The big rock monster fell, only to be pierced by the Asgardian right in the chest. Every single rune glowed red, stronger than any time before.

And before they went out, Jessica Jones lifted her mace and unleashed the most powerful hit she could, right upon the golem’s head.

BOOOOM!
The four of them jumped back, weapons still raised, as a cloud of dust lifted after Jessica’s hit. It was dead, it had to be. She felt the rock from the head breaking and the weird runes weren’t glowing anymore. That had to mean something, didn’t it? Nobody said anything, just waiting, as the cloud slowly dissipated.

When it did, they all widened their eyes in shock; the golem was destroyed alright, completely broken. But it wasn’t a golem at all. It was an armor.

Stuck inside it, there was a man.

Sif felt her body grow cold at the sight of the broken man inside the rock armor, his body glued together to the stone by the flaming runes. It was one of enthralled bikers, wearing a leather vest with a name tag on it: Rooster. What had Lorelei done?!

There was clapping behind them.

As if they were one, the four of them turned, fast, weapons raised to face their enemy. Lorelei had finally showed up, walking down the street towards them, her green dress flowing with the wind, her flaming hair fluttering. She was smiling as she clapped.

“Well done, Sif!” she mocked. “Well done!”

Sif would have attacked her right then and there, her arm trembling with the need to do it. She could see Natasha Romanoff and Melinda May aiming their weapons and Jessica Jones lifting her Thanagarian mace. But there was a good reason they weren’t firing.

Between them and Lorelei, firmly held by her hands, was a little boy.

“What have you done, Lorelei?” Sif asked, the words leaving her mouth as if they were a growl.

“Oh, you mean Rooster?” she asked, glancing at the dead man inside the rock armor. She grinned. “He wanted so much to fight for me, that I granted his wish.”

Her hands were caressing the child’s hair, delicately, as if she was actually a caring mother rather than a monster.

“It is over, Lorelei,” Sif said. “Let the child go and come willingly.”

“Now, why would I do that?” she asked, smiling, but her eyes were dead cold. “600 years, Sif. 600 years in a dark cell, not able to utter a single word.”

“You deserved worse!”

“Then strike me! Unleash that rage within you, Lady Sif! For once in your pathetic life, take what you want!”

Sif’s entire body was trembling in rage. Her eyes could see only red. There was nothing Sif wished more than to kill her. But not at the cost of an innocent’s life. Not against the orders of the Allfather.

“Take that sword of yours and stab us, right through here,” Lorelei said, her voice soft, caressing the child’s chest with a single finger. “Can you do it? Are you strong enough?”

“Put the child away and you will find out,” Sif promised.
Lorelei just chuckled.

“All these years and you are still the same Sif,” she mocked. “Doing as you are told, heeling at the feet of those who command you, never to get what you desire.”

Her green eyes fixed on Sif’s, a cruel glare burning in them.

“Do you ever wonder what could have been, Sif?” she said, her hands stroking the boy’s cheeks. “If you were stronger?” She glanced at the child and smiled cruelly. “Do you think you would have a son of your own by now if I had not taken Haldor from you?”

Sif saw red. Without thinking, she stepped forward, pure fury guiding her body, her arm lifting the sword.

“Ah! I would not do that if I were you, not if you want this beautiful boy to have a head after this is all over,” Lorelei threatened, grabbing the little boy’s throat. Sif stopped, still burning with rage, but not advancing anymore. “That’s better.”

“You have nowhere to go, Lorelei!” Sif yelled. “No one else to fight for you. There will be no escape. Let the boy go and I will take you to Asgard unharmed.”

“And if I do not?” Lorelei asked, raising her eyebrows. “You would never disobey the Allfather, Sif, we both know that! Do not bark empty threats at me!”

“The Allfather ordered me to bring you alive,” Sif countered. “He said nothing about bringing you whole. Hurt the boy, Lorelei, and I will hurt you. I will take your limbs off, one by one, and watch you scream in silence as I seal your voice once again, THAT IS MY PROMISSE!”

Lorelei actually seemed surprised by her threat, no doubt hearing the truth in her words, but she masked it a moment later.

“It seems you changed a bit, after all, Sif,” Lorelei whispered. “Still, I do not think it will be enough. No, deep inside, you still cannot keep those you care about safe, can you? Haldor was but the first. You know why I am here, in Midgard, do you not?”

To control Kal, Thor and every other champion in this Realm. But it didn’t matter, she had failed.

“Kal-El is out of your reach, as is Thor, Lorelei,” Sif stated.

“So you do know!” she exclaimed, happily. “Is that why you came to Midgard, Sif, to keep him safe? To keep him away from me? I have heard tales about the two of you during the Convergence Tournament.”

Sif did not answer.

“Your silence is telling. That means, dear Sif, that you know where he is. Is he close? I doubt a merciful god such as him would bear to stay away from the fight, leaving it to the care of others. Close then, but away from my voice’s reach?”

“You are beaten, Lorelei, learn to accept it!”

“But am I? You said I had no one to fight for me, but is that really true?” Lorelei asked, smiling. Then she looked around her. “Join us, my pets!”

Everywhere, from every single building still standing, people began to come out to the streets. Not
bikers, not criminals, normal people. Innocent men. Men that were being forced to hold their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters hostage.

Sif, Natasha, Melinda and Jessica looked around, seeing the mass of people approaching them, encircling them, each and everyone under Lorelei’s command.

“What is this supposed to accomplish, Lorelei?!” Sif screamed. “Kill those hostages and you have nothing! Order them to attack us and they will be defeated! You have nowhere to go!”

Lorelei pretended to think for a second.

“It seems that I will need assistance then, will I not?”

Saying this, Lorelei grabbed the boy in front of her and tossed him in their direction. Too many things happened at the same time. Sif moved, time slowing down around her, her arms raised so she could grab the child before he fell. Natasha and Melinda May raised their guns, aiming forward, but were unable to shoot with the kid still in front of them. Jessica prepared to throw her mace, bringing it backwards, but also having to wait for a better angle.

And all around them, Lorelei’s thralls began to kill their hostages.

Sif yelled, feeling her heart beating painfully fast inside her chest, as their knives and guns went off. Sons killing their mothers, husbands killing their wives, brothers killing their sisters, fathers killing their daughters. It happened so fast, all at the same time, and none of them could do anything but watch as the blood was spilled.

Then, they began to kill themselves.

There was no hesitation, no fear, no resistance. Just as they killed their loved ones, every man in the city began to kill themselves, forced by Lorelei’s magic to take their own lives. Guns were fired, blades slashed and the blood flowed, staining the ground.

During all that, Lorelei chanted, her magic flowing powerful. Runes began to glow on the ground just as the blood touched it and the very air was clacking with pure, raw power. When the kid eventually fell safely in her arms, Sif finally understood what was happening.

A ritual. Lorelei was drawing power from their sacrifices, their life-forces being used to fuel her magic.

Sif launched her sword towards Lorelei a moment after she smiled and yelled:

“HELP ME, SUPERMAN!”

The very sky thundered when the magic from Lorelei’s voice traveled far away.

Clark’s pupils dilated when he heard that divine voice, every single particle of his body resonating with it. His heart was beating faster than ever, he felt hot and cold at the same time, his mind numbed as the words penetrated his very spirit.

He barely noticed Ward and Coulson taking their guns when he took off, punching a hole through the Bus.

Sif’s sword was already airborne, cutting the sky, when Natasha and Melinda fired their
Kryptonian rifles and Jessica threw her mace. The air was still electric, burning their skin with the amount of magic in it, the entire place surrounded with corpses, blood and fiery runes on the ground.

There was a boom in the sky. Kal-El, the Superman, Savior of Midgard, had arrived.

He landed in front of Lorelei, hitting the ground so violently that the entire town shook, the ground breaking under his feet; just at the moment Sif’s sword arrived to pierce Lorelei’s heart. Moving with a speed only a Kryptonian under a yellow sun could, Kal grabbed her sword with his bare hand, his fingers avoiding the blade. The energy shots from the Kryptonian guns hit him directly in the chest, but he did not even react to them, allowing the energy to dissipate over his skin without flinching. And raising his other hand, he grabbed Jessica’s mace, his hand closing around the spiked metal without any semblance of fear.

Silence was all they could hear for a long moment. Until Lorelei’s hands grabbed Kal’s shoulders from behind him, touching him like a lover would, her hands the only thing they could see as she hid behind him.

“Now, my champion… KILL THEM!”

Hey guys, new chapter! I hope you like it, because this one was really long. Didn’t think it would become this big, to be honest. Anyway, tell me what you think about it. Thanks for everything!
“Now, my champion… KILL THEM!”

Sif was amongst the deadliest warriors of Asgard. She had battled and defeated uncountable enemies in defense of the Nine Realms. Gods, Elves, Giants, powerful beasts, armies from other planets, Sif had fought and beaten them all. Few would dare to face her and from those who did, even fewer survived. Even in Asgard, she could count on her fingers the number of warriors that could resist her fast style of combat.

Even so, when Lorelei ordered Kal to attack, Sif barely had the time to raise her shield before the Kryptonian was right in front of her.

The small shield rang like a bell when Kal’s fist smashed it, punching with such strength that Sif’s arm was simply pushed back against her, sending her flying with a blast so powerful that the Asgardian didn’t even have the time to think. Before she could even realize what was happening, she had already collided against a building behind her, destroying it completely.

Sif passed through the building, the walls turning to dust when she touched them, and the whole thing collapsed with a thunderous noise, a big cloud of dust raising to the sky; she barely noticed all that happening, as she bounced against the ground one, two, three times.

Then she felt something passing over her, fast. Sif did not even have the chance to try to defend herself when she felt a foot colliding against her chest, pressing her down against the ground. The blow made her stop immediately, taking the air from her lungs and bending her breastplate; the ground under her broke, causing a crater to open almost instantly.

She was pinned down, an unbelievable force holding her against the ground; then Kal brought his fist down.

Sif would have liked to brag that she did not flinch, but when the Kryptonian’s fist blurred, her first instinct was to close her eyes and turn away, waiting for the inevitable hit. Except it never came. There was a powerful wind, blowing away the cloud of dust and making Sif’s hair flutter; she opened her eyes.

Kal’s fist was stopped an inch away from her face, shaking. For the first time since this began, Sif looked into his eyes; what she saw there, surprised her.

Lorelei’s enthrallment was not a full mind control. Her thralls, for the most part, still kept their memories, their personalities, their morals; except that Lorelei became the embodiment of all their desires. The most important thing in their existence. A parent, even the most kind-hearted and peaceful of them, would fight and kill to defend their child. What Lorelei forced their thralls to feel was similar, but much, much more potent and she forced them to feel that for every single little thing she asked. Disappointing her, to her thralls, was like turning their backs at the most important thing in their lives, it simply couldn’t be done, no matter what she asked of them.

What Sif saw in Kal’s eyes, however, was conflict. They were wide, unsure… Afraid. Against all odds, he was resisting Lorelei. She had no idea how, she had never seen anyone able to do it, but
that might be their only chance of surviving this.

“Kal, you have to stop!” Sif yelled, looking deeply into his eyes, trying to snap him out of the enchantment.

His eyes trembled, his whole face twitched, but his fist remained where it was, still shaking.

“Sif, please…” he whispered, as if the words burned him.

“What are you doing?!” Lorelei screamed. “I ordered you to kill her!”

When the words reached him, Kal closed his eyes. And raised his fist; Sif prepared herself for the hit.

Before he could punch her, however, a pair of blue energy blasts hit him, fired no doubt by the Kryptonian rifles Kal borrowed to Natasha and May. He wasn’t expecting it; the blasts tossed him back a few inches, making him groan. It didn’t harm him, but it gave Sif enough space to twist herself and kick him with both legs against the chest, with every bit of her Asgardian strength she could muster.

The kick tossed him back, far away from her, her boots clashing with a loud noise against his ribs. Kal became a blur in the sky, as he flew in Lorelei’s direction, passing by Natasha, May and Jessica Jones so fast that they couldn’t even properly see him. But before he could actually clash against Lorelei, which was what Sif intended, he used his flight to stop midair, a booming noise echoing.

Slowly, his eyes never leaving Sif, he floated down, never actually touching the ground. Sif jumped up, stepping forward. Natasha and May remained behind, rifles aimed at Kal, and Jessica Jones stayed close to her, fists up, her face pale as snow but decided.

“Come on, snap out of it!” she heard Jessica muttering, almost like a plea.

“You have to stop. *Think* about this,” Natasha said, her expression never changing, but the voice incredibly serious. “You can do it.”

Kal’s eyes remained on them and she could see his muscles tensing, preparing to fight; the expression on his face, however, was filled with hesitation. Slowly, he turned, looking at Lorelei behind him.

“We don’t have to do this,” he said, his voice low. “Please, I can take you out of here, I can protect you. We don’t have to hurt anyone.”

Hearing that pained Sif more than any hit she had already taken in that battle. Lorelei was frowning, but not out of pity, out of confusion; Kal’s resistance was not something she had experienced before. Quickly, she stepped over to Kal and touched his face, gently, like a lover would; her face, however, did not have any trace of care.

“Asgard will never let me go, my champion,” Lorelei, pouring her magic over Kal. “*Never*! I need you to defend me!"

That was the end of Kal’s hesitation. When he turned back to them, his eyes were decided. The air itself became heavy. The dust and the debris around Kal began to float, as he gathered his energy, preparing to do Lorelei’s bidding; his hands closed into fists, his muscles tensed. Sif raised her shield, preparing her fighting stance.

Everything went wrong and now she would have to fight a battle for her life. And even if she won,
her victory would be a dead friend. Just like when she fought Haldor, 600 years ago. Damn Lorelei to Hel! Sif was burning with rage, with frustration, with impotent fury. Lorelei destroyed everything she touched, she was like a disease. And now, she had infected one of the most powerful beings she had ever met. Could they defeat him? Could they stop Kal? Could they do it without killing him or without suffering any losses on their side?

Before Sif could answer any of those questions — if there even was an answer to them —, Kal advanced, the air booming as he flew against them. It happened so fast that Kal became a blur in the air, the ground breaking because of the pressure; she had never seen anything like it. There was no time to react, no time to even think about doing anything.

And when he was about to reach her, reality itself seemed to break in front of Sif, like a window cracking. Kal disappeared inside the rift, leaving five stunned women behind.

Clark twisted himself midair as soon as he crossed something resembling a wall made of crystal that suddenly appeared in the middle of nothing, his feet breaking the street for several meters as he tried to stop. When he finally managed to do it, he looked around, trying to understand what the heck just happened. He was still in the same small city he was before, in the same street, surrounded by the same buildings on both sides.

Except that he was alone.

Sif, Natasha, Melinda May and Jessica had disappeared. Lorelei had disappeared. All those dead people had disappeared.

And yet the city was the same, down to the last detail. Well, not exactly, perhaps. Clark felt that something was different, as if the air itself wasn’t the same, but he couldn’t figure it out what exactly. It was just a feeling, something in his gut telling him that he most definitely wasn’t in the same place.

“First time in the Mirror Dimension?” a voice said from behind him. “It can be a bit unsettling.”

Clark turned fast, surprised to his core; how did someone sneak up on him? There, standing in the middle of the street a few meters away from him, was a woman wearing a yellow cloak. There was little else Clark could tell of her appearance, since she was almost entirely covered by that weird, old fashioned cloak, but one small detail stood out: a pendant in the form of an eye dangling from her neck.

That’s when her words finally reached his brain. Mirror Dimension; he had heard that name before, from Loki’s mouth no less.

“Ever present, but undetected,” Clark quoted the Asgardian god, recalling his words. “You are a sorceress!”

He saw a small smile on the woman’s lips.

“Well done,” she congratulated him. “So you are not completely ignorant about magical matters.”

Clark didn’t answer, eyeing her carefully. While he knew the name of the place where he was, that was pretty much all he knew about it. Right now, he was standing in another dimension, a place that most definitely didn’t follow the same rules his own dimension had. Slowly, still very aware of the woman’s movements, Clark glanced around again, trying to gather some sort of information about it.
The woman didn’t seem bothered at all.

“As the name implies,” she said, suddenly, “this dimension mirror ours. Everything here is a reflection of our dimension, but the ‘real’ world is not affected by what happens here. It is the perfect place to train, surveil…” She stared at him. “And sometimes to contain threats.”

Her words explained pretty well to Clark where he was, but more than that, it finally made him open his eyes to the situation he was facing. Contain threats… That’s what he was right now, wasn’t he? Clark knew that. Lorelei’s enthrallment didn’t erase his memories and morals or forced him to obey her without question, it just made him love her more than anything else. More than anyone else. More than his home, his mother, his friends… Much more than he thought he was capable of loving anything.

Sif, Natasha, Jessica… They were still his friends and he would die for them. But they were a threat to Lorelei. As was Asgard and even the people on Earth. That he couldn’t tolerate.

Clark knew, without a shred of doubt, that Lorelei was controlling him. He knew his love wasn’t real. Just as he knew that what Lorelei was doing – what he was doing – was beyond wrong. All those innocent people murdered by her… It made him nauseous just thinking about it.

But he felt the love anyway and he simply couldn’t ignore it, no matter how much he tried to – and he was trying with everything he had. It consumed his entire being, it made him simply unable to do anything that might cause Lorelei’s harm. Clark, right now, was as protective of Lorelei as he was of Earth and its people, even more so. The very thought of allowing someone to harm her was unthinkable, unconceivable, as was the thought of him hurting his own mother on purpose.

He was, without a doubt, a threat to Earth. He was aware of that. And if that woman in front of him knew that as well, then she was also a danger to Lorelei.

“What do you plan to do?” Clark asked, preparing himself to fight.

“I plan to stop you,” she answered, completely unbothered by his obvious fighting stance. “And her.”

As she said that, Clark realized that the same weird “cracking window” was forming by his side and Lorelei was crossing it; she jumped to him, eyes fixed on the cloaked sorceress. Clark felt an almost palpable relief in seeing her alright.

“A sorceress!” Lorelei exclaimed, shocked, barely acknowledging Clark. “In Midgard?”

“Why so surprised?” the woman asked. “We are rare, but we do exist. That was never a secret to Asgard.”

“And what does a mortal know about Asgard?” Lorelei questioned.

The cloaked woman smiled again, her hands still calmly behind her back.

“Quite a lot, I’d say. I was trained by your Queen, after all.”

That little bit surprised him almost as much as it surprised Lorelei. That woman was Frigga’s apprentice?

“You lie!” Lorelei hissed. “Frigga would never waste her time mentoring a mortal. And I bow to no Queen!”
Lorelei’s outburst didn’t seem to intimidate the sorceress at all. She simply tilted her head slightly, completely unconcerned, as if Lorelei’s wrath meant nothing to her. That made the Asgardian even more furious.

And Clark even more worried. If Frigga’s apprentice was challenging them without a care in the world, it probably didn’t mean anything good.

The woman’s dismissive gesture enraged Lorelei, however, and Clark was certain that she wouldn’t leave it at that. As if reading his thoughts, the Asgardian looked at him; he felt his heart quickening when he looked at her green eyes and despite knowing these feelings were not real, he knew he would fight – and kill, if necessary – for her.

“Bring me her head!” Lorelei commanded.

Clark could only obey.

Pulling his eyes from Lorelei, Clark looked at the cloaked sorceress, staring at her. A sudden – and powerful – rage burned inside him. That woman was a threat to Lorelei and even though Clark knew the Asgardian needed to be stopped, he literally couldn’t let that happen. Killing the woman would bring him no joy; the very idea made his stomach turn, really. Ending the life of a human with his bare hands was such a terrifying concept that for a moment he almost dared to disobey Lorelei.

But it was necessary, a little voice inside his mind whispered. She was a threat to everything he cared about. She had put him in this dimension, forcing Lorelei to follow them. She had forced his hand. There was no other way to save Lorelei, to make sure she would be safe and sound. Not as long as there were people trying to kill her. It was, as the little voice said, necessary.

Much like when he had to kill Zod to protect Earth.

Stepping forward, clearly putting himself between the sorceress and Lorelei, Clark took a deep breath, steeling his mind to what he would need to do. He was in a strange dimension, with rules he did not understand, facing an adversary he knew next to nothing about. But she was still human and capable of wielding magic or not, she shouldn’t be a match for him psychically.

He would end this quickly.

Gathering all his energy, Clark took off as fast as he could, the ground exploding under him. He had no idea how fast he truly was, what was the maximum speed he could reach, but he knew, beyond any doubt, that he could strike the sorceress before she had the chance to move a finger. Before she could blink it would be over.

Or so he thought, before realizing that he had barely advanced a few inches.

It didn’t make any sense. There wasn’t anything holding him back, no sudden weight pulling him down, no force resisting him. And yet, Clark was moving in slow-motion, as if time itself had slowed to a crawl around him. The debris he broke when he took off were almost stopped midair, his cape was pretty much frozen, not even the familiar sonic boom when he reached supersonic speed could be heard. What was happening?!

Clark had no answer to that question, but it became very clear that the sorceress in front of him was not facing the same problem.

In a single movement, seemingly so fast now that Clark was apparently stuck in *something*, the sorceress raised her hand and slapped the ground. Just like that, reality itself broke. The street
rippled like the ocean, the ground behaving as if it were made of liquid, each wave growing bigger and bigger, moving impossibly fast in their direction. He had no chance of dodging that, not at the speed he was flying, and Lorelei was apparently too surprised to do anything.

And like a wave in the ocean, the street exploded against Clark and Lorelei.

It was a powerful hit, but not enough to hurt any of them. It was, however, powerful enough to send them flying to the sky. Even then, though, Clark was still stuck in whatever sorcery the woman casted, spinning in slow-motion in the air, seeing the pieces of the street stopping to move when they got closer to him. Lorelei, apparently not bound by the same issues, was blasted away.

He tried to follow her, to grab her somehow, but he was unable to reach her moving so slowly. He could only watch as Lorelei was tossed away amongst the fragments of the exploding street, everything happening so quickly that his sluggish body could hardly comprehend. Soon, however, his whole attention was taken by something else.

By the entire world around him twisting and turning in a way it simply shouldn’t be possible.

The buildings around them grew like living things, the walls extending themselves up until they were the size of skyscrapers, the steel beams from its structure breaking the concrete as they stretched, like a huge mass of twisting “steel vines” coming out of the walls. The long street under him cracked, dividing itself in what seemed to be little islands, each one moving in a different direction like floating platforms. And then the entire world simply turned upside down, as if a giant had taken the planet and twisted it. The sky was down, the floating pieces of street broke apart going everywhere, the buildings were pointing down, like weird pillars of twisting steel tentacles flying in the middle of nothing.

Clark’s mind was barely able to comprehend what was going on. The laws of physics apparently didn’t exist in this reality and nothing made sense anymore, as he floated in slow-motion in the middle of all that chaos, desperately trying to move in Lorelei’s direction as she crashed against one of the floating islands.

Before he could, however, an entire building fell from the sky, right on top of him.

The Ancient One waved her hand, bringing one of the floating islands under her as she landed, her feet tapping the ground softly. She walked to the edge of the island, glancing from under her hood, assessing the battlefield she created. A succession of floating buildings, growing upside down like a mass of concrete and steel tentacles; little islands created from the broken ground, suspended in air all over, one of which the Asgardian had crashed upon; and an endless blue sky all around them, even down where the ground was supposed to be.

In front of her, completely destroyed but still retaining most of its form, was the building she just dropped over the Kryptonian, its shattered pieces orbiting him like an asteroid belt around a planet.

The Mirror Dimension, as she told Superman, was a reflection of their own dimension. It had, however, a few perks that theirs didn’t. Like the fact that anything that happened there didn’t affect the “real world”.

And the fact that, with the proper knowledge and the right amount of energy, she could effectively manipulate it in any way she wished to.

It wasn’t easy and it wasn’t something just anyone could do, but then again, she had the title of Sorcerer Supreme for a reason, didn’t she? She was the guardian of their dimension, the one
responsible for the safety of their world against any mystical threat, either from outside realities or theirs.

An Asgardian sorceress trying to conquer Earth fit that description pretty nicely.

The Ancient One did not arrive as quickly as she would have wanted. Lorelei was a threat, but it wasn’t until she performed a powerful magical ritual that she could find her. Tracking her exact location and breaking the wards around the town so she could open a portal leading there had delayed her; that delay had cost lives and the mind of Superman. What was an already big menace had suddenly become worse, much worse.

A threat so dangerous that she had no choice but to act in person, with the aid of the Eye of Agamotto.

Asgardians, as she knew well, were powerful. Especially one well versed in the Mystical Arts. And Superman was one of the strongest beings that had ever set foot on their planet. Together, they had more than enough power to bring this world to its knees; having the capacity to glance into possible futures, she knew that for a fact. Something needed to be done, the safety of Earth depended on it. As did the safety of the three Sanctums Sanctorum built on it.

The Ancient One fixed her eyes on the remains of the building she tossed on Superman, still floating slowly around the Kryptonian. She had no illusions that something like that would do anything more than delay him, but it would do for the moment. Glancing up, she watched as the Asgardian got up, her eyes fixed on a nearby skyscraper; the building, resembling more a mass of concrete and steel tentacles than a real building now, was trying to snare her with its several tendrils, without success.

She closed her eyes for a moment, focusing. Her goal was clear: stop Superman and incapacitate or kill Lorelei.

When the building around Kal-El exploded, the debris turning to dust as Superman flew up in great speed without a scratch, The Ancient One knew that none of this would be simple.

Natasha had no idea what was happening anymore and by the look of things, she wasn’t the only one. Agent May was frozen in place, still staring shocked at the empty place Clark and then Lorelei had just disappeared into. Jessica Jones was cursing, unable to stay quiet, as she grabbed her mace back, her eyes darting all around as if waiting for them to come back. And Sif, the only person who she’d hoped would know what was happening, was also looking around, searching for something.

Things happened too fast. The battle, the appearance of a weird golem creature at the end of it – that proved itself to be just a human inside a magical armor –, then Lorelei showing up with a hostage. Before any of them had any idea of how to proceed, people all around them were killing themselves, enthralled by Lorelei into ending their own lives so she could perform some sort of magical ritual.

A ritual that ended up boosting her powers enough so she could control Clark, even from that distance.

All of a sudden, they were facing Clark instead of Lorelei. Natasha closed her eyes for a moment, trying to regain her focus, fighting flashes of the time when she was forced to go up against Clint. She had hoped to never go through something like that again, but here she was, doing it once more.
Except this time, Natasha didn’t know how to fix things.

Before any of them said anything, suggested anything, they heard a car approaching in the distance. She sighed; Coulson and the rest of his team, no doubt. Hopefully wearing the devices made to protect them from Lorelei’s voice, because the last thing they needed right now was another person enthralled.

“Sif, where the fuck are they?!” Jessica Jones exclaimed, suddenly, finally snapping out of her confusion.

The Asgardian took a few seconds to answer.

“I do not know,” she said, not looking to Jessica.

She walked to the point where Clark had disappeared, trying to touch the air; there was nothing there at all, not after the weird cracks disappeared. Then there was a flash of recognition in her eyes.

“What is it?” Natasha asked, walking to Sif. “You remembered something.”

Coulson’s car finally arrived, parking close; he and Agent Ward got out, weapons prepared, both thankfully wearing their Sonic Blockers. Aside from a quick glance, however, no one even looked at them, everyone paying attention to Sif.

The Asgardian warrior nodded, confirming her suspicion.

“The Mirror Dimension,” she finally said. “They are not in our reality anymore.”

Lorelei was enraged. She was being challenged by a sorceress, a sorceress claiming to have been taught by Frigga of all people; an honor not even she could claim, no matter how much she despised the Queen of Asgard. The worst thing was that even though she wanted to deny it, to brand the Midgardian a liar, she could not. Not after seeing all her power. Not after seeing the control she had over the Mirror Dimension.

When her Champion disappeared into the dimensional rift, Lorelei was confused; stunned, even. The existence of sorcerers on Midgard was not something she had anticipated. She knew they existed in the past, obviously, but they were extremely rare. And nothing she had seen since she returned to Midgard gave her any indication that they were still around. Until one of them had trapped her Kryptonian inside the Mirror Dimension.

She followed them almost immediately, taking advantage of Sif’s surprise to pursue the one responsible for that; no matter how much she hated Sif, facing her by herself was not something she wanted to do. Lorelei needed Kal-El to conquer Midgard and she would get him back.

What greeted her was a Midgardian more powerful than she could ever have predicted. But powerful or not, she was just a mortal in the end.

Snarling, Lorelei waved her hand, using her powers to influence the Mirror Dimension; the small floating island where she landed flew in the mortal’s direction, just as Kal-El managed to snap out of whatever spell the sorceress had hit him with. A fireball began to burn over her hand.

The mortal had committed a very big mistake when she decided to challenge her.
The Ancient One waited, hands crossed behind her back, watching the Kryptonian and the 
Asgardian movements. Superman destroyed the remains of the building as he flew up, stopping 
midair for a moment; the Asgardian commanded an island to go to her, a fireball appearing over 
her hand. There was maybe a second, a last breath of air before diving into the deep ocean.

Then they attacked.

It was fast, as only higher beings such as them could move. Superman’s eyes glowed red for an 
instant and then a pair of energy beams was unleashed, at the same time a fireball of the size of a 
bus was tossed by Lorelei in her direction. There would be no chance for her to defend herself, for 
er her to escape or to try anything. There simply wasn’t enough time for it.

So she forced time around her to move slower.

The Eye of Agamotto glowed green and suddenly the fire and the energy beams slowed to a crawl, 
almost stopping. Moving fast, using the opportunity she created while she could, the Ancient One 
traced two circular portals with her Sling Ring, right in front of the attacks; their counterparts 
opened behind the Kryptonian and the Asgardian. She allowed time to return to its normal speed.

The flames and the energy beams disappeared into them, reappearing behind the Asgardian and the 
Kryptonian. The island Lorelei was standing on was blown up, tossing her away, at the same time 
Kal-El was blasted away by his own heat vision, crashing against one of the flying buildings.

Still from the small island she was standing, the Ancient One channeled her magic, making the 
Mirror Dimension turn upside down once again. The Asgardian, falling after being blown away by 
her own fireball, stopped midair for a moment, before starting to fall in the opposite direction; right 
on top of one of the buildings and its mass of moving steel beams.

With another wave of her hand, the steel beams changed again, twisting themselves until their 
shape resembled more a bunch of spears than tentacles. Spears that suddenly grew in size, moving 
towards the falling Asgardian.

To her credit, even while falling, Lorelei tried to manipulate the Mirror Dimension to transform the 
spears into something else, to stop them from growing or to at least weaken them until their 
durability was back to normal, something that her Asgardian body would no doubt survive. It 
forced the Ancient One to struggle against Lorelei’s magic for a moment; it was almost unbearable 
and it required her entire concentration, but she knew it would only take a few seconds for the 
spears to reach her.

She didn’t count on Superman recovering so fast, flying so unbelievably quickly that he managed 
to grab Lorelei and land safely over a floating island. Both of them looked at her, eyes promising 
payback.

Her strategy needed to be adjusted.

For a moment, she focused her magic, opening the Eye of Agamotto a little bit; the green light 
glowed through the opening. The Ancient One closed her eyes, allowing the strength of the artifact 
seep into her mind.

…The ground under her feet came to life, the tendrils of earth grabbing her legs. A blue blur flew 
against before she could free herself, the impact destroying her body completely…

…She avoided the earth tendrils by jumping to another island. A cloud of spears made of ice was 
thrown against her, forcing her to open a portal in the middle of the sky to flee. Before she could
enter, however, the Mirror Dimension was turned upside down by the Asgardian. While she fell, helplessly, a pair of energy beams burned her alive…

Instead of jumping to another island, she used her Eldritch Magic to create a glowing orange platform in the sky. Landing over it, she immediately created a pair of Eldritch shields, using them to block the ice spears. The spears broke against the shields, but before she had a second to feel relieved, Kal-El’s heat vision obliterated her defense. A single ice spear managed to pass through, sinking in her chest. The pain was unbelievable, but bearable, until the Asgardian closed her fist and made the spear grow spikes inside her body…

The Ancient One opened her eyes, not even a second after focusing her magic in the Eye of Agamotto; reality seemed dreamlike, as it always did after she glanced into the possible futures of this reality.

But she knew what to do now.

Before Lorelei could try to manipulate the Mirror Dimension and trap her legs, the Ancient One formed a seal with her hands; several copies of her arms appeared behind her, before her duplicates separated themselves from her, each one of them moving to one direction, jumping from the floating island, using Eldritch Magic to form platforms as they ran through the sky.

She saw one of her copies being trapped and pierced by ice spears. Others were obliterated by bursts of heat vision. A huge piece of rock was tossed against three of them and Superman himself flew there, slaughtering a group of her copies before they could blink.

The real Ancient One, however, was not there anymore. She was running, creating small Eldritch Magic platforms as she advanced, going towards Lorelei as her copies provided some distraction. Superman was an adversary right now, but he was not the enemy; she didn’t want him dead.

That’s why her duplicates tied him up with whips of Eldritch Magic, binding his hands, legs and neck, using not their muscles to hold him, but telekinesis. She knew it wouldn’t last – few spells were strong enough to hold a Kryptonian like that – but it would give her time to engage Lorelei alone.

The Asgardian saw her approaching and jumped to her island to meet her in combat, summoning two fireballs as she did it. Without stopping, the Ancient One made two shields of Eldritch Magic and focused on the Eye of Agamotto; suddenly, time sped up around her, allowing her to move even faster than Lorelei.

The fireballs were tossed against her, easily blocked by her shields, and then they clashed against each other, fist and shield colliding. The magic shield managed to absorb the hit – something a normal shield would never do, which would have cost her arm – and then the Ancient One hit her back, using the shield to bash her face.

The blow angered the Asgardian more than it hurt her, but it gave the Ancient One the opportunity to unleash a combo on her adversary, using her shields to defend and to attack. Lorelei was good, she recognized that, but it was clear that she wasn’t used to fight like that and the Ancient One had the advantage of moving faster because of the Eye of Agamotto. Throat, nose, belly, legs and finally chin; Lorelei was tossed back, dizzy for a moment.

That was when the Ancient One summoned the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak and threw it against the Asgardian.

The ancient artifact – resembling a skeletal armor made of metal – hit Lorelei directly against the
chest. And suddenly, as if coming to life, the artifact began to move by itself, closing against Lorelei’s chest, mouth, legs and arms. The Bands forced her to kneel and then pulled her arms back, completely immobilizing her, even as the Asgardian tried to fight it with all her strength.

The Ancient One allowed herself to smile for a moment, but it might’ve been too soon, because a sonic boom in the distance indicated that Superman was once again free.

Instinct alone was what saved her. Before she could even think about using the Eye of Agamotto, the Ancient One was already channeling magic into it, slowing time around her once more; the Kryptonian’s fist stopped inches away from her face.

Jumping back, Superman moving in slow motion towards her, the Ancient One traced a flaming orange triangle in front of her, using Eldritch Magic. Snapping her fingers, a square surrounded it, then a circle appeared around.

One layer, two layers, three layers… Then the biggest beam of blue energy was shot from the Eldritch insignia, swallowing the Kryptonian whole and tossing him away, destroying everything in its path.

Including the very floating island she and Lorelei were standing on, when the magic’s recoil hit the ground. The Ancient One could only watch as the Asgardian fell, already grabbing the Eye of Agamotto to try to rebuild it.

She could only hope her attack kept Superman away while she did it.

Clark felt his skin burn when the blue energy beam hit him, throwing him away, his body going through several buildings before he could gather enough strength to stop. Shaking his head, ignoring the burning ache on his skin, he looked back at where Lorelei was, trying to find her.

The island she and the sorceress were had broken and they were falling; until they suddenly weren’t anymore.

He watched as the pieces of the island stopped midair, as did the sorceress and Lorelei; then there was green glow. Like a puzzle being put together, the island began to piece itself back together, the cracks disappearing as if they never existed. Lorelei, still immobilized by that weird steel armor, was pulled back to the self-repairing island, as was the sorceress.

She was rewinding time! Clark had no idea how, but he finally understood what was going on when he approached her. Somehow, the sorceress was slowing down time around him; he would need to move faster. Lorelei needed him!

Gathering all his energy, Clark flew to them, faster than he ever tried before; space itself seemed to bend as he accelerated, the dimension rippling like water.

The island put itself together and the Ancient One raised her hand to open a portal. She would take Lorelei back to their dimension and leave Superman behind, until they could find a way to free his mind. Or at least that was the plan, until she sensed the Mirror Dimension tremble.

Changing her mind, the Ancient One opened the Eye of Agamotto again, slowing time around
Except it barely worked. The Kryptonian slowed down, of course, but he was still moving much faster than any human could. It surprised her to know that he even could fly that fast and that surprise cost her the opportunity to slow down time even more. She had no choice; abandoning the attempt to open the portal, the Ancient One jumped back, a moment before Kal-El clashed against the island, grabbing Lorelei as he did it.

She was thrown away when the island broke again, twisting midair to dodge and block the debris at the same time she used Eldritch Magic to create a round platform under her. Immediately after she landed, the Ancient One looked up, seeing Superman breaking the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak with his bare hands and freeing Lorelei.

The Ancient One closed her eyes for a moment, focusing. She had failed to separate them and it would be harder to try it again. Leaving the Mirror Dimension would not work, not when Lorelei could simply open a portal to follow her; it wasn’t like she even needed a Sling Ring to do so, which would be the first thing the Ancient One would try to steal or break in these circumstances. Humans like her needed an artifact like that to open portals, but higher beings like Asgardians could do it using their own strength; their bodies were strong enough to handle such power.

Fighting head on was not advisable, not when she was facing beings so powerful. Especially when she didn’t want to kill, as long as there was another possibility. Well, Superman, at least, she wanted alive; Lorelei was beginning to lose that privilege.

Whatever she would do, she needed to decide fast. Differently from them, the Ancient One was beginning to get tired. Drawing power from the Dark Dimension and controlling the Eye of Agamotto was beginning to take a toll on her and that was bad. Not only because she needed every bit of energy she had to fight, but because dealing with powerful artifacts like the Eye of Agamotto while tired was suicide.

Slowing time, rewinding it, making it faster around her… Small acts, perhaps, but costly ones. The more she used it, the bigger the chance for her to make a mistake. It could be as small as simply failing to work – which would cost her life, most likely – or as big as destroying space-time continuum.

Infinity Stones were not meant to be used carelessly.

“Are you saying they are in another dimension?!” Jessica exclaimed, looking at Sif. “How the fuck is that possible? Did that Lorelei bitch put them there?”

“How are we going to bring them back?” Agent May asked.

“Can we follow them?” Natasha asked.

“I do not know!” Sif snapped.

Honestly, Jessica couldn’t blame her. She was being bombarded by questions ever since Clark disappeared. But right now Clark was being controlled and he was in another dimension. They needed answers and Sif was the only one there who could provide.

“Lorelei was not the one who did this, was she?” Jessica asked, finally realizing this.
It was obvious, in hindsight. She had just acquired what she wanted: Superman. She was kicking their asses. Why would she run away?

Again, Sif didn’t answer. She just kept staring at the exact point Clark had disappeared into, her sword raised. Everybody was, she noticed, even Coulson and Ward, both using those devices that blocked sound, which probably meant they had no idea what was going on, even worse than them.

“It was not Lorelei who did this,” Sif finally said. “Someone else is fighting. Someone well versed in the Mystical Arts.”

The Asgardian warrior looked at them.

“Prepare yourselves to fight, because they will come back sooner or later.”

The Ancient One pulled two buildings closer, tossing one in the Kryptonian’s direction and one in the Asgardian’s direction. Lorelei manipulated the Mirror Dimension, turning it to the right so she could avoid the flying building; Superman just crashed into it, destroying concrete and steel alike with ease.

He was moving so fast that the Ancient One could barely keep up, even as she tried to use the Eye of Agamotto to slow him down. It was incredible; and frankly, scary. Add that to Lorelei’s magical abilities, that allowed her to attack from afar and to control the Mirror Dimension, and the Ancient One was mostly jumping from floating island to floating island and inside portals just so she could survive.

Opening a portal, she crossed it just as Superman attacked, reappearing far away. She closed her eyes and focused on the Eye of Agamotto.

...Superman kicked an entire building over her...

...A huge pair of red energy beams crossed the sky, engulfing half the sky. Her entire body burned before it turned into dust...

...The island she was standing on closed like a bear-trap, crushing her inside it...

...The Kryptonian filled his lungs and blew the air as strongly as he could. Islands, buildings and everything else was torn apart by the cold wind, as if a tornado had taken form, the debris tearing her apart...

...An Eldritch whip hit her, cutting her in half...

...Her arm was cut off by a pair of red energy beams, making her lose her focus on the Eye of Agamotto. Time itself seemed to break and her mind couldn’t even process what happened after that...

Thousands of possibilities played inside her mind, thousands of different futures... All ended with her being defeated. With one exception: the possible future where she left the Mirror Dimension and fought in the real world.

She couldn’t defeat both of them alone, not when she was holding herself back to avoid killing Superman. It wasn’t ideal, it wasn’t what she want to do, but right now she didn’t have much choice.

So, opening a portal, the Ancient One returned to the real world, waiting for them to follow her.
Sif was already moving when she saw the fiery portal opening, her sword cutting the air as she attacked; only to stop at the last moment when she realized that she did not know the woman in front of her.

The woman, wearing a yellow cloak, barely reacted. She just glanced in Sif’s direction.

“They are coming,” she said. “Do you have a way to break Lorelei’s enthrallment other than death?”

Sif glanced at her waist, to the metallic choker strapped there.

“Then prepare yourself. I’ll keep Superman busy while you do it.”

Sif, Natasha, Jessica Jones, Melinda May, Coulson and Agent Ward just looked at the woman, not exactly sure of what to respond. They had no idea who this sorceress was, only that she seemed to be the one responsible for trapping Superman inside the Mirror Dimension.

But, apparently, she was on their side. And right now they did not have the privilege to turn away potential allies.

Turning to look back, she met their eyes.

“Focus everything you have on Lorelei,” she commanded. “We need to subdue her fast.”

The moment she said that, the space in front of the cloaked sorceress was taken by a fiery portal. Superman passed through, followed by Lorelei, moving so fast that even to Sif’s eyes he was nothing more than a blur.

But to her and everyone else’s surprise, his speed suddenly slowed down. So much that the cloaked sorceress could quickly trace a fiery portal of her own and launch it towards him, making Kal reappear on the other side of the small town; she followed him immediately, disappearing into another portal. It seemed she would be able to keep him busy, at least for a while.

Sif would not waste this gift, then.

Dashing forward, she clashed against a stunned Lorelei, her sword hitting the Eldritch shield she was able to conjure at the last second. From behind her, Natasha, May, Coulson and Ward began to fire, the energy blasts and the bullets passing by her side and hitting the other shield Lorelei summoned.

That was when Jessica Jones arrived.

“AAAHHHHH!” she yelled, jumping into the battle without any hesitation, her Thanagarian mace bashing Lorelei’s shield with all her strength.

And like Sif had explained to Jessica when she gifted her the mace, Nth-Metal was very effective against magic.

The flaming Eldritch shield Lorelei conjured was simply destroyed by the hit, the Thanagarian mace clacking with energy around its spiked metal ball. Sif took advantage of the sudden opening, slashing her sword against Lorelei, attacking her undefended side; her sword pierced Lorelei’s abdomen, quick and precise, coming out through her back.

Lorelei would live, but it would hurt.
The sudden pain was enough to make Lorelei lose her concentration, her other magic shield disappearing. And before Sif could even pull her sword back, Lorelei was hit by a barrage of bullets, two energy blasts and a remarkably strong punch from Jessica, her hand covered by Kal’s robot, Kelex, the metal taking the form of a spiked glove that hit the sorceress right in the face. The last hit was what threw her down, making the Asgardian sorceress land painfully on the ground, her green dress tainted red and her nose pointed at a wrong direction.

Sif enjoyed that view for an entire second; then she placed the choker around Lorelei’s neck, to finally cut off her magic and end Kal’s enthrallment.

The fact that the battle noises from the other side of the town did not stop and the fact that Lorelei was laughing silently, even wounded, told Sif something was very wrong.

“Why isn’t it working?” Jessica Jones asked, glancing desperately from the fallen Asgardian to Kal. “You said it would work!”

It was supposed to work! Sif was trying to find an answer, her mind racing with endless thoughts. Was the choker damaged? It did not seem to be broken. But why wasn’t it working?! It had to work! If it did not… What would they do?

Snarling, furious, Sif touched Lorelei’s neck with her blade. And very carefully, prepared to kill her if necessary, she removed the choker; Lorelei’s laughs could be heard now.

“You thought it would be that easy, Sif?” Lorelei taunted, laughing, ignoring the wounds and the whole situation she was in. “Did you think I learned nothing during these 600 years you forced me to rot in a cell? Did you really believe you would beat me exactly like you did back then?”

The ritual. It had to be the ritual. The people Lorelei sacrificed to augment her powers so she could enthrall Kal. That was why the choker did not cut the control she had over him. Roaring, Sif pressed her blade against Lorelei’s neck, cutting her skin.

“Tell me how to stop it,” she threatened. “Or I will kill you!”

Lorelei just laughed.

“Would you really disobey the Allfather?” she asked. “I am so proud of you!”

“I meant what I said!” Sif yelled back, the blade cutting even deeper. “I do not want to disobey the Allfather, but I will if I have no choice. Tell me how to end the enthrallment!”

The Asgardian sorceress laughed.

“Silence my voice, seal my magic, kill me… Nothing will stop this. Kal-El is mine.” Lorelei fixed her green eyes on Sif’s face. “End my life and he will avenge me.”

Sif did not know if it was true, but when she lifted the sword and brought it down again, she did not really care.

“NOOOOO!” Kal yelled when Sif’s sword fell.

A pair of red energy beams hit her sword at the exact moment the blade would touch Lorelei’s neck, tossing it away. Sif raised her eyes quickly, seeing Kal disengaging from the fight against the cloaked sorceress and flying so fast in their direction that she almost did not have time to dodge.

Before she needed to, however, a portal opened by her side and the cloaked sorceress appeared, a
Kal’s speed slowed down until he was practically frozen. Sif could not understand what was happening, since there wasn’t anything holding the Kryptonian, and yet for some reason, he could not advance.

She could see he was trying. His face was twisted in rage and effort, but even his cape was barely moving, like he was stuck in time. She glanced at the sorceress by her side, as did everyone there, but she was entirely focused on her task.

Suddenly, Kal was launched up in the sky.

Thick red chains, apparently made of pure magic, appeared out of nothing, wrapping themselves around the Kryptonian with an audible metallic noise. The entire town began to tremble, moments before entire sections of the ground were simply torn apart, lifted to the sky as well, crashing against Kal.

Except they were not attacking him, they were trapping him. One by one, the pieces of the ground clashed against Kal, fusing themselves to one another, like a mountain being raised to the sky, creating an inescapable prison around him.

Before any of them realized, a huge shadow appeared over them, cast by a floating moon built around Kal.

The Ancient One sighed, ignoring the sweat pouring down her face. She was exhausted. But at least Superman was finally trapped and he would stay trapped by the Crimson Chains of Cyttorak and the moon around it for a long time. She allowed herself to rest for a second, ignoring the approaching people.

“I can’t fucking believe this…” one of the women whispered, shocked, looking up.

They were all looking up, even Lorelei, bleeding on the floor. Deciding she had rested enough, the Ancient One walked to the fallen Asgardian.

“How do I break the enthrallment?” she asked.

Her voice snapped everyone into motion and suddenly they were all around Lorelei.

“You cannot, mortal,” she answered. “There is no way to break the enchantment.”

“Every enchantment can be broken,” the Ancient One stated.

“Not this one,” she countered. “Kal-El is not bound to my magic or to my voice, he is bound to the sacrifices. It cannot be undone.”

The Ancient One stared at the Asgardian for a long minute. She was telling the truth, she realized. Well, perhaps the truth she believed in. Every enchantment could be broken, no matter how complex, that was a fact, but Lorelei didn’t seem to know how to break this one; the metallic choker put around her neck once again by the Asgardian warrior, however, would at least keep her from enthralling anyone else for the moment. That and the brutal punch that knocked her out, also courtesy of the Asgardian warrior.

But the fact that not even Lorelei knew how to break this enchantment was a problem.
Given time, she was certain she could find a way to break it. She was the Sorcerer Supreme and her knowledge about the Mystical Arts was vast. Even if she didn’t have the information, Kamar-Taj surely would.

Superman, however, was a threat that she could not keep trapped forever, not even with the Crimson Chains of Cyttorak.

Throwing him back inside the Mirror Dimension was not a solution either. The Mirror Dimension could work as an improvised cell, but it was far from being unbreachable. It was a reflection of their universe, to the last star system, and every being versed in the Mystical Arts could enter it, not only her and her apprentices.

What guarantee did she have that another sorcerer wouldn’t release Superman, even by accident? Sorcerers from other planets, drawn by his power, tempted to attack him or to free him? Another Lorelei set on controlling a powerful being or simply a madman seeking to bring destruction by releasing Kal-El?

What guarantee did she have that Superman himself wouldn’t find a way to escape? Humans needed a Sling Ring to open portals, but beings such as Asgardians and Kryptonians were far more powerful; there was a moment when they were fighting in there that his sheer speed was enough to bend the Mirror Dimension, almost cracking it. Who could know where he would end up if his powers cracked open a portal by accident. What if she managed to lose him in the Multiverse? What if he, using his own intelligence, found a way to open a doorway?

No, the idea of simply tossing Superman back in the Mirror Dimension did not please her at all. She needed another solution.

The moment she reached that conclusion, however, the whole world seemed to shake. Surprised, she looked up: the moon she created was cracking.

“Impossible!” she whispered, truly shocked, maybe for the first time since she arrived.

Everyone jumped back, the Asgardian warrior carrying Lorelei, when big chunks of the moon began to fall, crashing against the ground. The Ancient One, however, stayed where she was, her eyes wide. How strong was he? No physical being she had ever fought had this much strength, it was unbelievable. Could he really escape? The moon continued to shake, big cracks opening all over its surface, and bigger pieces were falling as the seconds passed. The noise was incredible.

And then, all of a sudden, it all came down, leaving only the Kryptonian and the Crimson Chains of Cyttorak around him. Superman was forcing the magical chains, his muscles bulging on his skinsuit, using so much strength that he was actually vibrating; which probably explained why the moon broke down.

The most impressive thing, however, the Ancient One noticed only a second later: he was biting the red chains as he trashed, his muscles straining the magical bindings.

There was a sound of metal bending, cracking, and the chain link the Kryptonian was biting simply snapped. Realizing that, he put even more strain on the chains, his incredible strength pushing it with all his might.

When the Crimson Chains of Cyttorak broke, it was like an explosion, sending every piece like a meteor against the earth; and then Superman was free. And he was furious.

He flew down so fast that the Ancient One could almost believe that he teleported, cutting the
distance between them in the blink of an eye; she was ready, however. Opening the Eye of Agamotto fully, she allowed the Time Stone to glow bright, its green light taking everything.

Superman froze in front of her, completely, as time stopped; for the first time, the Ancient One didn’t simply slow down time, she forced the sands of the hourglass to stop falling for good. It wasn’t the alternative she wanted, in fact it was the last option she would choose, but fate had already been put into motion and she would have to adapt. She didn’t know how to break Lorelei’s enthralment and she didn’t have the opportunity to look for a way.

So she would force Time to go back to a point before the enthralment ever happened.

Erasing the enchantment in Superman’s mind was, in theory, the best alternative. It would restrict the use of the Time Stone in this dimension to a single person, which was good as far as the Natural Laws were concerned.

But it was also extremely risky.

A tiny mistake, any error at all, and she could destroy his mind. If she went back too much, she would erase his memories, possibly to the point of making his entire life be forgotten. If she went back too little, she would fail to break the enthralment. If she lost control, even for a moment, she could simply break space-time continuum and then not even she could predict what would happen to him.

No, using the Time Stone directly in his mind could be worse than killing him. But since the enthralment was tied to the sacrifices, she could simply go back to a time before they happened.

It would take more energy, that was undoubtedly true, but she wouldn’t need to be as precise, she would simply have to focus the Time Stone powers on that area, until before the sacrifices ever took place. As long as she had the energy necessary to control the Infinity Stone, it could be done.

Closing her eyes, the Ancient One made her decision.

The buildings began to put themselves together, piece by piece, as the broken parts would simply fit in together until the damage was gone. Walls were rebuilt, windows were puzzled back together, even the paint on the buildings was coming back. The marks of the battle on the street were also erased, as the asphalt became as it were before Asgardians and Kryptonians fought on it. Vehicles, blown up or simply broken, were suddenly new.

And then all the dead people lying on the street began to get up. Fast, they walked back to where they were before they died, the weapons that killed them being pulled back, their blood rising from the ground and going back inside their bodies before their wounds simply closed and disappeared.

Just like that, every single person sacrificed so Lorelei could make her ritual was alive once again; and Superman’s enthralment had no more reason to exist.

The Ancient One cut the flow of magic, allowing the Eye of Agamotto to close.

Clark took a deep, desperate, breath when he suddenly came back. He widened his eyes, looking everywhere, his heart beating fast. The last thing he remembered was destroying that weird moon around him, breaking those red chains, and then attacking the cloaked sorceress; suddenly, everything stopped, as if he had been knocked unconscious.

For a moment, he really thought he was sleeping, because that could only be a dream.
What he was seeing around him was not possible. The town was unscathed, not a single damage from their battle anywhere. But infinitely more important than that: the innocent people that had lost their lives in the crossfire were alive!

How?! How was that possible?! He had seen them die through the cameras in The Bus, he heard their last breaths. And now here they were, walking around, talking, crying… Confused as he was, yes, looking shocked at him and everywhere else, but alive!

“Kal?” Sif called, carefully.

Clark raised his eyes fast, seeing Sif, Natasha, Jessica, May, Coulson and Ward standing at a distance, around an unconscious and bound Lorelei. They were looking at him with confusion, but with hope.

“It’s you again?” Jessica asked and the tone of her voice made his heart hurt.

Slowly, he nodded.

“I think so,” he looked at them. “What the hell happened?!”

“She kicked your ass!” Jessica summarized to Clark when they got back to The Bus. “And then she just ‘abracadabra’ the entire town, put everything back together, revived everyone and disappeared!”

It was a simple, and yet, a precise explanation of what happened, Natasha considered, as she bandaged her wounds. No one was seriously hurt, they completed the mission with no casualties and the damage – aside from a ‘Superman shaped’ hole punched through the hull of the The Bus – was negligible.

No one there pretended, however, even for a moment, that they were the cause for such a happy ending. If that woman, that sorceress, hadn’t shown up, things would’ve gone much differently.

She was the one who managed to battle Clark and Lorelei by herself. She was the one who kept Clark busy so they could capture Lorelei. She was the one who broke the spell and then, somehow, revived all those dead civilians, putting the town back to what it was at the same time. Natasha simply had no words to express how thankful she was for what that mysterious woman did.

And no words to express how badly their intelligence had screwed up if someone that powerful was galivanting around the world without their knowledge.

Sighing, more tired than she felt in a long time, Natasha sat down. That was a problem for another day. Fury, probably, would have a stroke once he heard of this, but Natasha was weirdly calm. Maybe it was her exhaustion talking, but she didn’t think that someone willing to do all that was a threat to the world.

SHIELD did a good job at keeping the world safe, she truly believed that, but maybe they didn’t need to know everything about everyone. Clark had almost convinced her of that once and she was beginning to think he was right.

“Who was that woman?” Coulson asked, looking, of course, at Sif. Who else, but a goddess, would have that kind of information?

“I have a few ideas,” Sif admitted, eyes still glancing every second at an unconscious Lorelei,” but I do not know for certain.”
“Well, what’s your best guess?” Skye asked.

“If I am not mistaken, this woman was the Sorcerer Supreme,” she said, seemingly deep in thought. “I was not aware Midgard had chosen another one. I thought Frigga was still some kind of ‘acting’ Sorcerer Supreme.”

Not a single person in the room knew what Sif was talking about, that was very clear.

“What?!” Skye exclaimed.

“Sorcerer?” Leo Fitz repeated.

“Who is Frigga?” asked Jemma Simmons.

Coulson, May, Ward, Clark and Natasha simply kept staring at Sif, waiting for her to explain.

“The Sorcerer Supreme is what we call the one responsible for the Sanctums Santorum built on Midgard,” Sif explained, not clarifying anything at all. “They are the first line of defense against magical threats from other realms or even dimensions. Frigga, for a long time, was the Sorcerer Supreme. I suppose the woman we saw today is her successor.”

There was a long silence.

“Are you honestly telling me there are wizards running around on Earth?” Coulson finally said, breaking the silence.

It was a question Natasha was dying to know the answer too.

Sif just shrugged.

“There were always sorcerers on Midgard,” she frowned at them. “You have thousands of stories about them, do you not?”

“Well, stories!” Skye exclaimed. “Fairy tales! They are not supposed to be real!”

Gods and aliens weren’t supposed to be real as well, and yet here they were, thought Natasha.

“It is just surprising to see one with our own eyes,” Coulson said, diplomatically as always. “And one with such power.”

That was the core of their surprise: how did someone so powerful stayed in secrecy all this time?

“I’m more surprised about that pendant of hers,” Clark said, finally opening his mouth. He still seemed shocked by what happened, in a way she had never seen, not even during the days after Black Zero Event. “That green stone inside that eye.”

“What about it?” Sif questioned.

“I’m almost certain that thing is an Infinity Stone.”

Again, a heavy silence fell upon them, broken only by Clark’s robot, still around Jessica’s wrist.

“By my readings, you are correct, sir,” it said.

Yes, Fury would definitely have an aneurism when he heard about this, Natasha had no doubt now.
Jessica barely listened to the discussion that followed, actively ignoring it as they all shouted something about “Time Stone” and “dangerous wizards” and “SHIELD needs to know!” all around. Frankly, she couldn’t care less. The only reason she was even there was to help Clark and he was alright now.

Thank God – she didn’t particularly care which fucking god she was thanking, but she was thanking them nevertheless.

Things went from heaven, to hell, then to heaven again very quickly. For a moment there Jessica was afraid that Clark would end up killing them all. And weirdly enough, she wasn’t afraid because she almost died; she was afraid because of what Clark almost was forced to do.

She knew, better than most, what something like that did to a person. Clark was a good man, probably the best person she had ever met, and the last one to deserve something like that.

So whoever this bald chick, this “Sorcerer Supreme” was, they owed her one. Witch or not, she saved her friend and probably the world.

“I need to go back to Asgard,” Sif announced, effectively ending the conversation. “Lorelei needs to go back to prison.”

“And stay there,” Jessica added, staring at Sif.

She knew the Asgardian warrior wasn’t to blame, in fact they owed her a lot too, but she was the only Asgardian she could complain to.

“Oh, she will!” Sif guaranteed, glancing at the unconscious sorceress. “Believe me.”

As she said that, people began to say their goodbyes to her, shaking her hand – May weirdly enthusiastically to a woman so serious –, until Coulson offered to accompany her outside so she could travel through the Bifrost. Clark, Natasha and she followed them, as Sif dragged Lorelei by the foot, making sure to hit her head against every bump in the way.

“Sif,” Clark began, and Jessica would’ve teased him by his seriousness if not for the circumstances of the day, “thank you. I mean it.”

And then he hugged her. Clark was always nice to people, but he seemed especially sentimental today. Sif was surprised for a moment, then she smiled, hugging him back.

“It was quite the adventure, Kal,” she said when he finally released her. “Not one I care to repeat, however.”

He chuckled. “No, me neither. Though I do wish you came back soon, not on duty, I mean. I’ll show you New York!”

“As soon as I can, I will accept your invitation, Kal,” she promised. She glanced from him to Lorelei, her expression losing its warmth. “But first I will make sure Lorelei pays for everything she did.”

Jessica suddenly remembered Lorelei’s taunts during the battle, something about a man named Haldor. It seemed Sif had lost important people because of that bitch before. If anyone would be committed to ensuring that Lorelei would stay locked up, it would be her.

After a few seconds, Sif turned to Natasha, extending her hand; the red-haired assassin shook it.
“Thank you for the assistance, Lady Romanoff,” Sif said. “It was an honor fighting by the side of one of Thor’s companions.”

“The honor was mine,” Natasha answered. She gave the Asgardian an almost imperceptible grin. “But do try to keep these prisoners away, please. We have enough crazy down here.”

Jessica agreed wholeheartedly with this; Sif, however, just laughed.

“Son of Coul, it was good meeting you,” she said, shaking Coulson’s hand. “And thank you as well for your assistance. You should tell Thor you are still alive, he will be most pleased.”

“I will,” Coulson promised. “And it was a pleasure helping you.”

Then Sif turned to Jessica; she grimaced. She was not good with this kind of shit. She liked Sif, but it wasn’t because of that she was here, it was to give back the weapon she borrowed her. Before she could say anything, she grabbed the Thanagarian mace from her waist and extended to her.

Sif frowned for a moment; then raised both her hands.

“No, keep it,” she said, suddenly. “Anyone that can hit Lorelei like that deserves such a weapon.”

Jessica caught herself smiling, to her surprise. She liked the mace and it wasn’t everyday she gained presents, if she were to be honest.

“It was nice meeting a friend of Kal,” Sif said, shaking her hand.

“It was nice meeting you too,” she answered. And it really was.

Sif, having said her goodbyes, turned around and took some distance from The Bus, ready to call the Bifrost. She filled her lungs and opened her mouth to yell; before she could, however, she looked at them again, apparently remembering something.

She glanced at Natasha.

“When we met during this mission, before we entered the flying contraption,” Sif began, “you mentioned something about Loki controlling people, like Lorelei did.”

“Not exactly like Lorelei,” Natasha explained. “But close enough.”

“With a Scepter, you said?” Sif insisted.

“A very sharp Scepter, yes,” Coulson added, rubbing his chest for some reason.

Sif stared at them for a moment, thinking about something.

“Loki does not know how to control minds, not like Lorelei,” she said, suddenly. “He tricks people, he weaves lies, he can convince anyone of doing anything… But he does not know how to control minds.”

Clark, Natasha and Coulson were very serious now.

“What happened to the Scepter he was using?” Sif asked. “An artifact that powerful… I never heard of it, but it would be wise to keep it safe.”

Saying this, Sif nodded at them again and yelled “HEIMDALL!” to the sky, disappearing into a multicolored light beam.
“You don’t know what happened to Loki’s Scepter?!” Clark exclaimed.

“I was a little busy dying,” Coulson answered, looking at Natasha. “Do you?”

Natasha just shook her head, lightly, her expression giving away nothing. Clark knew her well enough to tell, however, that she was worried. And if that Scepter really was lost, they all had reason to be.

“I assume SHIELD has it,” she said, finally. “I’ll have to ask Fury.”

That, non-surprisingly, didn’t ease Clark’s concerns. He trusted Natasha with his life, but not the people to whom she worked for. SHIELD, for all the good they did, still made him uneasy. Something about a huge and powerful spy-organization, that knew everything about everyone, didn’t seem like a good thing to him.

“Why the hell didn’t Thor take this to Asgard?” he exhaled, scratching his head.

“He was taking his brother to jail,” Natasha answered. “I’m sure you can understand his mistake.”

It wasn’t a reprimand, but Clark took it as one; and he deserved it. After all, didn’t he make the same mistake with Zod’s body after Black Zero Event?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t…” he sighed. “You’re right.”

Natasha gave him a small smile. “I’ll look for it, don’t worry.”

“Me too,” Coulson added, getting up. “Tomorrow, though. This was a long day.”

“Sorry,” Clark apologized, instinctively.

Coulson patted him on the shoulder.

“Everything worked out in the end,” he said. “We are all alive, all unharmed. It’s all we can hope for. What happened wasn’t your fault, just like it wasn’t Clint’s fault when Loki controlled him.”

He extended his hand and Clark shook it. “It was a pleasure, Superman. I have to check on my team, but we’ll talk again later.”

“Thanks for the help, Coulson. Really,” Clark said.

“That’s what I’m here for, don’t worry about it. Natasha, it was good to see you.”

“Good seeing you too, Coulson. Especially alive.”

He chuckled and left the room. Clark sighed, still sitting down. He knew he should leave, take Jessica back home, and hopefully sleep; his body didn’t seem to want to get up, though. He was tired, not only physically – which was rare for him – but mentally. It had been one hell of a day and he could only thank that weird sorceress that things ended up as well as they did.

Because if it were up to him, everybody in this plane would be dead and most people on Earth would’ve followed.

“How are you, Clark?” Natasha asked, softly. “Really?”

Clark looked at her, his mouth already opening so he could answer he was fine; then he stopped.
“Really? I’m not good at all, Natasha,” he answered, rubbing his eyes. “I almost killed everyone of you today. I would have killed everyone of you if not for that sorceress. An entire town of innocent people would have died. Kids... Kids died today. And then they came back. I’m... I don’t know what I’m feeling right now, but I’m not okay.”

She touched his shoulder, looking deeply into his eyes.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said.

“Maybe. Then again, maybe it was,” he answered. “I could’ve waited for this whole thing to be over from space. From Asgard even. I chose not to. I was too stubborn. I thought I could help. And then I became the threat.”

“We had no reason to believe a ritual like that was even possible,” Natasha argued. “Not even Sif thought it was possible.”

“No,” he agreed. “But I could’ve been more careful. I could’ve been stronger. I-I have no idea what I would do if I ended up killing you. Any of you.”

Natasha looked down and sighed.

“I know. But it wasn’t your fault. Just like it wasn’t Clint’s fault. It was Loki’s and it was Lorelei’s.” She looked at him again, brushing a bit of dirt from his cheek with her thumb. “Go home, try to get some rest. It might not feel like it right now, but we won.”

Natasha was right, it didn’t feel like a victory at all.

“Oh, I still need to give this back to you,” Natasha suddenly remembered, looking down at the Kryptonian skinsuit he had borrowed her.

Melinda May had already returned the weapons and the skinsuit to him, just as Natasha had given the weapons back. Her skinsuit – like the one he gave to Jessica –, was still with her.


That surprised her.

“You are really giving me alien tech?” she asked, eyes wide.

“I trust you,” Clark shrugged; then he smiled, getting up. “Plus, it suits you well.”

Natasha raised a single eyebrow, amused.

“It’s a gift for me or for you?” she teased.

Despite the horrible day they had, Clark laughed as he left the room. Honestly? The way she looked wearing that skinsuit he would have to say it was a gift for both of them, but he would never admit that out loud, not even under threat of torture.

It was time to go home.

“Another enhanced?” Pierce exclaimed on his secured line. “Capable of facing Superman?!”

“Capable of defeating him,” the voice corrected. “The things she could do... I’ve seen them with my own eyes and I still can’t believe it.”
Alexander Pierce would not believe it as well, if the one telling him all that wasn’t one of his most trusted agents. An agent that, like him, served both SHIELD and HYDRA. Magic… He was aware that magic existed, HYDRA had seen it before. But something like what his agent described? Turning back time, stopping it, bringing dead people back to life… Defeating Superman.

It was incredible. And extremely, unbelievably, dangerous. If HYDRA wasn’t controlling it, then it was a threat.

“They are asking about the Scepter,”” his agent pointed out, suddenly. “The abilities of this Lorelei brought into question the Scepter’s powers.”

“I will deal with this,” Pierce answered. “What else do you have?”

“The footage we had was somehow damaged. I’m not sure if it was because of all that magic going around or because of the Kryptonian’s robot.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“I agree. But I still have the recordings of the conversations after the battle. The Asgardian Sif shed some light over who this enhanced might be. And the Kryptonian also shed some light over what she might be carrying: an Infinity Stone.”

Pierce had no words. What happened earlier that day was unbelievable. And it proved, more than ever, that HYDRA needed to act fast. How could a being so powerful exist out there, completely unknown to them? How could an artifact as powerful as an Infinity Stone – another Tesseract – exist on Earth without their knowledge?

Project Insight needed to be hastened, especially now that questions about the Scepter were being made. He couldn’t very well answer that the Scepter was being used by HYDRA to grow an army of enhanced soldiers powerful enough to face Superman, Thor, the Hulk and the rest of the Avengers, could he?

“Find out more and keep me posted,” Pierce ordered. “Hail HYDRA!”

“HAIL HYDRA!”

Clark and Jessica opened the door to Trish’s apartment, entering quietly so they wouldn’t wake her up. It was night already and he could hear Trish’s softly breathing as she slept, resting peacefully in a way that Clark couldn’t help but to envy a little bit.

“Shit, I’m beat,” Jessica complained, sitting down on the couch. “What a fucking day!”

Her vocabulary was colorful, as always, but Clark agreed with the sentiment. What a day indeed. Still wearing his Superman clothes, he sat down as well, still dazed by everything that happened. He couldn’t believe that he would ever harm an innocent, especially someone he liked, but a few hours ago he almost did all that.

Magic or not, he felt disgusted with himself.

And there was, of course, the existence of that sorceress. Sif was certain that the cloaked woman who fought him was the one known as Sorcerer Supreme. Clark didn’t exactly understand what that meant, but he knew the woman was powerful and she was carrying, apparently, an Infinity Stone. He liked to think the better of people and that sorceress had given him no reason to think she was a threat – not when she saved all of them –, but he still wanted to know more.
He just had no idea how to do it, given that she disappeared. That, added to everything he was already feeling, made him even more stressful.

“How are you doing, Clark?” Jessica asked, snapping him out of his musings. She sounded weirdly serious.

Clark sighed. “Better. Still hating myself a little bit, but better. I’m just glad I didn’t hurt any of you.”

For a long while, he thought Jessica wouldn’t say anything. She just kept staring at him with an expression he couldn’t exactly describe; then she opened her mouth to finally say what was on her mind.

Except that, before she could say any word, her eyes spotted something.

“What the hell is that on your suit?” she asked, pointing at his bracelet.

The abrupt change of subject caught Clark unaware, but he looked to where she was pointing. There, stuck between his bracelet and his skinsuit, was a small piece of paper. How didn’t he notice that before? Carefully, he took it and studied it. It looked like a business card but how would something like that be stuck in his suit?

“177A Bleecker Street, New York City, New York,” Clark read it, still not understanding. It was only when he turned it and read it out loud that things suddenly made sense. “If you want to learn how to defend your mind, you know where to find me.”

“Holy shit… It’s from that witch!” Jessica exclaimed, looking as surprised as he probably was. “She is inviting you to her home?”

“It seems so,” Clark agreed, still shocked.

“You are not considering this, are you?” she questioned.

Yes, he was, most definitely, Clark thought, still in silence. He wanted to know more about her, to know if she truly was the woman Sif said. To know if she really had an Infinity Stone. To know this wizard order that existed, apparently in the middle of New York, without anyone knowing about it.

More importantly, he wanted to know if what she said in the note was true. Could she really help him to defend his mind? To guarantee that nothing like this would ever happen again?

“I think I’ll go there tomorrow,” Clark finally said.

“You are out of your mind!”

“Why?”

“Why?! Well, for one, she beat the shit out of you!”

“That’s not true!” Clark defended himself. “We fought to a standstill…”

He wasn’t able to convince even himself with that weak defense. Jessica raised her eyebrows.

“Clark, that woman controlled time. The only reason she didn’t just turn you into a baby or stopped time and just killed you, was because she didn’t want to. And now you are going there!”
“That’s not true,” he repeated himself. “And if it were, then all the more reason for me to go, isn’t it?”

Jessica snarled, slapping the couch. “You almost died today and you are going to mess with that magic stuff again?”

Clark sighed and scratched his eyes, feeling his exhaustion doubling.

“This is not what happened. What happened today… It was my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t!”

“It was,” he countered. “It was my stubbornness, my weakness. And I almost killed you all with my bare hands.” Clark looked at her, serious. “You are my best friend. And I didn’t want to hurt you, never. But if Lorelei commanded me to, I would have killed you today. I can’t let that happen ever again. Please understand that.”

Jessica looked incensed for a second, then she turned and looked down, breathing deeply. He thought she wouldn’t say anything anymore, but then she spoke, almost inaudibly.

“I understand better than you think.” Slowly, Jessica looked back at him, her expression a mix of fear, shame and anger, not something Clark had ever seen on her face before; without thinking, he held her hand. She didn’t object. “You asked what was wrong with me, why I was so worried during this mission.”

He felt her hand clenching over his.

“I think I’m ready to tell you now.”

The Ancient One put the Eye of Agamotto back on its rightful place, inside Kamar-Taj, her hands trembling a little bit due to her exhaustion. It had been a long time since she was forced to fight a battle like that, she admitted. Maybe she was getting too old for this.

Still, the hardest battles were usually the ones that needed to be fought the most. She had seen with the Eye of Agamotto what would have happened if she did nothing or if she failed; better yet, she had seen what could have happened. Several possible futures, most of them disastrous.

The Battle of New York, Black Zero Event… They were incidents with huge consequences and a body count to match their importance. But she knew, back then, that they would be solved without her help. That they needed to be solved without her help, so that heroes that would grow to fight even bigger battles could arise.

This occasion was not the case. Lorelei, with Superman under her control, would bring only destruction. The Avengers would fall under her control and soon the Earth and the Sanctums Santorum would follow. That was the future she stopped; or at least, most possibilities were grim like that. She decided not to take any chances.

Even so, that day wasn’t entirely a success, if she were to be honest, the Ancient One thought, glancing at the Eye of Agamotto.

If it were, she wouldn’t have the need to use the Infinity Stone like that. She, better than most people, understood that some laws had to be broken for the greater good. Even Natural Laws. Sometimes, the universe needed a push so it could survive.
It always came at a price, however.

The Time Stone was one of the most powerful, and dangerous, Infinity Stones. It didn’t simply destroy or control, it had the power to bend time and, with it, the power to create and destroy an infinite number of timelines. A power like that was not something to be used recklessly. A power like that sent ripples throughout the Multiverse every time it was used.

The Ancient One decided to use the Eye of Agamotto to undo Superman’s enthrallment, saving his life and sparing Earth the loss of a hero, a hero that could rise to be one of the greatest champions of their universe. To do so, however, she was forced to break the Natural Laws in a way they were not meant to be broken.

She could only hope no one out there was paying attention when she did that.

“Glad to know you were successful,” a voice said from behind her. “I was beginning to worry that the world was about to end.”

She turned to meet the eyes of Mordo and Kaecilius, two of her most prized apprentices. Mordo, the most loyal student she had, a true follower of her teachings, and Kaecilius, the most talented practitioner of the Mystical Arts she had trained in a very long time. Both men that would, hopefully, carry her legacy after she was gone.

One could never know for sure, when the future was always in motion.

“The world is always about to end, Kaecilius,” she answered, finally. “Infinite worlds mean infinite threats. For all we know the universe could end at this very second.”

She stopped talking, as if waiting for everything to end; both her students, she noticed, were holding their breaths. A second passed and nothing happened.

Her eyebrows raised.

“Or maybe not,” she finished, shrugging.

Mordo sighed, but Kaecilius seemed amused. Then they noticed how tired she looked.

“If the threat was so great, why didn’t you ask for us to accompany you?” Mordo asked.

Kaecilius, however, was looking beyond her, to the Eye of Agamotto.

“Were you using the Eye?” he asked.

The Ancient One didn’t answer to any of the two questions. She simply walked, expecting them to follow her.

“I could drink some tea,” she said, suddenly. “Would you like some?”

Both of them sighed now, knowing her well enough to realize that no answer would come. They followed her anyway.

“By the way, I’m expecting a new student in the next days,” the Ancient One said, glancing at them while they walked through the corridors of Kamar-Taj. “You will help me with him.”

Mordo frowned, not disagreeing with her, but in actual curiosity. Kaecilius was impassive.

“An apprentice?” Mordo asked.
“Yes,” the Ancient One agreed. Then she smiled. “And I believe he will be a complicated one.”

Lorelei was dragged through the halls of the royal palace of Asgard by the Einherjar, her feet barely touching the ground. She was chained, muffled and silenced by that accursed choker, completely unable to even try to escape. Even if she wasn’t bound or surrounded by soldiers, she was too weak to fight or run.

Sif had defeated her again. Like she did 600 years ago. Lorelei’s pride was hurt, but the worse thing is that she knew, with almost certainty, that her life was over. It was not death that she feared – in fact, right now, an execution would be a relief –, but the fact that she had wasted her one opportunity and it was unlikely that she would ever see the sunlight again.

The immense doors in front of her were pulled open and the Einherjar forced her in. And there, in front of her, was the Allfather.

“Leave us,” Odin commanded, waving his hand at the guards. They bowed and left, closing the doors.

Lorelei felt dread fill her. What did Odin want with her? Last time she was sent directly to the dungeons, unworthy of being received by the King of Asgard himself, no matter how big of a threat she represented. Lifting her eyes slowly, Lorelei looked around. They were not in the throne room, but a smaller chamber, filled with bookcases and a single desk. There were no guards anywhere, they were alone. Usually, that would mean an opportunity to her. She would fight, use the fact that there was only one adversary to try something.

Except that the god in front of her was Odin and she knew better than to try to fight a being so powerful. It simply could not be done.

For a long minute, Odin said nothing, simply gazing at her with his one eye, towering over her kneeling form.

“That did not take long, did it?” Odin said, breaking the silence. “Last time you tried something like that we took years to bring you to justice.”

Lorelei simply looked back at him, unable to say anything. He seemed to notice that.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he said and waved his hand. There was a green glow and the chains around her disappeared; as did the mask muffling her and the choker. “You can speak now. I would cherish the opportunity, if I were you.”

Surprised, Lorelei massaged her neck and jaw for a moment, feeling her magic flowing inside her again. Even then, she wasn’t deluded enough to think that her voice would work here. Odin was the most powerful sorcerer of all Nine Realms. To him, her voice was meaningless.

“What do you want me to say, my King?” Lorelei finally asked, her voice raspy. “I lost.”

“Yes, to Sif! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” Odin retorted, laughing.

That was a weird thing to say, Lorelei thought, frowning.

“But then again, she is a force to be reckoned with when she is angered and you, my dear, made her furious when you forced her to kill her little lover.”

Carefully, Lorelei got up, eyes fixed on Odin. Something was wrong. She would not claim she was
ever close to the royal family, but she had met Odin before and that did not sound like him.

“Still did not notice?” Odin asked, sighing. “Well, you were never the brightest.”

And then there was a green glow. Suddenly, it was not Odin in front of her anymore. It was Loki.

“What?” she whispered, too surprised to say anything else.

The God of Mischief seemed terribly amused.

“My latest trick,” he bragged. “What do you think? Do I make a good Odin?”

Lorelei had no words to answer. How was that possible? What did that mean? Did Loki kill his father? Did anyone else know about this? What was going on?

“Weird to see you lacking words, Lorelei,” Loki said. “You usually speak so much.”

“What is going on?” Lorelei finally asked.

Loki grinned. “I decided to take charge of Asgard for the time being. You see, important events are happening and soon we will have quite a lot to deal with. I am trying to prepare Asgard for the worse.”

Lorelei had no idea what that meant, but she didn’t care right now. How Loki managed to usurp the throne didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was the fact that the god in front of her was not Odin. She had a chance.

Focusing all her magic, she allowed her powers to flow through her voice.

“Release me!” Lorelei ordered, her voice thundering with power.

Loki widened his eyes for a moment. And then, slowly, he began to walk in her direction. Lorelei felt her chest fill with joy. She would escape! She wouldn’t spend the rest of her life rotting inside a prison, never able to utter a single word again! Fate had conspired to save her, that could be the only answer.

Slowly, his green cape fluttering as he walked, Loki walked until he was in front of her; then he grinned.

“No.”

Suddenly, before she could move, there was a green glow over his hand. A blue cube appeared out of nothing, something that simply exuded power. A blue energy field abruptly surrounded her, no doubt originating from that weird cube, and she was pushed to her knees, unable to move a single muscle.

Loki laughed, getting even closer.

“Did you really think your voice had any power over me?” he mocked. “You are not your sister, Lorelei.”

She widened her eyes, shocked by the turn of events.

“That is actually why I ordered you to be brought here alive,” Loki continued. He looked deeply into her eyes. “Where is Amora?”
Lorelei simply stared back at him. Grinning, Loki allowed his power to flow inside the blue cube; suddenly, the force field around her began to constrict her body, with such power that she could not even scream. She whimpered, trying to resist, feeling her bones starting to crack.

“I do not know!” Lorelei yelled, when the pain became unbearable. “I do not know!”

“Why should I believe you?” Loki asked.

“I hold no more love for my sister than you do for your brother. Why should I care about her? She left me to die in prison!”

Loki was staring at her eyes, almost as if he could sense any lie.

“Fair enough,” he said, simply, allowing the pressure to disappear.

Lorelei breathed in relief, feeling her blood flowing again, her eyes looking down.

“What do you want with her, anyway?” she finally asked. “I thought Odin banished her for a reason.”

“Her magic has its uses,” Loki answered. “Especially if one would like to remain undetected while pretending to rule Asgard, even when subjected to the likes of Heimdall. And, of course, if one would like to build alliances so Asgard would have help, should we need it.”

She did not pretend to understand what he meant about alliances. Was he preparing for war?

“As tragic as it is, if I cannot have the legendary Enchantress, then I shall have to settle for the lesser sibling.”

A spark of rage burned within her.

“I guess that was never a problem for your parents, was it?” she said. “Thor was always there to compensate for your inadequacy.”

Loki did not answer, he did not even move, but for a moment Lorelei saw a blazing fury behind his eyes. Instead of hurting her, as she feared, he simply touched her face, delicately.

“I will need your voice, Lorelei, for the good of Asgard,” he said.

She stared at him. “And why should I help you?”

This was her chance to negotiate, to avoid prison, to avoid having her voice sealed forever.

Loki frowned.

“Who said I was asking for your help?”

Lorelei did not understand what he meant by that; not until his fingers suddenly closed around her jaw, pressing, hurting her. The blue cube glowed again and the force field surrounded her entire body, forcing her mouth open. Grinning madly, Loki pushed his hand inside her mouth and pulled her tongue out.

She fought, tried to move, tried to do anything, but she could only remain paralyzed as Loki chanted something, revealing the golden runes on her tongue, runes that she had carved with magic.
“There it is,” he whispered, marveling at the golden glow. The force field kept her tongue in place for him to look at it. “Well, Lorelei, it seems we have a lot of experiments to do, don’t we?”

There was a green glow and suddenly he was holding a knife in his hands. Lorelei couldn’t remember the last time she felt so afraid.

He was bored. Scratch that – he was beyond bored! What was left for him to do anymore, he pondered, as he twirled slowly between the stars. Should he create a planet and populate with intelligent life? Nah, too annoying. Create a planet, populate it with intelligent life, convince them to worship him and then send a meteor right at it? Pointless. And cruel, now that he thought about it. The little ones didn’t deserve that. Plus, it was boring.

Booooring! Funny that when you could anything, suddenly everything lost its appeal.

Life in the 5th Dimension was starting to grate on his nerves. Maybe he should find someplace else to go. That’s it! A vacation! That would improve his mood. But where to? Spinning, he willed his power around him and suddenly he was surrounded by an infinite amount of big screens made of crystal, each one of them showing him different universes.

Dimensions made of pure darkness… Bleh! What would he do there? There was one there apparently made of flesh, bones and fire… What kind of insane being would like to visit such a place? A dimension covered with eyes, another filled with clouds and music, one so cold that only watching it made him shiver…

No, no, no! Something normal! Something cool! Something–

Suddenly, he felt a weird, but very familiar, energy. Someone was being naughty and messing with Time! Every single screen turned to dust, except for the one emanating the readings. Well, well, well, would you look at that?

This dimension wasn’t made out of fire and blood or cold, it was a normal place. Beautiful even. The proportions and laws of the universe were weird, he had to admit, but that was only because he was used to his own 5th Dimension. He could get used to it. But what caught his attention was what was happening on it.

A fight, that was clear, between a man in a blue suit and a woman wearing a yellow cloak. And the woman was carrying something really interesting: Time itself. Sure, he could manipulate time however he wanted to, but beings in lesser dimensions couldn’t. Most importantly, she was only manipulating time to fight the guy in blue.

Curious… Was he some kind of god in that universe? Nah, didn’t seem to be the case. Just a higher life-form. But then what was he doing there, fighting the woman carrying Time? Rewinding time on the screen, he looked back, seeing what happened before. His planet exploding, last survivor of his race – then not so much –, then last member of his race all over again…

Helping people, fighting bad guys, saving damsels in distress… Amazing! That seemed to be quite the nice chap.

Almost unconsciously, his form began to adapt, shrinking, constraining itself in a physical body such as the ones they had in that dimension. His eyes gathered all the details, what they were wearing, how they moved, how they talked…

Before he could even realize, he took the shape of a short, older man, bald on top of the head, but
with thick, white tufts of hair by the sides. A purple suit and a small hat appeared out of nothing around him.

Fascinated, he took his hand to the screen, ready to jump in; except he was zapped by some sort of energy.

“Ouch! How rude!” he exclaimed, shaking his hand. “A barrier? Now, that’s just unfair!”

Well, sooner or later – and that was incredibly relative in the 5th Dimension – that barrier would be weakened and he would be able to squeeze in a little bit of himself. That was just how things were. Until then, he would stay put. And think of a name!

“How about Mr. Mxyzptlk?”

Mr. Mxyzptlk opened a big smile. That was a pretty nice name! And soon, he would be able to play with Superman in that weird dimension of his.

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**Sorry for the delay, I've been working too much. But here it is, new chapter! Hope you guys like it!**
Fury didn’t exactly have an aneurysm, as Natasha feared, but judging by the pulsing vein on his temple, it had been a close thing.

“Let me get this straight,” Fury said, joining his hands on top of his table, as they sat in his room at the Triskelion. “An unidentified enhanced, possibly with magical abilities, faced and stopped a mind-controlled Superman and an Asgardian sorceress, using what is most likely an Infinity Stone to do so,” he stared into her eyes, the vein on his temple pulsing madly despite his calm tone, “and we know nothing about it?”

Natasha breathed deeply, also annoyed by it; then she nodded. That was what it took to send Fury on a verbal rampage.

“This is unacceptable!” he exclaimed. “How can our intelligence be this flawed?!”

She didn’t really have an answer for that, but Fury wasn’t really talking to her as much as he was venting.

“An Infinity Stone lying around Earth without our knowledge is already catastrophic, but the very notion that there is an entire order of enhanced people capable of magic living under our noses is downright insulting!”

It was, but then again they had abilities that Natasha could barely comprehend. Mutants were already a largely unknown quantity and some of them represented global risk, but at least they could understand more or less how their abilities worked. And at least they had an alliance of sorts with one of the biggest players in that particular community; it wasn’t perfect, but back then it was what SHIELD could do to deal with the most dangerous mutants without needing to go to war against them all.

They didn’t even know sorcerers existed until that woman showed up to help them against Clark.

Aliens and gods were recent myths proven real as well, but at least they came from other worlds. It was one thing to have a powerful entity from another planet to show up and another quite differently to have an entire society living on Earth without their knowledge.

“What do we know?” Fury finally asked, when the long and loud venting that Natasha mostly tuned out was over.

“According to Lady Sif, the sorceress that helped us could be someone titled ‘Sorcerer Supreme’,” Natasha began. “Thor’s mother, Queen Frigga, was acting Sorcerer Supreme for a while and, apparently, this woman is her successor.”

“And what exactly does this mean?” Fury questioned.

Natasha frowned slightly. “By her explanation, the Sorcerer Supreme is responsible for guarding the Sanctums, whatever they are, and consequently our world from threats.” Fury kept staring, waiting for more. She sighed. “You know how Asgardians are, sir, they act as if these kinds of things are common knowledge. Remember Thor not mentioning the Infinity Stones or the
Convergence? It literally didn’t cross his mind that we would need this information. Lady Sif, apparently, is the same.”

Fury didn’t say anything, he just kept thinking, trying to piece things together. Something occurred to Natasha as she observed him: while Fury seemed surprised – and outraged – that there were sorcerers living on Earth, he didn’t seem that surprised by the very existence of magic itself.

“Sir, did you already know magic existed?” Natasha asked, curious.

SHIELD’s Director turned to look at her with his one eye.

“In a way,” he answered and she honestly believed it was all she would hear from him. “SHIELD has come across several artifacts over the years that we simply couldn’t understand. Some called it ‘magic’, others ‘science’ and there were those that fit both categories. The Tesseract for example.”

“Isn’t it alien? Cosmic?”

“Well, sure, but what does that mean, really?” Fury retorted. “We could understand some of what it did, while most of it simply ignored the Laws of Physics altogether. Was it magical? Or had we simply stumbled upon something we didn’t have the knowledge to explain yet? That added its own set of questions as well. What is magic? Is it simply science that we do not understand or something that is completely removed from science?”

Fury got up, unable to stay on his chair.

“Every single civilization on Earth has its myths about magic,” Fury continued. “It could be, certainly, a way for them to explain what they didn’t know back then, sure, but maybe it was something else. Maybe every civilization has tales about magic for the same reason they have tales about ‘gods’: it’s real.”

That was a very likely explanation, Natasha considered. Of course, she would never have considered this before meeting Thor or fighting against aliens or seeing some of the things she had seen during these past years, but life was constant growth, wasn’t it?

“The Security Council is already furious that we can’t control Superman,” Fury muttered. “I can only imagine what they’ll thing when they find out that someone we don’t know fought him on equal grounds. Worse yet, that she fought a mind-controlled Superman. That will do wonders for their fear of him, I’ll tell you that much.”

That last bit was something that worried Natasha. On one hand, she knew Clark was a good man, someone that would die before hurting Earth. On the other hand, SHIELD was responsible for the world’s safety and, either she liked it or not, Lorelei had proved that Superman could be turned against them.

If the sorceress hadn’t appeared and solved everything, what would they have done? Could the Avengers – mostly Thor and Hulk – stop Clark before he destroyed Earth? Would a fight like that even let a world left to be protected?

Those were things Natasha truly didn’t want to think about, but it was her job to.

“And now we have that damn lost Scepter…” Fury continued, almost as if speaking to himself.

Natasha raised her eyes.

“Did you find anything?” she asked.
Fury shook his head, slowly. “Not yet. And let me tell you, it’s not looking good. I know SHIELD didn’t simply lose it, we are too smart for that.”

“But if we didn’t lose it…”

“Then someone from the inside took it,” Fury finished her thought. “Which means we have a traitor somewhere, infiltrated deeply. If it were stolen, I would’ve heard about it. But this was the first time I heard a peep about that Scepter since we acquired it. That isn’t good.”

It really wasn’t. That Scepter was extremely dangerous and it was probably in the possession of someone competent enough to infiltrate an intelligence organization of the likes of SHIELD undetected. This wasn’t good news for anybody.

“I want you to look for it, Romanoff,” Fury ordered. “But do it quietly. If the one who took it finds out we are looking for it, getting it back will be that much harder.” Natasha nodded. “And about the wizards and the Infinity Stone—“

“Superman is already on it,” Natasha answered, before Fury could finish.

Fury raised a single eyebrow. “Is that so? Do you trust him with that?”

“I do,” Natasha answered, without hesitation. “And I also don’t believe that these sorcerers are a threat.”

“It doesn’t matter what we believe in, Romanoff, only how prepared we are if they happen to be one.”

There was a time Natasha truly believed in that and it was a bit surprising to know she had changed her mind. Regardless, she had a job to do and she would do it. Getting up, she nodded to Fury and left the room.

“Is this it?” Jessica asked, in a mix of surprise and slight disappointment. “Gotta say, I was expecting something… more.”

Clark was too, even if he didn’t say anything about it. Instead of something directly out of a fairytale book, they were simply standing in front of a normal building, with normal people walking in front of it as they would in any other part of the city; it was a good thing he was wearing his civilian clothes for this.

“What were you expecting?” Clark questioned after a few seconds, double-checking the address written on the business card just to be sure. “Hogwarts?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted, visibly a little embarrassed.

“Right here, in the middle of New York? How would that work?”

“It’s magic, Clark, how should I know? Don’t they have concealing spells or some shit like that?” Jessica argued. “What’s it called? Fidelity? No… The one that makes the building appear out of nowhere when they know the secret.”

“Fidelius?” Clark remembered.

“That’s the one,” she said, grinning at him. “Nerd.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “Says the one who brought this up.”
Anyway, this is just an old-fashioned building,” Jessica continued, ignoring him. “I don’t see anything… magical about it.”

“Maybe it’s more impressive inside,” Clark guessed.

“Well, that’s your problem now,” Jessica shrugged, turning to him. “Are you ready for your first day in magic school, Mr. Potter?”

He was not, that was the truth, but Clark wouldn’t back away now.

“I guess I don’t really have a choice, do I?” he asked.

“We can just go,” she suggested, though both of them knew that wasn’t exactly true.

They could go away, of course, postpone the visit. But sooner or later Clark would need to go back there, if not for the reason that he needed to learn how to protect his mind, then for the simple fact that the sorceress who defeated him had an Infinity Stone with her and could, very well, find and fight him again with it.

Clark didn’t believe the Sorcerer Supreme – if Sif’s theory was correct – was evil, she had helped him and the world, but he needed to make sure of it.

“No, I’m good,” Clark answered, finally, sounding more confident than he felt. He looked at Jessica. “What are you going to do? You’re not staying here, are you?”

“Believe it or not, Clark, I do have a job,” she retorted. “Bills don’t pay themselves.”

He turned to Jessica and looked in her eyes; Clark was completely serious now. “Are you okay?”

Jessica didn’t need to be a genius to know why Clark was asking that question. He knew something was wrong with her when Lorelei appeared, he knew she was more worried than usual, tense; what Clark didn’t know was why. Not until she told him, the night before.

“He called himself Kilgrave,” Jessica whispered, not looking at him. “I met him… He found me when I was defending Malcolm from being mugged by a couple of guys. I kicked their asses… And he saw me doing it.”

Clark said nothing, knowing that if he interrupted, she wouldn’t have the strength to continue.

“I had no idea who he was at the time, I’ve never seen the guy,” she continued, “but when he spoke to me, something inside me just… snapped. I-I couldn’t say no, I couldn’t disobey. He told me to get closer, so he could take a look at me. A-And I didn’t want to go, I had no idea who that guy was, but my body was already moving.”

She stopped talking for a minute, clearly reliving the moment all over again.

“He was impressed by what I could do. Fascinated to find someone like him… But not quite as good. He asked me if I felt good beating those guys. I said yes, because I was helping someone. I made a difference,” she added, quoting herself sarcastically. “That amused the hell out of him, I could see. He asked my name, I told him. And then we went out for dinner. Chinese.”

Jessica breathed deeply, closing her eyes for a second. Clark could see that each word she said was painful, each word made her remember that day, pulling her into the darkness of her memories.
“Sif said that Lorelei made people love her, right?” she asked, suddenly. “That she became the most important thing in the eyes of her thralls. But you were still you, weren’t you? I mean, you weren’t forced to do anything, you just wanted to do it so badly that you couldn’t stop yourself.”

Clark nodded, also not happy to delve on those memories, no matter how recent they were.

“I was still me,” he explained. “I still cared about all of you… I just cared more about her.”

“Well, with Kilgrave it wasn’t like that,” Jessica said. “I didn’t care about him, I despised him. His voice, his face, his smell… I hated him. I hated him more than anything I ever hated in my life. But I couldn’t stop obeying him no matter what. He told me to follow him and I did. He told me to smile and I smiled. He told me to…” She closed her eyes again. “He made me do things that make me nauseous just to think about. He hurt me. He used me to hurt others. And I was there, forced to watch my own body doing things… Doing terrible things. Feeling everything, experiencing everything, without being able to do a thing to stop it.”

Before he could stop himself, Clark held Jessica’s hand, squeezing it; she didn’t pull away.

“He kept me for months. Months of torment, of humiliation, of…” She squeezed his hand so hard that if he was human his bones would’ve broken. “I couldn’t say no, Clark, I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t leave. I couldn’t even… end it all.”

Clark felt his blood boil. He was a master of self-control, being as powerful as he was he had to be, but the rage that surged within him when Jessica said that wasn’t like anything he had ever felt before.

“Where is this man?” he asked, feeling his hand shake a bit.

Jessica felt the tremor and looked at him, staring in his eyes for almost a minute. Whatever she saw there, it didn’t seem to scare her at all.

“He is dead,” she answered, turning her eyes from him.

“Did you…”

“Would you arrest me if I had?” Jessica asked, looking at him again.

Clark just gazed back at her for a moment. “What do you think?”

She didn’t answer, but her small smile told him she knew exactly what he would do.

“If I could, I would have killed him,” Jessica admitted, her eyes cold. “I would have done it without hesitation. But I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

“How did he die?” Clark asked.

“Hit by a bus.” She snorted, though Clark could see that humor was the last thing on her mind. “Karma, the universe getting back at him, I don’t know. Shit, I don’t care. I just care that he is gone and he is not coming back.”

Jessica spent the night on the couch, holding his hand until the morning. She didn’t sleep, didn’t say anything else about Kilgrave, didn’t cry or complained. But she didn’t let go of his hand even for a second and Clark was glad to be there for her. Whatever he imagined Jessica would share with him the night before, that wasn’t it. And he was having trouble dealing with it.
Clark never hated anyone. He disliked some people like anybody else, but *truly* hating someone, that was new. He didn’t hate Zod, even after everything he did, even after being forced to kill him so he wouldn’t destroy the world. He didn’t hate Lorelei, even after she mind-controlled him and almost forced him to kill his friends.

But he did hate Kilgrave for what he did to Jessica and it scared him how much.

Jessica wasn’t descriptive about what Kilgrave did to her, but she didn’t need to be. He hurt her. Hurt his friend in ways *no one* should ever be hurt. He forced Jessica to harm others, to do his bidding, to be his perfect little slave. All that was reason enough for Clark to hate him, but it went deeper than that.

Kilgrave had shattered Jessica’s belief in her potential to be a force for good.

He captured her when she was performing a good deed, saving someone, being a hero; and made her go through hell for months because of that. Not that he cared one bit about the man she saved or the thugs Jessica beat up. He didn’t even care about the fact that she was using her powers to help people, no matter how ridiculous he considered that notion. But as much as Jessica considered Kilgrave being hit by a bus “the universe getting back at him”, she no doubt started to consider her own situation as some kind of twisted karma.

Why was she being punished for trying to do a good thing? Why trying to help someone was rewarded by months of endless torment? Why was she almost driven mad for attempting to be a hero? What did she do to deserve this?

Clark knew she hadn’t done a thing to deserve this, that no one deserved to go through something like this. And deep down Jessica knew it as well. But it was hard to make Jessica believe in good after what happened to her.

It was a good thing Kilgrave was dead, because Clark really wasn’t sure what he was capable of doing if he ever faced that monster.

“I’m okay, Clark,” Jessica finally answered, snapping Clark out of his own thoughts. “I’m better.”

He stared at her, gauging how much she meant it. “You sure?”

Jessica nodded, slowly.

“I… I feel better after talking with you,” she admitted, almost inaudibly. Then she looked at him; and punched his chest. “And now we are done with this shit. Alright?”

“Alright,” he answered, getting the message. He couldn’t hide his smile.

“Now go in there,” Jessica said, pointing at the building. “And remember: not Slytherin!”

“Please, I’m clearly a Gryffindor!” Clark retorted, walking to the building.

“Sure you are, Hufflepuff boy,” Jessica remarked, moving in the opposite direction.

She was already far away before he had the chance to respond, so breathing deeply to calm himself, Clark knocked on the door.

Daniel Drumm knew they were about to get a visitor even before the man knocked at the door. So when the visitor was about to knock a second time, he waved his hand; as he commanded, the
doors of the New York Sanctum opened as if invisible hands had pulled them. The visitor, a man, stood in front of them for a second, a bit confused, but soon enough he overcame his shock and entered.

Of course, Daniel knew that the visitor was no simple man, no matter the garbs he was wearing; he would’ve known that even if he wasn’t already aware that they were waiting for Superman. To those that knew how to sense it, Kal-El oozed power, as only higher beings such as Kryptonians and Asgardians did. It really was no wonder that mankind used to worship entities such as them as gods, because a mere glance was enough to show the sheer power they possessed.

Ignoring the doors closing by themselves, Kal-El walked to the middle of the room, looking around as he did it.

The New York Sanctum was a beautiful place in Daniel’s opinion, like an old-fashioned mansion straight out from the beginnings of the last century. The entry hall was a circular room, with huge paintings on the wall, a dark marble floor, vases, couches and a chandelier that illuminated everything with a dim light. Behind him, a beautifully crafted wooden staircase led to the upper floors.

He allowed Superman to study the room for a few moments, until he stopped right in front of Daniel.

“Hello,” he said, smiling.

Daniel was a bit surprised by how incredibly normal Kal-El addressed him, as if he was a simple passerby crossing the street instead of a higher being of absolute power, but he concealed it as he greeted him.

“Welcome, Kal-El, to the New York Sanctum. My name is Daniel Drumm. I am sorry to say that the Master of the Sanctum is otherwise occupied, but it is an honor to greet you today.”

“Nice to meet you, um, Master Drumm?” Kal-El answered, uncertain about how to address him, but smiling and raising his hand.

Slowly, once again a little surprised by the warm greeting, Daniel shook his hand. “Daniel is fine,” he added, a bit uncomfortable with the formality that a being such as Superman had extended him.

As far as he knew, entities that possessed that much power usually didn’t go around greeting mortals as equals, but then again, he was Superman and apparently he cared about humans quite a lot.

“The Ancient One is waiting for you in Kamar-Taj,” Daniel said, after shaking Kal-El’s hand. “If you’ll follow me…”

Kal-El followed him as he asked and Daniel led him towards a corridor on the staircase’s left. At the end of it, was the doorway that led to Kamar-Taj, a tall door made of stone, engraved with runes and the symbol of Kamar-Taj.

“Is the Ancient One the one they call Sorcerer Supreme?” Kal-El asked after a second. “As a matter of fact, what is Kamar-Taj? And this ‘New York Sanctum’ we are in?”

Daniel stopped walking, turning to look at him with a slight frown. “What were you told?”

Superman fished what seemed to be a business card from his pocket and gave it to him. There was the address of the New York Sanctum written on one side and on the other a simple phrase: If you
want to know how to defend your mind, you know where to find me.

He had to control himself not to sigh in frustration.

“So you know nothing about this?” he asked, giving the card back to him; Kal-El shook his head. “But you do know, at least, what this place is?”

Kal-El stared at him for a second, then shrugged. “A magical school of some kind?”

This time Daniel really did sigh in frustration; he respected the Ancient One more than anyone, but this was typical of her.

“In order: the Ancient One is the Sorcerer Supreme,” Daniel answered, abruptly. “What that title fully means, I suggest you ask her, but in few words the Sorcerer Supreme is the guardian of this dimension.” He gestured around. “The New York Sanctum is one of the three Sanctums Sanctorum on Earth. And Kamar-Taj is a house of wisdom, a place where the Masters of the Mystic Arts gather to learn.”

There was a minute of silence, as Kal-El digested the quick notes he provided him.

“So… a magical school?” he asked, finally.

Daniel sighed again. This one would do well with the Ancient One.

“That is a grossly oversimplification… But in a sense, it is true,” Daniel granted, reluctant. “Kamar-Taj is a beacon to all those willing to learn the Mystic Arts, seeking to elevate their minds and their spirits. A place of knowledge, but more importantly, a place where those who are lost go to find themselves.”

Superman listened with attention and respect, without interrupting. But then, he glanced at the doorway behind Daniel and his face frowned in confusion.

“Is Kamar-Taj that room over there?” he asked, uncertain.

He couldn’t help but to smile. “In a way. Follow me.”

And then, after his brief explanation, they were walking though the corridor again, until they reached the door. With a wave of his hand, the stone doors opened by themselves, obeying his authority as the acting Master of the Sanctum. And behind it, miles away from New York but just there in front of them, stood Kamar-Taj’s interior. The room that housed the Orb of Agamotto – currently taking the form of their world –, the gateways to the other Sanctums and, more importantly, the Eye of Agamotto itself.

This time, Kal-El stopped, surprised.

“The sounds… That’s not New York,” he said, no doubt listening to the noises around Kamar-Taj through the gateway. “A portal?”

So he wasn’t entirely ignorant about magic, that was good.

“A gateway that leads directly to Kamar-Taj,” Daniel explained, “available only for the Sorcerer Supreme herself, the Masters of the Sanctums and a few trusted high-ranked sorcerers such as myself.” He pointed to it. “The Ancient One is expecting you. It’s been a pleasure, Kal-El.”

“The pleasure was mine, Daniel,” Kal-El answered, politely, smiling at him for a second before
turning his eyes back at the doorway. He gave Daniel a last nod and walked towards it; before he crossed it, however, he turned, as if he had just remembered something. “Oh, I almost forgot! I have my cellphone with me. Is it safe to go through? Or the magic is going to mess with the electronics?”

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment, sighing again. “This is not Hogwarts, Kal-El. Your phone will be fine.”

New York’s sounds disappeared completely when the stone doors closed behind him and Clark took a moment to adapt to the abrupt change. Magical forms of transportation were still weird to him, he had to admit, but he would get used to it eventually. So, instead of focusing on the least important detail there, Clark looked around, taking his time to study the room.

It was a dark room, circular, full of tall pillars and with three doorways carved in stone on the walls; one of which he had just used to get there. They would probably lead to the other Sanctums, he imagined, whatever that meant. Above him, far from the ground, there was a big sphere, in the form of their planet, just floating in the air without anything to hold it, under a dome with a beautiful projection of the night sky. But the thing that held Clark’s attention almost immediately was in the center of the room, over a small pedestal.

The Infinity Stone the Sorcerer Supreme used to fight him, encased in a pendant in the form of an eye.

For a moment, Clark simply gazed at it, too stunned to do anything. Did they really leave an Infinity Stone there, unguarded? The room was opened, anyone could just go there and take it; unless – it suddenly occurred to him – they couldn’t. He was inside a magical place, after all. Who knew what kinds of unseen protections were all over the room.

“It is impressive, isn’t it?” a voice said from behind him. “I always feel at peace in this room.”

He turned around quickly, surprised that someone was able to sneak up on him; that’s when he saw her. The same sorceress that battled him, wearing the same yellow cloak, except this time her hood was down and Clark could actually see her face. The Sorcerer Supreme was, as he already knew, a woman. She had a shaved head, pale skin and an overall unimpressive appearance.

Except for her eyes. Those were full of intelligence, wisdom and, more importantly, power. That was the same woman who had defeated him and Lorelei almost by herself and looking into her eyes he could understand how.

“It is a beautiful place,” Clark finally said, honestly, still watching the Ancient One. Uncertain, he approached her. He did not know how to do this correctly, so he just went for it. “I wanted to thank you for what you did. You saved my friends. And you saved me. I’m really sorry for attacking you.”

She just waved her hand, smiling, as if defeating him was barely worth mentioning. “Don’t worry about it. It’s all part of the job.”

“Sorcerer Supreme, right? Sif – the Asgardian warrior who helped you – mentioned it. You are Frigga’s successor, aren’t you?”

Again, the Ancient One smiled. She walked to the center of the room, hands held at her back, and looked up to the floating sphere.

“Frigga taught me everything I know about the Mystic Arts until I was strong and wise enough to
take her place. She was a good master and an even better friend. You have my gratitude for saving her life,” she answered, bowing her head to him; Clark had no idea how she knew about that, but she probably had her ways. “I am the latest in a long line of Sorcerers Supreme, going back thousands of years to the Father of the Mystic Arts, the mighty Agamotto. The same sorcerer who created the Eye I used to stop you.”

Following her gaze, Clark looked at the Eye on the top of the pedestal, remembering the strong green glow it had when she used it during their battle.

“How is this an Infinity Stone?” Clark asked, already knowing the answer.

“The Time Stone, yes,” the Ancient One answered, without any preambles. “Inside the Eye of Agamotto. An artifact created for the sole purpose of containing and channeling the power of an Infinity Stone. An artifact that has been used to protect our world as much as we use our powers to protect it from others.”

“Protect the world from what?” Clark asked, dreading the answer. “What is the purpose of the Sorcerer Supreme?”

The Ancient One grinned again. “There is an infinite number of realities, Kal-El. Countless dimensions out there, some like ours, others as different as they could possibly be. And with an infinite number of worlds, comes an infinite number of threats.” She stared at him. “Mephisto, Shuma-Gorath, Cyttorak, Chthon, Trigon, Dormammu… Beings so powerful that if allowed to cross to our world, they would consume our reality whole.”

Clark felt a cold shiver down his spine. When Sif and Daniel Drumm said that the Sorcerer Supreme was the guardian of their dimension, he didn’t really understand how literal that statement was. Compared to the threat of the complete annihilation of their universe, Zod’s invasion – something that would result in humanity’s genocide and Earth being terraformed into another planet – seemed almost insignificant. Pretty much anything would seem small compared to that, he admitted.

“How?” he asked, suddenly, looking back at her. “If those beings are so powerful, how exactly can you fight them?”

Even with the aid of an Infinity Stone – something Clark was now relieved it was in the Sorcerer Supreme’s possession, if those were the kinds of threats she dealt with – that seemed impossible.

“We can’t,” she answered, simply. “What we can do is keep them away.” Saying this, she waved her hand at the floating orb above them. The orb lit up in bright orange, showing Earth and all its continents. Three crests appeared over the globe, glowing orange as well. “Agamotto built three Sanctums in places of power, a long time ago, where great cities now stand. The Hong Kong Sanctum, the London Sanctum and the New York Sanctum, which you already know,” she added, glancing at him. “Together, they generate a protective shield around our dimension.”

As she said this, the crests on the globe started to expand, creating a barrier around the orb.

“The Sanctums protect the world and the Sorcerer Supreme protects the Sanctums,” the Ancient One finished.

So that was the true purpose of the Sanctums, Clark realized. They were parts of the barrier that kept dimensional conquerors away from their world. He couldn’t begin to understand how that worked, but their importance was more than clear now.
“Why here?” he asked, suddenly. “On Earth? Why did Agamotto built the Sanctums on this planet and not another one?”

The Ancient One shrugged. “Convenience, I suppose. Earth is a place of tremendous mystic power, of the likes few other worlds can claim. It is located at the exact center of the Yggdrasil and it thrives because of all that power. Also, back then, when Agamotto decided to build the Sanctums, there was no civilization to speak of, so there was a smaller chance of the indigenous life forms tampering with them. Of course, ‘when’ is a relative matter to someone wielding the Time Stone,” she added, as if considering the notion for a moment. Shaking her head, she continued. “Additionally, being one of the Nine Realms, Earth is under Asgard’s protection, so if help was needed, Asgard would be there to lend a hand.” She shrugged again. “Earth was not the only place where he could have built the Sanctums and these Sanctums are not the only protection our universe has against other dimensional threats, but they are certainly the most important.”

“And the most likely to get attacked,” Clark added, worried.

“That is why it is the Sorcerer Supreme’s duty to defend them,” the Ancient One said. “Think of the Sanctums as the gate of a very tall and thick wall. A strong gate, well protected and perfectly built, but at the same time the most vulnerable spot to be attacked. That is why our task is so important.”

“This barrier is strong enough to keep all those beings out just like that?”

“Yes and no,” she said. “I compared the barrier to a wall, but in reality it would be more accurate to compare it to a net. A fishing net, for example. Imagine a net wide and strong enough to hold a whale. It could, arguably, be used as well to hold sharks and other big fishes, but smaller ones could still pass though. It’s not easy for them, it is risky, but it can be done.”

“So the barrier works only to hold the very big ones,” Clark said.

“The smaller ones have to be captured and tossed back into the ocean,” the Ancient One agreed. “Even a ‘small fish’ can prove to be a threat, under the right circumstances. The Sanctums must be protected at all costs.” She looked at him. “That is one of the reasons why you are here.”

Clark understood what she meant even before the Ancient One even said it. He might not be a threat from another dimension, but when Lorelei took his mind, he became a threat to the world all the same. And the Sanctums that held the protective barrier around the universe just happened to be on that planet; if he destroyed them, then their universe would be at risk.

The feeling of extreme guilt grew inside him once again.

“The Eye of Agamotto can be used as a way to glance into possible futures,” the Ancient One said, ignoring his discomfort; he forced himself to pay attention. “To those who know how, the Time Stone can show the past and every possible outcome in the future. It is a way for us to be prepared, to know when we are needed.” She stared at him fixedly. “When you were enthralled by the Asgardian sorceress, I was needed.”

“Would I… What did I do?” Clark asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

“In several possible futures, you were used for the capture and enthrallment of the rest of the Avengers,” the Ancient One answered, as if he had asked her about the weather. “The leaders of the most powerful countries followed and soon Lorelei had in her hands a force strong enough to take the planet. The resultant war, in many of the possible futures, destroyed the Sanctums or, at the very least, created such chaos that Earth became vulnerable to outside threats.” She glanced at
him. “You were a victim, Kal-El, but the weakness Lorelei was allowed to explore meant the end of the world. I cannot ignore this.”

He looked down, ashamed, incapable of looking at her. She was right, he knew that. It might not have been his fault, not really, but the result was the same: Lorelei used him to take Earth and to kill who knows how many people.

“Why didn’t you just… kill me?”

Clark had no desire to die, but if his death meant Earth’s safety… Well, that wasn’t even a difficult decision to make.

“Because I had other means to stop you,” the Ancient One answered, simply. “Make no mistake, Kal-El, if there was no other way, I would have. It wouldn’t bring me any joy to do it, but it is my duty to protect this world. It was a good thing, however, that I had other means to stop you. This universe will need Superman.”

He raised his eyebrows when she said that; it sounded like she was absolutely sure of it. Which was very much possible, he recalled, since she could see the future.

“In which way… You know what, I think I don’t want to know,” Clark said, rethinking his decision to ask that question. He didn’t want to know what the future had reserved for him.

The Ancient One smiled at him.

“The future is in constant motion, Kal-El,” she explained. “The same way the Multiverse is infinite, so are the possible futures of your life. I can see the future, gaze at the several branches of Time, but the further I look, the more uncertain my visions are.”

“You don’t have a way of knowing which of them are real?” Clark asked.

“They are all real, Kal-El,” the Ancient One corrected him. “Every single one of them. I just don’t know which of them will be real for you. One thing is certain, however: Superman will be important in all of them.” Saying this, the Ancient One waved her hand again, making the orange glow on the globe disappear. “Come with me.”

Without a second glance, she left the room and Clark followed her closely, looking around to see more of Kamar-Taj. The place seemed like a temple or a monastery, of the likes one would find in Asia, with monks training to reach a higher state of spirit; of course, he could be just projecting the old stereotypes, but the architecture of the place did remind him of that.

Using his x-ray vision, on a lower capacity so he wouldn’t intrude too much, Clark looked around, seeing several people training. Some were meditating, some were sparring, some were reading and learning. And there were, obviously, those practicing magic, opening portals, creating constructs of orange light and other things. All of them were wearing old-fashioned robes, the kind monks could be wearing.

Maybe the stereotype existed for a reason.

“Where are we?” Clark asked, curious. “I mean, where is Kamar-Taj?”

“Nepal. Kathmandu, to be precise,” the Ancient One answered, entering a room to her left. “I’ve seen you flying over the city a few times, you probably already saw Kamar-Taj before.”

He couldn’t know, not from that point of view, but right now he could see the exterior of Kamar-
Taj and Clark was impressed by it. They walked through a corridor by a courtyard and Clark could see without the need of his x-ray vision as the sorcerers practiced their craft, tracing their magic in the very air in front of them. Beyond them, he could see the rest of the city and the mountains. It was a truly beautiful place.

The Ancient One, however, was not taking him there and continued her walk for a few minutes, eventually entering in another room. This room, like the first one he arrived, was dark and illuminated only by a few dim chandeliers. Differently from the other room, though, this one was vast and full of weird artifacts.

He could see suits of armor, clearly ancient, but well preserved. Weapons, like swords and spears, on the walls and wooden racks, with designs that hailed from every part of the world. Robes etched with glowing runes. Wands and staves. Pendants, rings and every single kind of jewelry, from the simple ones to the ones crafted with incredible precious stones. Statues that seemed somewhat alive, paintings that actually moved, scrolls and even what seemed to be a magic lamp.

It took Clark a moment to realize he was standing in a room full of magical artifacts, something he never imagined it would happen in his life.

“This is incredible!” he said, fascinated. He raised his hand and tried to touch a golden helmet at the center of the room, watching his face reflected on its polished metal surface.

“I wouldn’t touch that, if I were you,” the Ancient One said, before he could grasp it. “That Helmet can be quite… possessive.”

Clark had no idea what she meant by that, but he pulled his hand back fast, unwilling to find out.

That’s when he finally saw what the Ancient One was trying to show him. Behind her, at the wall, were several stone tablets, even taller than Clark. Some of them had drawings carved on their surface, others had only ancient writings, but all of them seemed to tell stories.

The one closer from the Ancient One was filled with weird runes – an alphabet he couldn’t understand, most likely – but it had a very recognizable hammer drawn at the bottom, held by an also very familiar figure with long hair and a cape.

“Thor!” Clark exclaimed. “This… This is when he fell on Earth, isn’t it? It was foretold?”

The Ancient One just smiled, still in silence, allowing Clark to continue to see the tablets. He saw one that had a warrior with an eyepatch – Odin, most likely – battling a horde of Frost Giants. Another showed an army of warrior-women riding winged horses, fighting a lone figure wearing a helmet with horns, as several blades crossed the sky. There was a carving of a Hulk-like creature holding an axe, with a full beard, sitting on a throne surrounded by recently unshackled aliens. Bor battling Malekith and his Kursed warriors on Svartalfheim. Kryptonian ships engaging a world defended by winged soldiers. An entity of some kind blessing a young baby, amongst the Egyptian pyramids, visibly mutating his appearance on a genetic level. Kree ships attacking the Nova Corps…

Other tablet had an imposing entity, surrounded by winged demonic-like beings, facing several warriors: an Asgardian that very much resembled a young Odin wielding Mjölnir, a woman surrounded by an aura in the form of a flaming bird, a sorcerer wearing a helmet that looked very much like the golden helmet he almost touched, a lone warrior woman with a glowing fist and the crest of a dragon on her clothes, an aged man wearing a cape and what seemed to be a skinsuit with a familiar ‘S’ on the chest, a man with a flaming skull for a head riding a mammoth, an alien that Clark recognized from his ship’s archives as a member of the long extinct Martian race and another
warrior wearing an armor that resembled a feline of some kind.

One of the tablets had a single person on it, a man wearing a cape, fallen on the ground, evidently dead or dying, as snow began to fall upon him; he could barely read a set of words carved on it, saying *Fimbulvetr* or something like it. The next one was clearly Asgard’s Ragnarok, depicting a war between gods, giants, an enormous wolf, a dragon and an immense serpent, ending with the Realm Eternal shattered in an explosion. Other had one alien, clad in an intimidating armor, wearing a gauntlet that glowed with six stones carved in it, shining with sheer power.

Clark’s eyes fixed on each tablet on the wall, absorbing every detail etched on them. Prophecies, he realized. Prophecies made by someone, or by several people, detailing events that would happen or had already happened. Events that shaped their universe.

The last one he saw, was a single ship falling on Earth, as a planet exploded in the distance.

“Is that… me?” he whispered. Touching the ship with extreme care, feeling the carving on the tablet. Clark looked at the remains of the destroyed planet that could only be Krypton. “You knew this was going to happen?”

The Ancient One walked to his side, touching his shoulder.

“The future is uncertain, Kal-El, even when we can see parts of it. The branches of Time are usually confusing and more often than not we cannot even comprehend what we are predicting,” she said, her voice soft. “In this reality, this prophecy came to pass. In others, it didn’t. Nothing is set in stone.” The Sorcerer Supreme waved at the tablets. “Each one of those tablets are prophecies made by seers, by wielders of the Time Stone, by people that had the gift to see into the future. Some of them happened. Some of them will happen. Some of them, however, may never happen. As the Sorcerer Supreme, it is my duty to glance into the future and to learn how to protect our dimension from threats that may endanger us.”

She turned to him, looking into his eyes.

“But I cannot do it,” she said, finally, surprising Clark. “Not by myself. The Multiverse is infinitely dangerous and I am only one person. A powerful one, yes, but just one. No Sorcerer Supreme has ever protected this world alone, no matter what people like to think, not even Agamotto.”

The Ancient One approached him.

“I need your help, Kal-El,” she said, abruptly. “We all do. I have protected this dimension for centuries, using magic to extend my lifespan because *I was needed*. But the future is uncertain and the more I gaze into it, the darker it becomes. I cannot do this alone, not anymore. Superman *will* be needed. That is why I tried to help you with all my strength.”

At that moment, Clark felt the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders, but it was a burden he would gladly take upon himself if it meant sharing the load the Ancient One was carrying. Being Superman, defending Earth, was a task that required *monumental* dedication and willpower; and he was, in the end, a superpowered alien defending a single planet.

The Ancient One was a human tasked with defending an entire universe.

No one should do something like this alone, no matter how powerful and wise. And if he could help her, Clark would do whatever he could.

“How can I help you?” he asked her, letting his complete seriousness permeate his words.
It was almost imperceptible, but Clark could see the Ancient One’s muscles relaxing when he said that.

“First things first,” she said, “you must learn how to defend your own mind. Lorelei is not the only one out there that can take advantage of this particular weakness. There are even non-magical ways of controlling one’s mind, ways that you may or may not be susceptible to.”

Clark couldn’t help but to think about Kilgrave when she said that. He didn’t know how his powers worked when he was still alive, if he were a mutant or some kind of enhanced, but who knew if he could control a Kryptonian? And like the Ancient One said, there probably were others out there who could do something similar. There was always the chance that they could be as evil as Kilgrave was; he needed to be prepared.

“Torquasm-Vo should be a good place to start,” the Ancient One continued and Clark snapped his head up to look at her.

“You know about Torquasm-Vo?” Clark asked. Frigga knew about it, he remembered, but he didn’t expect that specific knowledge to be passed on.

The Ancient One seemed to find his surprise amusing. “I have visited several worlds, Kal-El, physically and through the Astral Dimension. I may not have stepped on Krypton, but Torquasm-Vo was a very famous Mystic Art once upon a time. Rao truly impressed a great number of people throughout the cosmos.”

Clark was smiling when he asked: “So you know Torquasm-Vo?”

“I am not a master, but I do know enough about it to pass on,” she answered. “At the very least, I can teach you to protect your mind, which is our very first goal.” Without saying anything, she gestured for him to follow her. They left the room with the prophecies and walked by the courtyard again, where the sorcerers were still practicing. “You will start with meditation. I want you to come here, to Kamar-Taj or the New York Sanctum, to meditate at least twice a week. You may come whenever you want, but I realize you have other obligations.”

Somehow, Clark felt he was signing up for yoga class, instead of learning an ancient alien Mystic Art in an honest-to-god magical school.

“I will teach you how to meditate properly,” the Ancient One continued, ignoring his uneasiness, “but whenever I am otherwise occupied, Master Daniel, Master Mordo and Master Kaecilius will help you.” She looked at him. “It will all depend on your dedication, however.”

“I won’t let you down,” Clark promised.

She smiled. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

He smiled back at her and turned to watch the training yard, seeing the sorcerers learning how to open a portal, coached by a tall, dark skinned sorcerer that seemed extremely competent.

“You know, sometimes I imagine how it would be to live a normal life,” Clark said, suddenly, still watching the sorcerers. “To have a normal job, a girlfriend, a normal hobby… And then someone yells for help and I go out flying to save them, wearing a red cape. Until today, I didn’t think things could get even weirder.” He smiled at her, showing he didn’t mean anything bad by the commentary. “Now I’m an alien in Hogwarts.”

The Ancient One chuckled. “Some people are not cut out for a normal, boring life, no matter how much we might desire it during the hard days. You and I are meant to fight aliens and dimensional
threats and who knows what more so everybody else,” she waved in the town’s direction, “can live their normal lives.” She looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “And we both know that, even if we could, we wouldn’t change a thing.”

She was right about that.

Turk Barrett was a criminal, there was no argument there. It wasn’t something he used to brag about or something he felt particularly guilty about, it was just the statement of a fact. Crime was his way of life, ever since he was a kid, and he wasn’t about to change that. He wasn’t one of those psychos that went around murdering people for no good reason or even a high-class mobster, the kinds that ruled the underworld, but he was a criminal and – unless he was talking to the cops – he wouldn’t deny it.

So he could say, with authority and absolute certainty, that Superman’s appearance on Earth had thrown the criminal world into chaos.

Things were spiraling out of control ever since Superman decided to start flying over New York, answering cries for help. The laws that ruled the streets couldn’t be applied anymore. Criminals like him, who spent their whole lives doing what they did, were being caught like rookies because everything changed overnight. Nothing was guaranteed anymore and professionals such as himself had to learn new things as they went along, hoping everything would work out.

Turk had lost count of how many people Superman and the police had arrested since Black Zero Event. Buddies of his, old crooks that had persevered for years and years doing their trade, were being thrown in jail because there was a freaking alien god flying faster than a bullet, stopping crime everywhere.

He had been a victim too, of this abusive system, before Black Zero Event; before Superman was even Superman. Of course, Turk didn’t know what the fuck he was back then, with his speed, strength and red eyes; he actually thought he was a demon of some kind. Or worse, a mutant. It was only after Zod’s invasion, when the Big Blue Boy Scout appeared for the first time, that he made the connection.

Luckily for him, things had worked out; and differently from others, Turk was known to be adaptable. He made a mistake, yes, but he learned from it. That was the important thing, right? And like any good learner, Turk decided to pass on his knowledge, to improve the minds of tomorrow.

That was why he was waiting for the rookie to arrive, standing in that dark alley close to the docks. And almost as soon as the thought crossed his mind, the guy appeared. Turk sighed, shaking his head slightly; the things he did for money, imagine that. Him, a teacher! It wasn’t as if he particularly cared about his students, that was true, but he would teach the guy what he needed to know to operate in this new world.

If he didn’t, the new guy would be caught, sooner or later, and that money would come out of his pockets, so at least he was motivated.

“You’re late,” he complained, when the guy was close enough to hear.

“There was a–“

“I don’t wanna know,” Turk interrupted. “You arrive in time or you’re out.”

The guy nodded fast. Well, at least he was open to the idea of learning new things. If everything went right, he probably would be able to teach him a thing or two.
“Hi, I’m Robb–“

“No names!” Turk interrupted, looking frightened to the sky for a moment. “Never say names out loud!”

The guy, Robbie, seemed confused about why he was being yelled at. Fucking rookie! Probably freshly arrived from some hick town like Smallville or something, with absolutely no notion of the dangers of New York. Superman was a worldwide hero, a menace to criminals everywhere, but he seemed especially fond of New York for some reason. How complicated was for these guys to understand that he could hear everything?

Robbie was still frowning; Turk sighed.

“Look, kid, if you’re smart, you’re gonna learn some stuff tonight,” he said. “Rule number one: no names. Better yet, no talking at all. Voices call undesirable attention of people we really don’t want here.”

“Who?” Robbie asked.

Was this guy for real?

“Him!” Turk exclaimed, pointing up frenetically. The guy was still frowning. “You-Know-Who up there!”

“Voldemort?” he whispered.

Motherfu–Turk was beginning to realize this guy wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed.

“Think about what I’m saying,” Turk said, slowly. “Who is the one who can fly and listen to anything, anywhere?”

Robbie actually had to think for a couple of seconds, but then he exclaimed: “Super–“

Turk lunged and closed his mouth before he could speak, pushing him against the wall. There was a long moment of silence, as the guy watched him with wide eyes.

“Never, ever, say that name,” Turk threatened.

He had no idea if the stories were true and Superman would actually appear when his name was spoken, but he wasn’t in the position to try. All he knew was that damn alien could listen to cries for help from all over the world and he most likely would respond to his name; that was something they really didn’t need right now.

The rookie nodded as best as he could, with Turk still holding his head, so he released him.

“Is it true he appears when you say his name?” Robbie asked, his voice low.

“Don’t know, don’t really wanna try,” Turk retorted. “Now let’s go, we’re already late.”

Saying this, he began to lead the rookie through the dark alley, moving towards the docks. Contraband was harder and harder to hide these days, with all the new tech, the laws and Superman, but of course it still happened. While there was a need for illegal shit, there would always be new ways to transport said illegal shit.

The cargo they were waiting for, however, wasn’t exactly illegal, though, it was just avoiding taxes; it was too risky to deal with that nowadays and Turk didn’t want to go back to jail. He had
even turned down the offer to traffic some women a few days ago, even with the outrageous money the Russians were paying; he had got into trouble with Superman back then for trying to kidnap some junkies for the Mutant Factory, he would stay the hell away from that kind of thing from now on.

Good thing he did, because the guys who accepted the job were beaten up by some Masked Vigilante and arrested; as if they hadn’t enough problems with Superman, now they had a new guy on the loose.

Turk led the rookie inside the docks, avoiding the main entrances, making his way through the containers. Guards and cops were paid to look the other way when a new cargo arrived, but it was best not to take any chances; sometimes people just happened to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time. And, of course, not everyone could be bought. Apparently, Superman’s goodness was contagious, because less and less people were afraid of the mob these days.

That was actually the case that night. There was one guard who didn’t take bribes and he happened to be the one working; Turk raised his hand and stopped, hiding in the shadows as he watched the guardhouse. Back then, something like that would be easily solved, but the order from the “upper management” was to not call attention and bodies dropping all around did just that. So they would have to wait a few minutes until the guy left and then get to the cargo.

Somehow, however, the rookie didn’t get the memo, because when he saw the reason why they stopped leaving the guardhouse, he drew a gun.

Again, Turk jumped against the guy, pushing him down and taking the revolver from him. The fight did a bit of noise and the elderly guard stopped for a moment, but probably decided it was just the wind. Turk waited, on top of Robbie, until the guard left.

“What the fuck is this?!” he whispered, pissed off, swinging the old revolver in front of Robbie’s face. “Where the hell did you get this?”

“It’s-I got it from my pops,” Robbie answered, frightened.

“Rule number two: no fucking guns!” Turk snarled. “What kind of imbecile are you, kid?! Do you even know how loud this shit is? Do you know how fast You-Know-Who can get here if you fire a gun?”

Another change in this brave new world: guns were useless. It took criminals a while to understand this. Sure, you could use them to shoot a fucker or two, but then what? Probably before you even had the chance to shoot a second time, Superman would already be there. A super-fast, bullet proof, superpowered alien that could take entire gangs down in a matter of seconds and wait for the police to arrive.

Guns weren’t power anymore, they were just a very loud one-way ticket to prison.

Turk wasn’t one to use guns, it wasn’t his style, but he did use to sell them. Nothing big or exceptionally dangerous, but he had his clients; except that business was pretty much dead now. Not only people learned that firing a gun, anywhere in the world, would bring Superman on their heads, Superman himself had hunted down weapon’s dealers everywhere and arrested them. Even destroyed a few “legally” acquired guns sold to interested parties, by the government.

Seeing the Big Blue Boy Scout fucking with the government was funny, at least. But that meant Turk himself couldn’t sell them either.
When the guard was already far away from them, Turk allowed Robbie to get up; the gun, however, stayed with him. It would go to the sea as soon as they got close enough.

“You don’t fire guns,” he repeated, hammering that lesson on the kid’s head. “Never! That’s game-over nowadays! And while we’re talking about this, you don’t fucking kill! Never!”

“I’m not afraid of killing!” the kid answered, full of bravado, which showed Turk that he was indeed afraid of killing.

“You should be,” he replied. “Very much.” He pointed up. “You-Know-Who is usually a pretty chill guy, but hurt someone, kill someone, especially innocent people, and he will get pissed. And believe me, you don’t want that guy pissed!”

As far as he knew, Superman didn’t kill humans. He barely hurt people, even when they actually tried to shoot him. For a while, criminals everywhere took this as a sign of weakness or some shit like that, despite the fact that he had twisted that other alien guy’s neck as if he were a chicken; until a bright gang member decided to grab a kid hostage when Superman appeared to arrest him.

Bad idea. The guy didn’t even have the chance to threaten to pull the trigger; before he could blink, Superman crashed against him, taking him away from the kid. And the guy found out, in a very painful way, what happened when someone collided against a being called Man of Steel. Broken bones everywhere, broken pride, and an open-season on every single criminal remotely related to him.

His gang was arrested in a couple of days, then his suppliers, his clients and everyone that claimed ties to the guy.

Needless to say, it became a new law in the underworld for criminals that threatened or hurt innocents to be ostracized, even sacrificed for the greater good; that was how afraid they were of Superman. Nobody there cared one bit about innocents, that was true, but hurting them meant career-suicide. If it had to be done, then it had to be done quietly. And that was hard to do when the guy could hear a fucking pin dropping on the other side of the world.

Turk pushed Robbie against the container.

“No guns and no killing!” he repeated. “Got it?”

He didn’t know if the rookie agreed just for the sake of agreeing or if he actually understood, but as long he didn’t pull shit like that with him, that was his problem.

They waited a few minutes hidden between the containers. The guard that didn’t take bribes had just left and his replacement, bought and paid for, had just left the premises as well; the cost was clear. In silence, Turk guided them through the containers close to the sea, the ones that had arrived recently. He took a second to clean his prints from the revolver and toss the thing away in the water; he actually expected the rookie to say something, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

Double checking the number of the container, Turk began looking for it. He knew it was there, he’d seen it earlier that day, and the guys with the trucks were probably already waiting close by, ready to move the cargo when he called them.

Finally, he spotted it. “Here it is,” he whispered, chuckling.

Looking around to check if there wasn’t anyone around, Turk opened the container. It was filled to the brim with boxes.
“What are those?” the rookie asked, eyes wide. “Drugs?”

Turk rolled his eyes. It was like he was talking to the wall. How the hell were they supposed to hide a shipment of drugs like that? Never mind Superman, the proper channels would spot shit like that any day of the week.

Not that Superman wasn’t a pain in the ass when it came to drugs, because he was. But he decided that destroying the root of the problem was easier than hunting down drug dealers everywhere; he got rid of so many sellers, ripping apart their businesses, all over the world, that the price of the drugs – any drug, really – shot to the roof.

There were still some people brave enough to deal, mainly the Chinese, but Turk wasn’t crazy enough to mess with those fuckers.

“No, not drugs,” Turk answered, pulling one box down. “Even better.”

“Booze?”

“Kid, stop guessing, you’re bad at it.”

Grabbing a knife, Turk cut the box open. He sank his hands into it, tossing the protective plastic away, and finally fished the object inside it: the latest Starkphone.

“This here, kid, this is the fucking future,” Turk said, lifting the cellphone for the rookie to see. “Completely legal, genuine stuff, but made far away from the US, where people don’t have to worry about work-hours or minimum wages. And all we have to do, is bring them inside the country without paying taxes. Almost honest work.”

The rookie was speechless, staring at the phone. Turk chuckled at the surprised face. Sure, maybe it wasn’t as profitable as drugs, guns or even people, but this way Superman wouldn’t fly there and fuck everything up out of the blue. It was a crime, yes, but not a crime he would worry about too much.

“We have another cargo arriving tomorrow and then another one the day after,” Turk said. “Not cellphones, though.”

“What?” Robbie asked.

“Protein. You know, those expensive supplements people that go to the gym take.”

The kid just stared back at him, as if trying to understand.

“But… There are drugs hidden inside them, right?” he asked.

Turk sighed, putting the Starkphone back in the box.

“Kid, listen to me. The days we used to smuggle shit like that all over are about to end. Nobody wants to deal with the kind of heat that it brings on their heads anymore, it’s not worth it.”

“So we are… working? I mean, honest work?”

“We are stealing from the government. We are fucking heroes, if you ask me!” Turk laughed at his stunned face. “Now, help me unload this, the guys with the trucks won’t take long to arrive.”

Another good night of work, Turk thought satisfied, looking up to the full moon. No cops, no Superman, no Avengers of any kind. All was well in the world.
That was when a Masked Man dropped from the container right on top of him.

“Well, at least today you don’t look like you fought an entire warehouse of mobsters,” Claire Temple commented, checking his injuries with a clinical eye. “Maybe half a warehouse.”

Matt chuckled, allowing her to clean the cuts and bruises on his chest. She was right, though, this time he probably wouldn’t even need stitches.

“It was a calm night,” Matt said. “I just asked around about the Russians a bit.”

He couldn’t see, of course, but Matt felt Claire staring at him.

“With your fists?” she asked. “That doesn’t make for a very interesting conversation.”

“You’d be surprised.”

Matt found that criminals had unusually loose tongues when he allowed his fists to do the talking. And since he had important questions to ask, questions that needed to be answered for Claire’s safety, Matt had been throwing himself at the problem rather religiously lately.

Unfortunately, before they started to answer, criminals usually did attempt to fight back, no matter how scared and inept they were; sometimes they landed a hit or two. That was why he was there that night, allowing Claire to take a look at his wounds, inside an apartment that belonged to neither of them.

There was a reason Matt used a mask when he went out to punch bad guys. For his own safety, of course, but mainly for the safety of his friends that couldn’t protect themselves from that kind of threat, not like he could; he could say whatever he wanted about Stick, his old mentor, but the old man did teach him how to fight and to fight well.

But mask or not, Matt made a mistake. He allowed his emotions to cloud his judgment. He started all this because he couldn’t bear to listen to every single crime going on in Hell’s Kitchen and do nothing. It was his very own version of Hell. So he decided, when he couldn’t take it anymore, that he needed to do something. Thus, Matt started his crusade against crime in Hell’s Kitchen.

What he failed to consider was that when someone was pushed, they were bound to push back. And since they couldn’t fight him, they chose a weaker target. The Russians, frustrated by his constant interference in their operations, decided to kidnap a child, to force him to appear.

It didn’t work as they intended. As soon as the kid and his father yelled for help, there was a booming noise in the sky and Superman descended upon them like a vengeful god, completely destroying their car, their guns and arresting the kidnappers.

But if they failed to kidnap the kid, as intended, the Russians had succeeded at pissing off Matt. He started all this to help innocents and now an innocent had been put in danger so they could get to him. Matt was furious and that fury had cost him his rationality. He threw himself back in the war against crime recklessly, trying to finish it once and for all and it almost cost his life, when he made the mistake of attacking a warehouse that was prepared for him.

Claire was the one who saved his life, when she found him half-dead hiding inside a dumpster close to her building. She did what she could, being a professional nurse, but before Matt could leave, a Russian enforcer managed to follow his trail to Claire’s apartment. Matt confronted him and, luckily – or not, depending on the point-of-view – the guy was put into a coma.
Matt had no idea if the guy would wake up and he honestly didn’t care all that much; he didn’t kill people, but that was pretty much his only rule when dealing with the kind of scum who saw nothing wrong about hurting innocents. But he was concerned about what the Russian could remember if he ever woke up. If he somehow recalled where he was when he faced him, then Claire would be in danger and Matt couldn’t allow that.

That was why she was hiding, temporarily, in her friend’s place, when she should be there only to feed the cat. And that was why Matt was so desperately trying to dig up everything he could on the Russians, so he could send them all to jail as soon as possible.

It was easier said than done.

“Matt,” Claire began, stopping to clean his wounds for a second, “you are going to get yourself killed if you continue like this. You’re not Superman, you know. You need some kind of protection if you intend to fight criminals every night.”

“Armor?” Matt shook his head. “It would slow me down too much.”

“So will a bullet!” Claire retorted, applying a bandage over one of the deep cuts.

Matt turned to her, a smirk on his face. “You worried about me?”

Claire stared back, pushing his hand so he would hold the bandage while she grabbed the tape. “What if I were?”

“I would tell you that I’m a big boy, and not to be,” Matt countered, still smirking.

She was not exactly impressed.

“Right… That’s why you keep ending up here,” she mocked, playfully.

“Well, maybe I just like the sound of your voice.”

“Hmm. So what happens the night you come by and I’m already talking to someone else?”

“Yeah, it crossed my mind,” Matt admitted, not exactly thrilled by the possibility. He put his hand in his pocket and fished a cellphone, giving it to Claire. “Here.”

“Um, you shouldn’t have,” she joked, taking the cheap phone of his hands.

Matt chuckled.

“I didn’t. The burner’s for me. Memorize the number, put yours in. Next time I need to come by, I’ll call.”

Claire wasn’t as amused as he was by that.

“By ‘come by’, do you mean stumble in, bleeding to death?” she asked.

A guy was found half-dead inside a dumpster once and suddenly people thought this would become a habit. He was still rolling his blind eyes when Claire tossed him his shirt; he grabbed it before it hit his face.

“Yeah, something like that,” he answered, putting it on.

“You’re gonna get yourself killed,” Claire said, again. “You really gotta easy up.”
Despite being a tad annoyed, Matt was truly grateful to have someone caring for him that much. Especially someone who knew what he really was. Very few people knew about his abilities and it was nice to not have to pretend to be helpless. He might’ve not liked to put Claire in danger, but he didn’t regret meeting her, not for a second.

“No, I can’t, not yet.”

“I can take care of myself, Mike,” Claire exclaime ned.

For a split second, Matt almost forgot that Claire didn’t know his real name. Talking to her was so easy that he sometimes didn’t remember they weren’t exactly old friends. He didn’t really like to think about that.

“It’s not just about you,” he said, deciding to just ignore that. “It’s a little more complicated than that. You ever heard the name Wilson Fisk?”

Unsurprisingly, Claire shook her head. “No. Who’s that?”

That was a very good question. Just a few days ago, Nelson and Murdock, the law firm he built with Foggy, had been approached by a nameless representative of a company named Confederated Global Investments. The guy, a smooth talker full of confidence, told them that they represented a consortium with diversified interests in the privet sector, both domestic and international, and that from time to time they scouted the landscape for promising talent to put on retainer, such as them.

Matt didn’t even need his abilities to know that was all bullshit.

The company was a subsidiary of a holding company, of a loan-out to a holding subsidiary and on and on and on… It was a front, nothing more, nothing less. And even though the company’s check cleared in about two seconds, they were a lot more worried about what they wanted Nelson and Murdock to do.

More accurately, about who they wanted Nelson and Murdock to represent.

A hitman. A psychopathic hitman named John Healy that had killed – allegedly in self-defense – a man called Prohaszka, by repeatedly smashing his head with a bowling ball. He showed no remorse, no emotion whatsoever after the deed and it took them barely a second to realize what kind of monster they were dealing with; the kind that Nelson and Murdock shouldn’t represent.

But Matt needed answers. He needed to know why that hitman was hired to kill Prohaszka, a known mobster. He needed to know why Confederated Global Investments was paying them to represent the man. He needed to know who was behind that company. Because whoever it was, they were moving into Hell’s Kitchen to do something big.

So they represented John Healy and managed to free him. And when Matt confronted the man, forcing him to give him the name of his boss, John Healy, a man capable of killing without feeling a single thing, became so desperately afraid that he chose to ram his own head through a piece of metal rather than live with the consequences of giving out Fisk’s name.

Matt could barely understand how someone could inspire that much fear, but whoever this Wilson Fisk was, he was probably the one behind the Russians, behind Union Allied and the man who tried to kill Karen Page, behind all that was wrong in Hell’s Kitchen.

“Just a name someone gave me,” Matt finally answered, with an indifference he didn’t feel. “But there’s no public record, nothing on the internet, not one mention of Fisk.”
“Maybe whoever gave you his name was lying,” Claire guessed.

“I would’ve known if he was,” Matt said.

“How?”

“Heartbeat,” he answered simply, extending his hand to take the burner back.

“Right, of course, heartbeat,” Claire said, sarcastically, giving him the phone back. “So what, you’re just gonna go out there punching whoever you can, hoping to find somebody who knows this Fisk guy?”

“Well, apply enough pressure, someone will break,” Matt said, putting his mask on. “Sooner or later.”

“What happens if the ‘someone’ turns out to be you?”

Matt was already getting up to leave, but he could sense that Claire was truly worried about him. He stopped and went back.

“Claire, I’ll be fine,” he said, touching her shoulder. “The streets are not so dangerous anymore. Not after Superman.”

“Oh, is that why you come back here nightly, looking like you’ve been through a grinder?” she said, ironically.

He decided to ignore her tone. “But no bullets,” he said, simply. “Do you remember the last time there was a shooting in New York?”

“Yes, last week!”

“A shooting that claimed lives,” Matt corrected himself, fast.

This time, Claire didn’t answer so fast. “Well, no, but I’m sure these guys still have guns.”

“Of course they do, but they know that if they use them, it’s game-over. There are still a few idiots here and there, but those are not the guys I’m dealing with.”

“No, you are dealing with the crime bosses,” Claire replied, sighing. “It’s just... I’m worried.”

“I know you are,” he said. “But trust me, Claire, I’ll be fine. And in no time you’ll be safe, back into your place.”

“Back to work,” she corrected him. “I can’t stay cooped up anymore, I’m going crazy.” He laughed. “I can’t believe all these guys are still out there. I mean, how can they work with Superman flying all over?”

Matt faced her, incapable of seeing her face, but sensing her all the same. It was true that Superman was changing the world and what he’d done for the safety of Hell’s Kitchen was amazing. He couldn’t even remember the last time he heard gangs fighting, robberies, people being mugged at night or worse. And it wasn’t only in New York, but the entire world.

Entire Crime Families were arrested, corrupt politicians were exposed, murderers, rapists, drug dealers, weapon’s dealers, warlords, criminals all over the world were facing, for the first time, punishment for what they did. Just the other day, hundreds of pedophiles around the globe had been arrested, when proof of what they did, of the material they had, was given to the police forces
of several countries, hacked no doubt by Superman, even though his name wasn’t mentioned by the cops.

Finally they had someone to fear and the innocent had someone to save them.

But Super or not, he was one man. And criminals were adaptable like rats. Now they were confused, lost, but sooner rather than later they would learn how to commit crimes again. Some of them had already learned. Those were the ones Matt was facing right now.

“Tell me, Claire, why do we have to take our full course of antibiotics?” Matt asked, suddenly.

“What?” Claire asked, completely confused.

“Why do doctors say people have to finish the full course of antibiotics?” Matt repeated. She still didn’t answer, looking shocked at him. “Humor me.”

“Well,” she started, still not sure why he asked that, “the reason doctors recommend their patients to finish the prescribed dose of antibiotics is so there isn’t a risk of any bacteria surviving. Some people stop as soon as they feel better, thinking they are cured, but while most bacteria have indeed been killed, the most resistant ones are still there. And without competition from the others, they’ll reproduce and infect the patient again, but this time the patient will have a whole lot more resistant bacteria than before…”

Claire stopped talking, finally realizing why Matt asked her that question. She widened her eyes.

“Criminals in Hell’s Kitchen are just like that,” Matt said. “Right now, Superman is dealing with most of them, but the strongest, the most resilient, will hide and survive. They’ll avoid the storm. And when there is no more competition, no one between the city and them, they’ll be back, stronger than before. And Hell’s Kitchen will fester.” Matt opened Claire’s window. “That’s why I need to see this through.”

And with a last nod in her direction, Matt jumped out.

All the talking ended abruptly when James Wesley entered the room. He stopped for a moment, looking at the people inside. The one that was doing most of the talk was an elderly man dressed in an expensive suit, a man named Leland Owlsley, the one responsible for moving and hiding most of their money. By his side, visibly annoyed by all the chatter, were the Russian brothers, Anatoly and Vladimir Ranskahov; he couldn’t help but to notice that Anatoly was bruised, as if he had taken quite the beating recently. On the opposite side, standing regally, was the menacing figure of Nobu Yoshioka, leader of the Yakuza branch on New York, gazing at him with his watchful eyes. And finally, sitting on the only chair in the room, was Madame Gao, holding her cane, the very picture of a frail Chinese elder lady; despite her appearance, she was probably the most dangerous person in the room and in Hell’s Kitchen, save perhaps his own employer, and everybody there was quite aware of that.

“Finally!” Leland exclaimed. He made a grand gesture of pointing to the room they were in. “Look at this place! Look at all that mold! Another hour down here and we’ll begin grow that stuff in our lungs. The good news is that we are already so beneath the earth that we don’t actually have to pay for being buried if that happens.”

Leland was, of course, exaggerating, but surprisingly not by much. It truly was a dirty, old room, Wesley agreed, but it wasn’t like they were there without a reason.

“Can’t we ever meet in a nice place?” Leland continued to rant. “Freezing on top of a skyscraper
under construction and now the Devil’s basement? Can’t we compromise and get something in the middle? You know what, by this point I think I actually prefer the skyscraper, it’s easier to breathe.”

“Do you want to discuss our business in the sky, really?” Wesley asked, raising his eyebrows. “We might as well invite Superman to sit with us.”

The old lawyer sighed, but didn’t say anything else about the matter. He knew, as everyone there also did, that the reason they were meeting underground was to avoid eavesdroppers. Specifically, one eavesdropper that tended to fly around in a blue suit. The last thing they needed was for Superman to hear about their plans.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” Wesley said, bowing his head to Madame Gao, “especially to you, Madame Gao.” She accepted the apology gracefully. He turned to the Russians and extended a folder to them. “I brought something for you two.”

Vladimir grabbed the folder, looking into his eyes with an annoyed gaze that told Wesley exactly how much he was pissed off with him; he couldn’t help but to smirk.

“Leland finalized the paperwork yesterday,” Wesley explained, as the Russian brothers browsed the folder. “Prohaszka’s holdings in Kitchen Cab have been acquired and transferred via a third party to Veles Taxi. Your distribution infrastructure has just doubled.”

To the victors, the spoils, those were the rules in the underworld. Rigoletto and Prohaszka were the last of the big crime bosses in Hell’s Kitchen and what once belonged to them was now theirs. There was something fulfilling in devouring their rivals and acquiring their strength, Wesley thought.

“Tell your employer, we are grateful,” Anatoly said, his thick accent as respectful as a Russian mobster could be; his brother was not amused by this in the least, if the scalding look he sent Anatoly was any indication.

Wesley looked at Vladimir.

“I don’t think he really cares at the moment,” he said. “You were light again this week.”

The Russians glared at him, but they knew very well they were wrong; more importantly, everyone in the room knew it as well. Their alliance worked because each one pulled their own weight. None of them were there because they enjoyed each other’s company, they were there because as a united front they were stronger.

Madame Gao produced the heroin and the Russians distributed it. That was the agreement. Except that, despite the production continuing normally – which was a feat in on itself, with Superman destroying drug dealers everywhere –, the Russians were not moving the drugs to where they needed to be. And if one of them ceased to be useful, well, they had no business being there.

“We had a complication,” Vladimir said, simply.

Wesley looked at Anatoly’s bruised face; they all knew what kind of complication they had. The same complication they’d been having for a while now and still couldn’t fix it.

“The Masked Vigilante?!” Leland exclaimed, looking to all of them. “You still haven’t dealt with this? For Christ’s sake, it’s not like we are asking you to fight Superman!”

The Russians turned enraged to Leland, but Wesley was the first to reprimand him.
“We don’t say that name!” he barked.

Leland raised his hands. “I know, I know, I’m sorry. My bad. There are so many names I can’t say that it gets a bit confusing. I can’t say his name. I can’t say your employer’s name. Can I say my own name?”

“By all means,” Wesley sighed, tiredly. “Why don’t we go back to the skyscraper so you can yell your name to the skies? Maybe we’ll get lucky and no one will be listening.”

For all his bluster, Leland got very quiet, very fast. Instead of saying anything back, he just pretended to zip his lips shut and throw away an invisible key.

Madame Gao chuckled, amused. Everybody else wasn’t – he couldn’t tell if the Russians or Nobu was more annoyed by Leland.

Ignoring all that, Wesley turned to the Russians, moving on. “You assured us you were addressing this complication.”

Vladimir was visibly enraged at being berated. “Do you know what the Masked Man was asking? This fool who laid hands on my brother?”

“Not my concern,” Wesley replied, dismissive.

“It should be,” Anatoly said, serious. “He was asking about your employer. By name.”

It was only through years of professionalism that Wesley’s face didn’t show a fraction of the fury he was feeling at that moment. These two incompetent idiots were ruining everything. They didn’t have the luxury to make mistakes, not when there was a superpowered alien flying around New York, almost literally grabbing criminals by their necks and throwing them in jail.

Profit was already low with so many of their personnel behind bars. Drugs were extremely risky to make, move and sell. Guns were pretty much a dead business nowadays, since no gang wanted to be caught with them. People trafficking was, as well, almost finished. An empire as big as theirs needed money to keep itself and most of it was coming from legitimate businesses and smuggling, but that wasn’t feasible. They needed the drugs to be sold and they needed to do it quietly.

But of course, “quietly” didn’t seem to be a word that translated well from Russian.

“All the more reason to settle this,” he said, with a calm he wasn’t feeling. “You sneeze, we all catch a cold. He’s weakened your operation.”

“You think us weak?” Vladimir asked, as if challenging him.

“This isn’t personal, Vladimir. It’s business. Distribution of our product,” he said, looking at Madame Gao when he said that, “has been affected, which in turn is causing delays in other ventures. This is not acceptable.” Wesley smiled, opening his arms as if he was relaying wonderful news. “Fortunately,” Wesley continued, “my employer has agreed to help return you to solid footing.”

“How?” Anatoly asked.

“By aiding you in certain duties deemed vital to the continuation of the service—“

“He wants to take over,” Vladimir interrupted, turning his back at him as he spat on the ground.
“We value the service you provide, but clearly you need help providing them,” Wesley explained, not denying it.

“It’s one dude, how the hell is he not dead yet?” Leland exclaimed, suddenly. “Does he have a magic hammer or an iron suit we don’t know about?”

The Russians didn’t seem to like the question.

“He is not a common man,” Anatoly said, somber. “And we cannot deal with him as we normally do, now, can we?”

Which meant gunshots and explosions. That would definitely be a bad move. Sure, maybe the Masked Man would die – “maybe” being the key word –, but Superman would be upon them before they could celebrate. No, the times when they could pull stuff like that and get away with it were over.

Superman changed the rules of the game. Once the man who had the most guns was the strongest, now that man was just the most likely to be sent to jail. Leland was having to do near miracles to keep their money away from the alien’s advanced tech – most of their accounting books were literally back on paper, any register they had of their finances and projects kept far away from computers. Money laundering had to be perfectly executed, since there was no room for mistakes anymore.

And it wasn’t only the fact that they had to keep themselves hidden, it was the fact that most people weren’t as afraid of them as they had been before. Superman gave hope to the weak, the belief that all one had to do was call and he would be there. How can someone intimidate a person when all that was pretty much true?

“We almost had him, not too long ago,” Vladimir argued. “Our men almost killed him.”

“That was when you tried to kidnap that kid, wasn’t it?” Leland asked, chuckling. “Boy, was that a bad move or what?”

If looks could kill, Leland would be already dead.

“The alien interrupted,” Vladimir retorted. “What did you want us to do?”

“Maybe not kidnap a child?” Wesley suggested. “I know it probably sounds weird to you two, but there are other ways to solve problems. Your problem is the Masked Vigilante, not the alien.”

“Why not solve both?” Vladimir asked, turning to look at him with violent eyes. Wesley didn’t like the sound of that. “We all know about the Vulture who makes weapons with parts left from the Incident. I’ve seen them. I bet they could kill that flying son of a bitch and then we can just deal with the Masked Vigilante as we always dealt with problems.”

“Absolutely not!” Wesley exclaimed, immediately.

“Why? Too much of a coward?” Vladimir provoked.

“Think about what you’re saying,” Wesley retorted. “Do you really believe those guns can kill him? The General,” and they all knew he was talking about Zod, “had the same strength he did, plus the advanced tech and look at what happened to him! And you think you can do any better?”

Wesley approached, almost touching Vladimir.
“He is not to be challenged. He is not to be provoked. You think he spares his enemies because he is weak? He spares criminals because we are less than maggots to him. No fancy gun will change that.”

For a split second, Wesley was certain Vladimir would strike him, but before he could do anything Madame Gao started to speak in Mandarin; he looked at her immediately.

“Translator?” Leland asked, turning to him.

Wesley ignored him, still listening to Madame Gao; when she finished, he chuckled.

“An apt comparison, Madame Gao,” Wesley said, looking at the Russians. “Madame Gao was reminding me of an old story. Humans cannot fight the sea, but they can sail over it.”

“And? What does that mean?” Leland asked; as always, he lacked subtlety.

“It means,” Wesley answered to Leland, still looking at the Russians, “that the alien is a force of nature. He is the sea. We cannot fight him, beat him into submission, control him. But we can learn how to sail.” He smirked at Vladimir. “Forget these guns, use your head. You said you almost killed him? How did he escape? Where did he run to? Maybe you should ask your man these questions.”

“He is in a coma,” Anatoly said.

“Well, I’m sure we can find something to wake him up, so we can ask him a few questions,” Wesley suggested, nodding at Madame Gao; if there was any substance like that, she would know about it. “Anyway, solve this. We cannot keep dealing with these losses forever.”

Message relayed, message received; kill the Masked Man or you are out.

The Russians left the room with a last glare and Leland, dying to get out of that place, was right behind them. Wesley was suddenly under the gaze of two pairs of eyes that were capable of making even he nervous; he felt a little bit of sympathy for the Russians right now, because he was in a similar position.

With all the bravery he could muster, Wesley looked at Mr. Nobu and Madame Gao.

“Stark got in the way of the negotiation of the buildings you wanted, but rest assured, I’ll deal with it,” he said, fast. “One way or the other.”

There was a long moment of silence; then, finally, Nobu nodded and Madame Gao smiled.

Wesley breathed relieved and thanked both of them. It was true that they needed their help, but sometimes he couldn’t help but to think that things would be far safer if they hadn’t to deal with dangerous individuals such as them.

Karen Page was a woman with a mission. And that mission was to bring to justice the people involved in the murder of her friend, Daniel Fisher, the same people who had also framed her for killing him.

It didn’t matter she had been freed, pronounced innocent of any crime. It didn’t matter that Union Allied, the company where she and Daniel worked, and that was most likely responsible for this, had gone bankrupt. It didn’t matter that Karen had been threatened with legal action if she went forward with this. It didn’t matter that all that had almost cost her life, when an assassin tried to kill
her and the only reason she was still breathing had been because a Masked Vigilante saved her.

Nothing of that mattered, only justice. That was why Karen was meeting with Ben Urich, a legendary investigative reporter that worked for the New York Bulletin, the same reporter that had exposed Union Allied in a front page article and brought the whole company down with the information she had acquired.

“Did you look at it?” she asked, nervous, as they both sat at a table in a small coffeeshop.

The day before, Karen had found Ben and gave him all the information she had on the case, hoping he could help her to find out more about it.

“Yeah, I looked at it,” Ben answered, drinking his coffee.

He said nothing else.

“And?” Karen insisted.

“And,” he continued, slowly, “it’s a story I heard before. Company gets caught in a scandal, files for bankruptcy, then quietly restructures under a new name.”

No, that wasn’t the story Karen wanted him to focus at!

“They killed Daniel Fisher,” she said, leaning over the table. “They tried to kill me!”

And the fact that she wasn’t dead was pretty much a miracle. Karen never was a religious person, but sometimes, when things like that happened, she wondered if there wasn’t anyone watching over her; then she remembered that, despite the fact that she was alive, innocent people had died and no one had saved them.

Karen’s life had changed completely not too long ago. She used to work as a secretary in the financial department at Union Allied, the company that was overseeing the bulk of the government contracts for the reconstruction of Hell’s Kitchen after the Incident. The Battle of New York had transformed completely the business, bringing new owners, new grants, new contracts and an almost unlimited stream of money.

And Union Allied had benefited from every dollar of it.

As secretary of the chief accountant, one of Karen’s jobs was to coordinate the pension claims for the company, so when she received an email with an attached file called “Pension Master”, she didn’t think twice about opening it. Except the email apparently wasn’t meant for her, because when she opened it, instead of a pension fund, Karen saw only an obscene amount of money.

It was still being designated as company pension and it was being constantly adjusted, money coming in and going out, but it most definitely wasn’t the company pension; not with that absurd amount of money.

Naively, Karen made the mistake of confronting her boss, Mr. McClintock, asking him what that file was. Back then it didn’t even cross her mind the danger she was in, she was just trying to do the right thing. Maybe her boss was the only one involved, embezzling or something, and it was her duty to do something. He denied, of course, laughed it off, told her that the file was just a theoretical model they were screwing around with, but she was sure something was wrong. So she decided to talk to Daniel Fisher, a colleague that worked in the legal department, someone she thought nice. They went out for drinks, she told him what she found and then she blacked out.
Next thing she knows, Karen woke up in her apartment covered in blood, with Daniel Fisher’s body by her side.

She had to relax her hands not to break the coffee mug and take a deep breath. They’d killed him because of her. Because she tried to do the right thing. They tried to frame her, managed to send her to jail for a night, and even sent a prison guard to try to kill her during the night, so they could all pretend she committed suicide.

Daniel was married, he had a little boy, and he was killed simply as way to scare her.

If it weren’t for Matt Murdock and for Foggy Nelson, Karen would be dead or in jail for a crime she didn’t commit. They appeared as if sent by a guardian angel, represented her, got her out of jail and even protected her. It was their first case, but they knew she was innocent and they stood by her all the way, even going as far as giving her a job at Nelson and Murdock.

But they weren’t the only ones responsible for her still being alive. The Masked Vigilante of Hell’s Kitchen had also saved her.

The reason the ones in control of Union Allied didn’t simply kill her, like they did with Daniel, was because Karen made a copy of the file. The plan was to frame her and let her rot in jail, but they didn’t count on some inconsistences on the crime scene, nor did they count with Matt and Foggy appearing to represent her so fast. They adjusted and tried to forge a suicide, but that also failed.

So they sent another assassin, a man named Rance – probably the same man who killed Daniel –, when she went back to recover the copied file in her apartment.

Karen had no doubt that if the Masked Vigilante hadn’t appeared, she would be dead. But he did. He confronted the assassin, defeated him and took the file to the very man sitting in front of her, Ben Urich. The legendary reporter took that information and wrote a first page article, exposing everything. Union Allied filed for bankruptcy, her boss, McClintock was arrested, and Karen was left alone, since everything she knew was already public knowledge.

But she knew that the true guilty people, the owners of all that money, were still out there. And now that Union Allied had been buried, they were reforming under another company, so they could continue to commit the same crimes. Karen couldn’t allow that to happen.

“I’m still a little unclear on one point,” Ben Urich finally said, snapping Karen out of her memories. “You say here that Rance assaulted you in your apartment. And a man in a black mask saved your life?”

Karen didn’t need to be a specialist to hear the skepticism on his tone.

“Yes,” she answered, “but he just… He came out of nowhere.”

“And you’d never seen him before?”

“No.”

“Stranger things, right?” Urich said, shrugging.

He didn’t believe her, Karen realized. She didn’t know why that hurt so much.

“Well, what about Rance?” Karen insisted. If he didn’t believe her, they maybe he could just take a look at the evidence. “Do you really believe that he just up and hung himself in jail? That guard tried to do the same thing to me. Why don’t you ask him?”
“Farnum?” Urich asked, saying the name of the guard. “He’s dead,” Karen got pale. “Ate the barrel of his gun in his basement. And your old boss, McClintock? Overdosed on pills or some such. You seeing a pattern here, Miss Page?”

Karen felt sick, but more than that, she felt furious.

“Then why isn’t anyone looking into this?” she exclaimed.

Ben Urich looked at her as if she were a child. He leaned closer.

“You don’t understand how lucky you are,” he whispered, staring at her. “Count the angels on the head of a pin and move on.”

She couldn’t do that, these people couldn’t just get away with this.

“So they just shuffle some papers and all this disappears?” Karen said, outraged.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Urich retorted.

“Oh, don’t bullshit me!” Karen exclaimed. “A construction company is brick and mortar, literally. You cannot just shift cranes and trailers and office equipment like you can numbers on a page. There has to be a trail if everything is being liquidated!”

Ben Urich kept staring at her, in silence. Then he put his mug down.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

Karen could only look, shocked and lost, as Urich got up.

“What?” she asked. “So that’s it?

He leaned closer. “Stories like these are built on sources, Miss Page. Credible sources. I did some digging into your, uh… Past activities.”

She couldn’t meet his eyes, feeling ashamed and small. But somewhere inside her there was still courage, because Karen stared back at him.

“Well, I did some digging too. I read every big story with your byline. The VA Kickbacks, toxic runoff, the Teachers Union Scandal… Hell, you pretty much brought down the Italian mob back when I was in diapers. What ever happened to that reporter, Mr. Urich?

Urich was in silence for a long time, looking down, as if physically hurt by her words.

“He got old,” he finally said, “And a hell of a lot less stupid.”

Karen could only watch as Ben Urich left, too disappointed to do anything.

Ben Urich walked to the coffeeshop’s door, feeling sick in his stomach. Despite what he said, despite what he found on Miss Page’s past, he knew she was telling the truth. And she was there, after being framed and almost murdered, asking him for help.

And he was turning his back on her.

There were good reasons for that, Ben told himself. Mitchel Ellison had been very clear about what kind of stories he wanted to print in the New York Bulletin and that wasn’t one of them;
investigative journalism didn’t sell newspapers. Back in the day, Ben wouldn’t think twice about disobeying him, but he couldn’t risk his job, not when his sick wife needed the money so much.

More importantly, he knew what kind of danger he would be getting into.

Miss Page was right, he was one of the responsible for exposing the Italian mob, for bringing them down, but things were different now. Back then, the crime had rules. The mobsters were ruthless, but there were lines they didn’t cross, limits. These new players had no rules, no limits, nothing holding them down. And they were making a move on the city.

Old players were disappearing. Rigoletto, an old Italian mobster, had “retired in pieces”, according to his sources. Prohaszka had been bashed in the head with a bowling ball until there was nothing left. Those murders weren’t coincidental, they were takeovers.

All that without mentioning the trail of corpses these new guys left behind. In addition to Rigoletto and Prohaszka there were Miss Page’s coworker, Daniel Fisher; her boss, McClintock; the prison guard that tried to kill her, Clyde Farnum; the assassin Rance; the hitman that killed Prohaszka, John Healy…

People naively believed that Superman and the Avengers were keeping the world safe and maybe up there, in the skies fighting aliens, it was true. But down there, in the streets, hidden behind shadows and smoke, crime still thrived.

Karen Page couldn’t begin to understand how lucky she was to get out of all this alive. She suffered, yes, but compared to what these people could do to her, she was fine. She had her whole life in front of her and if she closed her eyes then maybe, just maybe, she could move on and be happy.

But he knew she wouldn’t. He looked into her eyes and he saw himself. With or without his help, Karen Page would try to bring these people to justice. And death would be a kindness if she made a mistake.

Sighing, Ben stopped as soon as he crossed the door. He couldn’t allow that to happen. Turning back, he got into the coffeeshop again and walked to her table. Miss Page didn’t even notice, too stunned – and probably disappointed in him – to do anything else than stare at her coffee.

Fidgeting with his jacket, Urich got a two-day old New York Bulletin newspaper from his pocket and tossed it on the table, right in front of her. She jumped back, startled.

“If you try to do this alone, you’re going to die, Miss Page,” he said, being as direct as he could. “I can’t help you, I’m too old for that, but maybe he can.”

Following his eyes, Miss Page looked at the newspaper, her eyes moving as she read the article printed on the page. It was a small freelance piece, about a politician taking bribes, but it was a good one – something that had actually made the politician in question lose his job and face charges. But the reason Urich was pointing out that wasn’t because of the story or the consequences of it.

It was because of a previous article that reporter had written: the one that exposed the Mutant Factory and all those involved.

“This kid is good,” he explained. “He’s not me, but he knows what he is doing. Got a good head over his shoulders. If you’re going through with this, Miss Page, find him first.”

Saying this, before she had the chance to even ask anything, Ben Urich left.
Jessica Jones hated hospitals. The smell, by itself, was enough to make her stomach turn. She had spent too much time inside one and if she never had to step in a hospital again, she would consider herself lucky. Unfortunately, Jessica liked money a little more than she hated hospitals and the man she was looking for had been admitted there recently, if her sources were correct.

And apparently they were, she realized, when she looked through the little window on the door and met Turk Barrett’s eyes; Jessica was quite happy to notice that he had the good sense to look scared.

“Hey, Turk, fancy meeting you here,” she greeted him, as soon as she opened the door.

By the look on his face, Turk would’ve tried to run if he weren’t currently stuck to the bed, his broken leg raised in the air. Jessica had no idea what happened, but he did look like he’d been run over by a truck.

“Oh, shit, what are you doing here?” he asked, his swollen face turning to her.

“Why, I came to visit my old friend, of course,” Jessica answered, sarcastically, pulling a chair closer to his bed and sitting down. “Or, you know, I came to find you, again, so you can pay for your son’s expenses as a good father would.”

“I’m not a good father,” he retorted. “And that bitch is spending way too much for a kid so small.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. It went without saying that Turk wasn’t a good father, that was why she was paid almost monthly by the mother of the baby to find him and force him to pay child support. Jessica barely remembered how she got that job for the first time – she broke apart a fight between them in a bar or something, she was too drunk to recall –, but it was good for her to have a fixed amount of money every month.

And slapping Turk around until he paid was fun, so there was that too.

“Oh, you don’t have to remind me you are scum, Turk, I’ll never forget it,” Jessica replied. “Now, the money.”

“Bitch, do I look like I have money? Look at me!”

Ignoring the “bitch” commentary for now, Jessica did as he asked, her eyes moving from injury to injury. She was wrong, it wasn’t a truck, that much was clear, unless the guy pissed off a Transformer, because the marks on his face were definitely from fists. Eyes swollen, broken nose, parted lips, broken hand, broken leg…

“Who the hell did you piss off, Turk?” Jessica whispered, actually amazed by the amount of punishment he took. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do shit! I’m legit now!”

Jessica snorted. “Yeah, a legit criminal. We both know you’re a crook, Turk, you don’t have to lie to me.”

A small crook, yes, but a crook nevertheless. Usually, Jessica wouldn’t give two shits about it, but Turk crossed the line when he tried to kidnap people for the Mutant Factory.

“How are you out so quickly, by the way?” Jessica asked. “You confessed to the cops you kidnapped some people, didn’t you?”
“I tried to kidnap some people, I didn’t succeed,” Turk corrected her. “The charges weren’t so bad, they let me go with a slap on the wrist.”

“Bullshit,” Jessica said, immediately. “You were arrested before, the cops aren’t that stupid.”

“No, but some of them tend to close their eyes when someone waves a bunch of cash in front of them.” Jessica raised her eyebrows and he understood immediately what she got from that. “Not me! I don’t have money. But the Russians do and I was a valued expert in my line of business. They got me out.”

“Were they the ones who did this to you?” Jessica asked.

He snorted; and immediately regretted, because it caused him pain. “Please, this was that damn Masked Vigilante. Son of a bitch caught me by surprise, otherwise I would’ve fucked him up.”

“Sure… Wait, what Masked Vigilante?” she asked.

Turk looked shocked at her. “You didn’t hear about Hell’s Kitchen newest vigilante? And you call yourself a PI?”

Jessica gave him a fake smile; then poked his ribs.

“Ouch! Damn it, don’t do that!”

“What about this Masked Vigilante?” she repeated. “Who is this guy?”

“If anybody knew, he would be dead. That’s why they call him ‘Masked’.” Jessica’s gaze made him rethink his level of sass quite quickly. “Look, I don’t know much. Nobody does. He’s been making life difficult for the Russians, fucking with their cargos, beating everyone with his bare hands. Doesn’t kill anybody, but that’s pretty much his one rule, from what I’ve seen. He even put a guy in a coma. You-Know-Who is already putting everyone in a difficult position and this guy isn’t helping.”

She would love to see Clark’s face when she told him criminals in New York were referring to him as “You-Know-Who”, but Jessica did her best to ignore that for the moment.

“Why did he beat you?” Jessica asked. “I thought you were ‘legit’ now.”

“I am. Mostly. But he wasn’t there for me, he was there because I worked for the Russians before. He wanted to know about them.”

“He is gunning for the Russians?”

“He is gunning for everyone, but he has to start somewhere,” Turk said.

“Huh… Who would’ve thought?”

A vigilante beating people up in Hell’s Kitchen, going after mobsters with his bare hands. That didn’t happen every day. The last person who actually challenged organized crime in New York was Clark, but he was Superman, so that didn’t count.

“Anyway, this guy is as good as dead,” Turk continued. “The Russians won’t forget this.”

“Maybe,” Jessica shrugged. “Or maybe he will kick their asses too. I mean, look at you. He did a pretty good job. But that doesn’t concern me, I’m not here to laugh at you, I’m here to take your money. Pay up.”
“Come on, look at me!” Turk exclaimed, again. “I don’t have insurance! Do you know how expensive an aspirin is? Cut me some slack, I’ll pay next month.”

Jessica wasn’t listening anymore, she had already spotted his wallet over the nightstand. Ignoring his struggles, she got up, grabbed it, took every single bill she found inside, and forced the leather wallet into Turk’s mouth, not very gently.

“You can’t stop being a father for a month, Turk, it’s a full-time job,” Jessica said, turning to leave. “See you next month!”

When she left the hospital, Jessica had already grabbed her phone.

“Clark, you’re not going to believe the shit I just heard.”

New chapter! Hope you guys like it!
Chapter 33 – From Russia With Love

The only sound in the dark hospital room was the beeping of the machines keeping Semyon alive, stuck in the coma ever since he crossed the path of the Masked Man. Anatoly and Vladimir both stopped in front of him, their eyes fixed on their fallen comrade. The brothers were accustomed to violence, both part of this life since they were born. They had seen truly horrible things in Russia and some even worse in the US.

Still, seeing Semyon looking like he lost a fight against a train gave them pause. It looked like every bone in his body was broken, suspended and held together by metal.

“My god,” Anatoly breathed.

Who the hell was this Masked Man? Anatoly himself traded punches with him and lost, luckily not as bad as Semyon had, but he had been defeated and he escaped at the last moment. They’d seen man after man, hardened Russian enforcers, share the same fate. Was this Masked Man even human at all? He felt like a man, like flesh and blood, but could a mere mortal do something like this?

“Give me the kit,” Vladimir asked, interrupting his musings, his eyes still on Semyon.

Anatoly did as he asked, giving his brother a small flask and a syringe; Vladimir stared at the ominous yellow liquid inside the flask for a second. They had no idea what that thing was, but Madame Gao assured them it would wake Semyon from his coma so they could ask their questions.

Neither of them expected Semyon would live much past that, not after he was injected with that thing.

“He’d understand,” Vladimir said, glancing at Anatoly, before grabbing Semyon’s arm.

Anatoly doubted he would, but they did not have many options right now. Whatever this Masked Man was, he couldn’t be stopped. No matter how many men they sent, it was never enough. Of course, they couldn’t very well start shooting everyone in sight, that would draw Superman to them and make an already complicated situation worse, but surely 10 or 15 men armed with knives, bats, pipes and whatever they could find should be enough, right?

Except it wasn’t and Anatoly and Vladimir simply didn’t see things improving. And for their own good, things needed to improve. The Masked Man by himself was already a big problem, but the biggest problem they had was appearing weak in a line of business where that was suicide.

Fisk, Madame Gao and Nobu would not tolerate their mistakes for much longer and when they reached their limit, it would be over for Anatoly and Vladimir.

They needed to find another way, they needed an edge; what Semyon possibly knew could be this edge. Semyon was the one that got closest to finishing off the Masked Man, the only one who successfully laid a trap that almost killed him. The Masked Man escaped half-dead and Semyon was the one who followed the trail of blood.
Anatoly would like very much to know where that trail would lead them.

Without ceremony, Vladimir began to pull the tubes and wires connected to Semyon, the syringe already ready with Madame Gao’s concoction.

“Let’s hope this thing works,” Anatoly said. “Because if it doesn’t…”

“Then what?” Vladimir retorted, glaring at him. “What are you so afraid of?”

Anatoly inhaled deeply. He loved his brother, he really did. He would kill and he would die for him without thinking twice, but sometimes he had to hold himself back not to smack him around; good thing Vladimir was the one with the famous bad temper and not him. At the same time that the fire burning inside Vladimir made him such a powerful man, it was also his weakness. To Vladimir, as long as they were together, nothing could defeat them. Masked Man, Fisk, Madame Gao, Nobu… Not even Superman and the Avengers. It didn’t matter.

He knew that wasn’t true. He knew their situation was one step away of being irreversible. He knew that they had to tread lightly. Because if they couldn’t solve this Masked Man problem, Fisk would make them pay and they would count themselves happy if they got out alive, let alone with a portion of their business.

Opening his eyes, his anger successfully controlled, Anatoly stared at his brother.

“We were in that hellhole of a prison for three years,” he said, raising three fingers in the air. “From Princes of Moscow to shitting in a bucket. I promised myself back then that if we ever got free, we’d never lose what we had again. Especially not to pride.”

His brother held Anatoly’s shoulder, his eyes fixed on his.

“Pride was what got us where we are,” Vladimir answered. “Even when we had nothing, we at least had that. And now you want us to cast it away? To bow and scrape to these sons of bitches who had it easy their whole lives?! We went through hell itself to get here!”

“And I’m afraid to go back,” Anatoly whispered.

He would never admit that to anyone but his brother, but it was true. Anatoly feared going back. Sometimes he thought if it was worth it. They were rich, they had power, why should they risk everything to get a bit more?

From all their sins, pride was more likely to be their downfall.

Vladimir put the syringe down and approached his brother.

“We are never going back!” Vladimir promised. “And we will never lower our heads. Not as long as we are together.” He paused, looking into his eyes. “Are we together, brother?”

Anatoly grabbed his brother’s hands. “Always.”

He smiled and nodded, taking the syringe again. And without hesitation, he pierced Semyon’s heart with it, injecting Gao’s mixture.

For a few seconds, absolutely nothing happened. Then Semyon got up screaming, his eyes wide with terror.

“Semyon, it’s us!” Anatoly said, trying to call him down. “Breathe. You’re safe.”
“Tell us about the man who did this to you,” Vladimir asked.

Semyon looked at them, eyes still wide, his face black and blue and swollen.

“The Devil!” he said, incoherently. “He’s the Devil… Devil!”

Anatoly and Vladimir looked at each other, neither able to mask the apprehensiveness in their eyes. They hoped Semyon would calm down and tell them what they needed to know.

Matt smiled as he approached his office, hearing Foggy and Karen talking. His buddy, as always, was cracking jokes and trying – very badly, Matt noticed – to flirt, which mostly consisted of self-deprecative commentaries and weird, but kind, compliments to Karen.

Karen, he realized, thought the whole thing cute; which was better than creepy, of course, but not quite where Foggy was aiming yet. He would have to give him some tips.

Arriving at the door, Matt opened it, swinging his cane in front of him as if he needed it. The voices stopped for a moment when they looked at him and he just waited, knowing what was coming.

“My god, are you okay, Matt?” Karen asked, worried, going to him.

“What happened to your face?” Foggy asked, not nearly as tactful as Karen, but just as worried.

The truth was that a Russian got lucky and hit him with a baseball bat, right in the face; not as terrible as it could’ve been, but strong enough to leave him with quite the bruise. Obviously, Matt couldn’t tell them that.

“I ran into a post,” Matt explained, chuckling. “Got distracted, you know how it is.”

“Did you go to the hospital?” Karen asked, lightly touching his face, still incredibly concerned for him.

“Yes, someone already took a look at it.” It was only a partial lie. Claire was, after all, a nurse.

“You gotta be careful, buddy,” Foggy said, also getting very close to look at his wounded face. “Womankind will never recover if you permanently damage your pretty face.” He paused for a moment. “Might be good for me, though.”

Matt rolled his eyes as Karen laughed.

“Sadly for you, it will heal,” Matt answered, walking to his desk. “So, how are we? Still close to bankruptcy?”

“Always,” Foggy agreed. “But we have some good news. Josie finally paid us.”

“For the grand reopening?” Matt asked, smiling.

“Yep. Josie’s Bar is finally back on business!” Foggy celebrated. “We should totally go there tonight.”

“Is the water complication fixed?” he asked, uncertain.

“Well, it should be,” Foggy answered, hesitantly, “but just to be safe, let’s stick with alcohol.”
“Fine by me.”

“Josie’s Bar?” Karen finally asked, barely following the conversation.

Foggy was happy to explain. “The sleaziest, most awesome bar in Hell’s Kitchen. It was recently closed because of a, um, problem with their water supply, but after a few renovations they are finally reopening. Why don’t you come with us?”

“Sounds good. Tonight?”

“Yeah.” Foggy was very happy now, but he suddenly realized his dazed smile was beginning to unsettle everyone, because he went on, looking at Matt. “Aside from that, I think I got us a few new cases. Some people are being illegally forced out of their homes. Mostly elderly people and immigrants, you know, easy targets because they don’t understand the law, but I think we can help. I’m visiting some of them later, offering our services.”

Right thing to do, no doubt, but Matt doubted they would get paid at all. Probably cooked meals and maybe fruit. But, well, a job was a job.

“I could help,” Karen added, immediately. “You know, a lot of them probably won’t speak English and I’m fluent in Spanish.”

“That would be handy,” Foggy said, smiling at her. “Unfortunately, my second language is fairly rare in the US.”

“Which one?” Karen asked.


“He learned to get closer to a girl in college,” Matt summarized.

“Not so long, apparently,” Foggy smiled, completely unashamed. “So yeah, I would gladly take any help you can offer.”

“Meet you there?” Karen asked, grabbing her purse. “I have some quick stuff to do, but I’ll be there.”

“Sure, see you later.”

Foggy stared at her the whole time, until the door was closed.

“Ah, crap, I’m in trouble, Matt,” Foggy admitted. “I’ve been struck by the Cupid again, I think.”

“You’re lucky those arrows aren’t lethal, Foggy, otherwise you would be dead,” Matt retorted, smirking.

“No, this is different! I think we really have a connection, you know?”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Well, Matt, if you weren’t blind it would be quite easy for you to figure it out yourself,” Foggy answered. “On a scale of 0 to 10, Karen is a solid 11. Whereas I am, stretching, a 4.”

Matt laughed. “You’re not ugly, Foggy.”

“Says the blind man!” He got closer. “Really, go ahead, feel my face if you dare. But I’m not
responsible for any nightmares.”

He rolled his eyes. Matt didn’t need to see to know Foggy was severely exaggerating this, as he did everything else.

“Look, Foggy, why do you like Karen? Is it because she is a ‘solid 11’?”

“Of course not! I mean, that’s not a deal breaker, but it’s not why I like her. She is kind, smart, driven… Really, what’s not to like?” he said, dreamily, then he shook his head. “But girls like that don’t go for guys like me. They go for, well, guys like you. You damned, beautiful bastard.”

Matt rolled his eyes again. “You not being fair, Foggy. If you truly believe Karen is more than just beautiful, then you should trust her to see past beauty alone. She is smart enough for that, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is, but… I don’t know, Matt,” Foggy sighed. “It’s like the Punjabi-situation all over again. I open my heart, get out of my comfort zone, and then she steps all over it.”

“First of, the Punjabi-situation was creepy as hell. Don’t do that again. Second, you’re not the same boy you were back then. Now you’re a successful lawyer, with your own firm, life experience and, above all, confidence.”

“Do I really have confidence? I’m not that sure…”

“You do!” Matt insisted. “Maybe not so much when it comes to women, but you do. Just… Pretend this is a case. Karen is the jury and you have to convince her to date you.”

“Do I have any evidence to prove my point?”

“You don’t need evidence, you just need to make the jury believe in you.”

“Our profession sounds really bad when you put it like that, Matt,” Foggy mentioned.

“I know,” Matt admitted.

“But you presented an interesting point-of-view. I shall try.” He stopped for a second, then turned to Matt again. “What do you mean the Punjabi-situation was creepy? I thought it was cute.”

“You stalked the girl to language classes, Foggy. You actually learned to speak Punjabi.”

“It shows dedication,” Foggy insisted.

“Trust me, it really doesn’t.”

Foggy frowned. “What do you know, anyway? You had your own college-romance with that Greek girl and I was left alone. What was I to do?”

This time Matt was the one who frowned. There were several ways to describe his relationship with Elektra, but “college-romance” wasn’t one of them.

“Let’s just… Work,” Matt said.

“Fine by me,” Foggy agreed, happily. “Hey, you think we’ll meet the Avengers in Josie’s tonight? I kinda miss them, they are cool people.”

“I’m pretty sure they have more important stuff to do, Foggy,” Matt answered, opening a book in
“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Foggy admitted.

“Look at the size of this fucking TV!” Jessica exclaimed, impressed, when an entire wall of the apartment opened itself to reveal a TV almost the size of a cinema screen; the light coming from it was enough to illuminate the entire apartment.

Clark was speechless. His apartment’s renovation was finally over and he went back to it with Jessica to see how it was; except that, by the amount of changes Tony’s crew made, it could very well be another apartment entirely. An apartment that would probably belong to a very rich person, 150 years in the future, by the amount of tech all around.

The changes started right at the door. Clark fished his key out of his pocket to open it and only then he realized that there was no keyhole anywhere. He frowned, before noticing a retina scanner and a fingerprint scanner that most definitely weren’t there before; hesitantly, he approached them both and after a pair of blue glows, the door unlocked itself, sounding not unlike a bank’s vault door. Weird, but he could live with that, he supposed.

That was when they truly witnessed what Tony had done.

Simply put, Clark didn’t recognize his apartment anymore. There wasn’t a single thing left from his old place, not even the floor, the ceiling or the number of walls. His old wooden flooring, basically rotten and so dirty it was permanently stained, was gone, replaced by some expensive ceramic; a quick x-ray scan revealed a lot of tech imbued in it, but he had no idea what for.

The ceiling was repaired, the hole where his upstairs neighbor could peek through was closed and the whole thing was freshly painted, almost glowing. The walls, also, were painted, no longer exhibiting the non-removable stains all over it, and two of them were simply taken down to make his living room bigger. The windows were way larger now – more than enough for someone to fly through them, he noticed – and the glass was no longer the yellowish dirty thing from before, but some kind of darker material, no doubt made for privacy. Another x-ray scan revealed that the walls were reinforced now, probably even bulletproof, as were the windows, ceiling and flooring.

What really caught their attention, however, were the furniture and the appliances. Whereas before he had a fridge that might very well have existed since the Soviet Union, now everything in the apartment seemed something out of Star Trek’s Enterprise. Everything was chromed, glowing and even his cabinets had touchscreens for some reason; what did they do, inform him how many plates they had inside?

And then there was the TV: a colossal monstrosity that could possibly blind a human being, taking an entire wall of the apartment.

Clark was without words for a long moment.

“We have to watch Firefly on that,” Jessica exhaled, her eyes wide, breaking the silence. Well, she healed fast, so she probably wouldn’t go blind that easily, but was there really her reaction to all this?

“Oh my god, what is this?!” Clark exclaimed, finally regaining his voice. “How much did Tony spend here, 10 million dollars?”

He would’ve been freaking out badly if Tony hadn’t essentially done all this behind his back; as it was, he was still freaking out, thinking about how much money he had thrown away to do all that,
but not as much as he would normally. Clark called that progress.

“12 million dollars, approximately, sir,” Kelex answered, projecting her drone form in the middle of the apartment somehow, not through Liquid Geo, but like a blue hologram, Jarvis’ style; Clark and Jessica simply watched, shocked. “This place was hardwired for some sort of AI, sir. I have successfully uploaded myself on it.” There was a pause. “All systems functioning as they should, no bugs detected anywhere.”

“12 million dollars…” Clark repeated; his eyelids were shaking slightly.

“So you’re like, part of the apartment now?” Jessica asked, apparently not caring one bit about the money spent, unable to keep the distaste out of her voice.

“That is correct,” Kelex answered, not bothered or not even realizing Jessica’s apparent dislike. “Mr. Stark installed sensors everywhere. I can, for example, calculate the exact weight of the furniture on the flooring and even the temperature of your skin.”

“That’s not creepy at all…” Jessica whispered, no longer as excited.

“I am glad you think so, miss Jones, because I have also uploaded myself to your apartment,” Kelex added.

“Motherfu–”

“Okay, Kelex, we’ll talk later,” Clark interrupted, holding Jessica before she could break his new apartment. After an investment of 12 million dollars, the last thing he needed was an angry Jessica inside it. “Just… Give us some privacy. You know, no recording or peeking private stuff.”

“Oh, is that a problem, sir?” Kelex asked, almost as if she was surprised. “I assumed since you can see through walls and hear everything happening in the building that there were no secrets to be kept.”

Jessica stared at him with livid eyes.

“We’ll talk later, Kelex!”

“Very well, sir, I can sense you are distressed.” Just like that, Kelex faded.

There was a moment of silence.

“I swear to god, Clark, if that thing records me in the bathroom I will–“

“Kelex won’t, she knows how to respect boundaries, don’t worry,” Clark said, fast. “So, everything seems nice, right? Want to see yours?” he asked, trying to change the subject. He would worry about Tony later.

Jessica breathed deeply, calming herself. “We’ll see it in a minute, let’s just sit down for a while. Saying this, she simply dropped upon one of the new couches, groaning in pleasure. “Holy shit, the stuff these rich assholes can buy sure are nice…”

Clark watched her lose herself in her little world for a moment, but when it became clear that she wouldn’t restart the conversation, he said:

“So… What was it that you were telling me before we arrived?”

“Right! I was telling you about what Turk told me, right? The vigilante guy,” Jessica remembered,
opening her eyes filled with glee. “Calm down, You-Know-Who, I’ll tell you what I found out in a minute.”

He suddenly recalled vividly how happy she was on that conversation they had a couple of days ago, by phone, where Clark learned that for some reason, criminals were referring to him as You-Know-Who and refusing to say his name, as if he would appear out of thin air if they did it. Maybe he needed to sit down too.

“You know this is nonsense, right?” Clark asked, almost forgetting what he was saying when he felt the no doubt incredibly expensive couch; if sitting on a cloud was possible, it would probably feel like that. He opened his eyes after a moment, trying very hard to continue his thought. “I don’t just fly to wherever someone says my name. How would that work? I mean, when people scream ‘Superman’ very loudly, in distress, I’ll probably hear it, but I won’t show up every time someone says it.”

“Let the little shits believe it, it’s funnier that way,” Jessica said, smirking. “Things get real peaceful when criminals are scared like that.”

That didn’t sound right to Clark.

“I don’t like to know my name inspires fear,” he admitted.

“It doesn’t, at least not on good people,” Jessica answered, putting her feet over his lap as she laid down without a care in the world. “Those kinds of people, though? The only language they understand is fear. Fear of the police, fear of the Avengers, fear of you. And as long as they’re afraid, they won’t hurt innocents.”

She wasn’t wrong, he knew that, but even then it bothered him. He was supposed to inspire hope, not fear, to guide people to a better path. Clark sighed; maybe it would take time for that to happen, but he truly hoped it would someday.

“And what about the Masked Man?” Clark asked, putting the conversation back on track. “What did you find about him?”

By the grin on her face, she definitely had something good. Jumping up, she grabbed her backpack and picked a bundle of pictures and notes.

“Oh, this and that,” Jessica answered, tossing all that to Clark. “Gotta tell you, it wasn’t exactly difficult, the guy basically left a trail of assholes with broken bones behind.”

Jessica was exaggerating, but not a lot, Clark realized as he began to look at the pictures and notes. Photos of people beaten to unconsciousness, limbs twisted in weird angles, alleys and places by the docks with blood stains all over it, telling what was, without a doubt, a grim story.

“Jesus… Who is this guy?” Clark whispered, truly shocked.

“No idea, but he can sure fight,” Jessica answered, happily, probably misinterpreting Clark’s horror by admiration. “This Masked Man isn’t beating one or two people he takes on by surprise, Clark, he is facing 10, 12 guys at the same time and leaving them like that. Turk would tell you, he knows what he’s doing.”

Clark turned to her. “You think this is cool? Look at them! The fact that this guy didn’t kill anyone yet is a miracle.”

Jessica frowned. “I’m not one for killing people, but I wouldn’t exactly shed tears for these guys if
one of them dropped dead, I’ll tell you that much.” He widened his eyes at her words. Jessica
sighed and grabbed the photos out of his hands, picking the top one. “See this guy here? Know
who this is? Name is Thomas Ridley. Small fry, been in some gangs, but never actually became
someone important, so the police didn’t really care much about him. But he does like to steal shit
and, being the cowardly turd he is, he prefers to steal from women and children.”

He didn’t realize it yet, but he was holding his breath for some reason. Jessica went on.
“Until, one day, something must’ve gone wrong, because a woman and her two-year-old daughter
were found dead in an alley where he used to mug people.” Jessica shrugged. “Police took him in,
but there was no proof. People say he walked out of the station laughing.” Jessica looked at
Thomas Ridley photo. “Well, he sure as hell can’t laugh now, not with his jaw broken like that.
And I doubt he’s going to walk again if those knees pointed backwards have anything to say about
it.

She shuffled through the pictures and grabbed another one.
“Now, this one is interesting too. Part of the Russian mob, you can see by the tattoos. This was
before you started flying around, of course, but this shining member of society liked to rob banks.
Combining cops and civilians he probably has about 2 dozen kills. Innocent people, people with
families and all their lives in front of them, until they crossed this son of a bitch’s path. Until a
week ago nobody had a clue where he was, until he suddenly appears right in front of a police
station, beaten so badly that he most likely will never be able to twitch his fingers and fire a gun
anymore.”

Clark didn’t know what to say in response to that, but Jessica wasn’t finished yet. She grabbed
another photo, a guy on a hospital bed, so bruised that he could barely tell the color of his skin.

“This one is my favorite,” she announced. “Harold Harkin, family man, happily married with a
beautiful wife, proud father of three cute little girls. Successful businessman, not rich, but not poor
either, hard worker American. People all over the country were outraged when he was found like
that, because if a man like him wasn’t safe, who was? Well, the outrage ended quickly when the
police found out exactly how close he was to his little girls…”

“God…” Clark whispered, tossing the photo down, disgusted by the very sight of the man.

“None of these people are nice guys, Clark,” Jessica said after a few seconds, seriously. “I
checked, believe me. Some are worse than others, but they’re all trash and I want you to know
this.”

“Why?” Clark asked.

“Because I’m not stupid and I know you’ll look for this Masked Man. Knowing you, you’ll find
him sooner or later, sooner if you’re actually looking for him. And I want you to keep in mind
what I showed you today. Sure, he might go overboard a few times, but he saved a lot of innocent
people, he hasn’t hurt anyone that didn’t have it coming and he hasn’t killed anybody.”

“So far,” Clark added.

Jessica shrugged. “Like I said, I wouldn’t care if it happened to someone like that,” she said,
pointing at Harold Harkin’s picture.

“It’s not right, Jessica,” Clark argued. “I can understand the anger, believe me, and this… thing
over there deserves to stay the rest of his life in jail, but if the Masked Man starts killing people...
How long will it be until he is not any different than them? How long until he kills an innocent man by mistake?"

“Well, like I said, no one died,” she said, glancing at the photos. “And he clearly knows what he’s doing. This is not just raw violence and anger, he knew where to hit, how to cause pain, how to permanently injure… And he knew exactly when to stop too. It’s no coincidence that they’re all alive, I can tell you that much.”

Clark didn’t like it one bit. That level of violence was not what someone looking to do good did. This Masked Man might’ve been hurting horrible people, he even might’ve been saving innocents, but no one did what he did to those people for purely good reasons. He wasn’t kidding when he said he understood anger and that was anger. Clark knew it well, he had witnessed terrible things all over the world, things that made him sick, and he had to actively stop himself from doing something like this more than once.

That’s why he knew that no matter how much good the Masked Man was causing, he was not doing this only to help people. He was doing it to let his Devil out.

And if he kept doing it, if he kept feeding it, it was a matter of time until they were one and the same.

He sighed, tiredly. Still, Jessica was right about something, the Masked Man hadn’t killed anyone. He was violent and he was enraged, but he hadn’t killed anyone and so far he had saved a lot of people, people Clark himself wasn’t able to help. Maybe he was a vigilante, true, but technically so was Clark, he remembered.

He really needed to meet this guy. Either to stop him from crossing a line and becoming the very thing he hunted or simply to stop him, period.

“Alright, I promise I’ll keep this in mind,” Clark said, looking at Jessica. “What else can you tell me about him?”

Jessica grinned. “Well, he seems to have some issue with the Russians. Lately, he is solely hunting them down, disrupting their operations, causing a lot of losses for them.”

“Any idea why?” Clark asked, frowning.

“Nope, no clue. But between him and you, the Russians are getting desperate.”

“That’s never good,” he said. Cornered animals usually fought ten times harder and more viciously.

“Yeah, I don’t think so either,” she agreed. Jessica hesitated for a moment. “Another thing you might want to know… It’s just a theory of mine, but I think the Masked Man might be enhanced.”

Clark’s head snapped in her direction. “Why do you say that? Because of the way he fights? Does he have super-strength or something?”

“As far as I know, he hits hard, but not that hard. Not gonna lie, by the look of things he fights well, maybe too well, but I don’t think it is because of some kind of enhanced strength. No, what I mean is how he finds his targets.”

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, now he’s going after the Russians, so that theory doesn’t apply now so much, but before he
was simply beating people who were committing crimes. You know, rapists and muggers, he would find and stop them before they could do anything. Thing is, do you know how tiny are the chances of someone stumbling upon stuff like that in time to stop them? And doing it again, night after night? Sure, you can do it, but he’s no Superman.”

“You think he’s… what? Sensing the criminals? Seeing the future? Listening to them?”

She seemed embarrassed for a second. “I’ve no idea, okay? It’s just a feeling. Using technology for surveillance is a possibility too, I mean, that’s how most spy agencies do it, isn’t it? But he doesn’t seem connected to an intelligence agency or even the cops and he doesn’t seem rich enough to pull something like that by himself.”

“How can you tell?”

“He fights people using a freaking t-shirt, if witnesses are to be believed! Can you imagine a rich guy doing something like this? At the very least they would wear some kind of protection, bulletproof vest or something, but not a t-shirt!”

“That actually makes sense,” Clark admitted. He stopped a moment to think. “So we have a possibly enhanced vigilante, beating up Russian mobsters… That’s really not a lot to go on.”

“Can’t you just hear him? Frankly, I’m surprised you didn’t stumble on this guy yet. He is out there almost every night, beating criminals.”

Clark sighed.

“I’m one man, Jessica, and the world is a big place. New York has been quiet lately, nothing so serious happening that the police can’t handle. Other places in the world? Not so much.” He looked at her. “Last night, I saved people from drowning when a dam broke in China, stopped a big shootout in Brazil and prevented a terrorist attack in the Middle East… After the first bomb exploded and claimed a lot of innocent lives.”

He closed his eyes, trying to repress his memory. Clark knew, better than anyone, that not even Superman could prevent every bad thing from happening, despite what some people thought. But that didn’t make it easier when he had to see with his own eyes the people he couldn’t help.

Clark opened his eyes again and continued.

“After that, I looked for the terrorists who did that and caught most of them.” He looked at Jessica. “And then I came back to sleep a little bit.” She touched his shoulder for a moment and he was thankful for the gesture. “I don’t need a lot of sleep to function, less and less each year apparently, and I can go on for days without resting, but even I can’t be everywhere at all times. I-I need rest and I need a life too, other than Superman. As callous as this might sound, I have to make choices, I have to react to the worst situations, and a bit of unarmed fighting barely registers in my hearing as an emergency.”

That’s not to say he relied solely on his gifts to help people. He trusted his vision and hearing, of course, but he also used other sources. Kelex, for example, had hacked a few satellites, so she could provide fast and reliable information about what was going on around the Earth, from dangerous storms forming over populated areas and volcanos about to erupt, to troops moving to start conflicts. As a good reporter, he also followed the news, also a good source to know what was going on. And obviously he had contacts like Tony and Natasha to provide him with additional information.
When it came to stopping situations without previous warning, though, his gifts were all Clark had to rely upon, that was the truth; but even he couldn’t listen to everything at the same time and distinguish perfectly what was what. Not unless he was entirely focused on his task and looking for something clear. He was conditioned to follow certain sounds: gunshots, screams of fear and rage, bombs, natural disasters, yells for help… But punches? Fist fights? Unless he was really paying attention, those sounds were no different to him than any others.

And sometimes – more than he could ever accept – this ended up costing lives. Clark knew he wasn’t a God, that he couldn’t simply do anything he wished and save everyone, but that didn’t stop him from feeling guilty when he failed like that.

Jessica squeezed his arm and released him.

“I know, Clark, I didn’t… I didn’t mean anything by it,” she said, a bit embarrassed, not meeting his eyes. “Well, if not by sounds or flying over Hell’s Kitchen, then you’ll find this guy using some other method. You’re investigative reporter, aren’t you? Use your detective abilities.” Saying this, she got up. “I’m going to see how my apartment is, if Stark kept his end of the bargain or if it’s still a hole. Want to come?”

“Sure, I’ll be right there, I’ll just call Tony first and thank him,” Clark said, looking around; ‘thank him’ didn’t sound like much, not when Tony spent about 12 million dollars on a gift to him, but he was sure it was all Tony needed or wanted from him. “You should too.”

“Whatever. Wanna watch the big TV later?”

“Sure, but I can’t stay long, I actually have to deliver a new story to the New York Bulletin today.”

“Anything interesting?” Jessica asked, going to the door.

“Compared to Mutant Factories and Masked Vigilantes, no, not really,” Clark joked.

“We can’t all have cool jobs,” Jessica bragged. “I mean, I’m basically Sherlock Holmes and you… You do some nice stuff from time to time too, like writing a new recipe or talking about the weather.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I still remember that naked guy you had to take pictures from, the one with hair all over.” They both shuddered. “That seems like a real nice job.”

Her raised middle finger was the only response he got before the door was closed.

The blue hologram of Tony’s suit glowed brightly in the middle of the room, as he and Bruce watched. Several numbers were displayed around it, the formulas as clear to the two scientists as simple words would be to any person, and the pieces of the suit moved by themselves, showing exactly what each of them could do.

As soon as it was complete, another suit assembled over the hologram armor, this one red in color, the huge parts putting themselves together until the previous suit completely disappeared under it. An armor that covered another armor, until the whole thing became big, bulky and threatening.

“I present to you, the Mark XLIV, AKA the Hulkbuster,” Tony said, opening his arms in a grand gesture. “Or, you know, more or less how it’s gonna be.”

Bruce was listening to Tony, but he was too busy analyzing the numbers to answer. He got closer, holding his glasses, doing the math inside his head; he turned to Tony.
“Did you already build a prototype?” he asked.

“No, not yet,” Tony answered, stepping closer. He hesitated for a moment. “Here’s the problem: this is all nice and mathematically perfect, but it’s theoretical. Everything we did was based on estimates from when the Big Guy came out to play. I mean, we had footage of you breaking tanks, wreaking havoc in Harlem, smashing Chitauri in Hell’s Kitchen, biting a Kryptonian’s head… But we don’t have actual numbers that we can rely upon with absolute certainty.” Tony exhaled. “We have to move on to practical tests.”

Tony was a smart man and as such, he already knew what Bruce’s answer would be.

“Are you out of your mind?!?” Bruce exclaimed. “Tony, this is insane! We have the numbers, we did the math together, we don’t need me to call the Big Guy so we can poke him with a stick.”

“And what if we’re wrong? What if the estimates are off? What if you got stronger? That’s why we test stuff before we need to actually use it, Bruce, because if it goes wrong, we can fix it.”

“I’m pretty sure that if I Hulk-out things will go wrong and we won’t be able to fix anything,” Bruce retorted. He shook his head. “Tony, you know I can’t control it.”

“Actually, that’s not true,” Tony piped up. “Jarvis, put on the footage of Tests 1, 2 and 3.”

“As you wish, sir,” Jarvis promptly responded.

Bruce frowned for a moment, confused, until three screens in front of them turned on and he could see himself inside the Avengers Tower. For a moment, he didn’t understand, not until it began playing; he choked on his own saliva.

He saw himself getting up in the middle of the night, sleepy, and running face first against the plastic wrap someone – someone named Tony Stark, no doubt – taped on his door; the plastic wrap, almost invisible to his drowsy eyes, tossed him on his back against the floor.

On the second screen, Bruce saw himself calmly opening a bottle of Coke, only to realize too late that there was a Mentos carefully stuck under the lid, which promptly fell inside the drink and started a chain reaction that turned the whole thing into a geyser, soaking the whole kitchen and him.

Lastly, he saw himself entering the bathroom during the night, with the urgency only someone with a full bladder could muster, only to end up covered in his own urine when he failed to notice that the toilet had a plastic wrap over it; Bruce could only stare at his wet socks, as he visibly remembered the moment with horror.

Very slowly, Bruce turned to look at Tony.

“Those were tests?” he asked, his voice too calm. “You mean to tell me that I was covered in pee because of a test?”

“How does that make you feel?” Tony asked, not unlike a shrink.

Bruce closed his eyes for a moment. He breathed slowly for a second, then opened his eyes.

“I feel like I could strangle you,” Bruce answered, still too calmly.

“You or the Big Guy?”
“Oh, that’s all me, Tony.”

Tony’s response to the threat was a bright smile.

“And you say you don’t have control!” he said. “See? If that didn’t make you turn into a green rage monster, what would? I mean, look at those wet socks. And your heart rate was barely elevated.”

“It is true, Dr. Banner, your heart rate was stable,” Jarvis agreed.

Bruce seemed like he would complain about Jarvis reading his vitals, but he decided against it.

“Not turning into the Hulk and controlling the Hulk after I turned are two very different things,” Bruce replied. “You could’ve asked me that before pranking me like a teenager.”

“Control is control, Bruce. You know how to stop yourself from turning, you know how to focus your rage when turning. Now you gotta learn to come back after turning.”

Bruce closed his eyes in frustration.

“It’s not that simple, Tony.”

Tony just stared at him, unusually serious for a moment. “I know. Remember when I told you about my Arc Reactor, about how I learned to control it?” He raised his hands when Bruce opened his mouth, ready to interrupt. “I know, I know, I didn’t turn into a furious, muscled person, I know. But the principle of the thing is the same: I had to learn to live with it.” He tapped his chest, where the Arc Reactor had been before he was able to surgically remove it. “I woke up after almost being blown up by my own bombs with a car battery attached to my chest. I honestly can’t tell how I survived that kind of surgery, in a cave no less, but I did and I used what I had to make my first Arc Reactor.”

To his surprise, Bruce was listening without saying anything.

“Now, I could’ve given up, I could’ve stayed with the car battery and not risked anything, but I made a choice and I stuck with it. And it was that choice that made all the difference, because the Arc Reactor in my chest was what powered my first suit and allowed me to escape. And now I’m Iron Man, an Avenger, fighting for good and all that, instead of making weapons.” Tony pointed at Bruce. “What you have is a burden, I agree. But it’ll only put you down if you allow it to put you down. If you learn to control it, if you take this terrible privilege and do something with it, then it becomes a gift. The choice is yours.”

Both of them stayed in silence for a long while. Tony could understand Bruce’s reluctance, his fear, that feeling that nothing could be done about it; he felt the same when the Arc Reactor started to poison him and he couldn’t find a way out. But just like Fury and the “ghost of Howard Stark” forced him to go on, he needed Bruce to snap out of it and try.

The Hulkbuster was, after all, a contingency plan to stop an uncontrollable Hulk. One that didn’t involve calling Thor and Superman to battle the Big Guy. But for that to happen, for they to actually build a suit strong enough to stop the Hulk, they needed the Hulk himself. A weird paradox, true, but that didn’t change their situation.

And if Bruce learned to accept himself and actually learned to control the Big Guy, well, all the better for everyone.

Bruce opened his mouth to finally say something, only to be interrupted by a phone call. Tony
sighed in frustration.

“Mute this thing, Jarvis,” he said.

“Sir, it’s Mr. Kent. Should I tell him you’ll call back?” Jarvis said.

“Oh! Never mind, put him through, I want to know what he thought about the apartment.”

“Apartment?” Bruce asked.

“I renovated his apartment when he traveled to Asgard, it just got done today,” Tony explained, before speaking loudly. “Hey, Clark, how’re you doing? Bruce is here too.”

“Hey, Tony, I’m good, how about you? And you, Bruce, everything alright?”

“I’m fine, thanks, Clark,” Bruce answered.

“Yeah, everybody is fine, how’s the apartment?” Tony asked, excited. “Did you like it?”

“It’s… It’s amazing. I think you spent too much on it, I’m not going to lie, but it looks great, Tony. Thank you.”

“Pepper was the one who dealt with most of the decoration, I’ll tell her you liked it. I took care of the technological stuff. Say, why aren’t you using the hologram projector?”

“The what?” Clark asked.

“You can use the hologram projector to link the call, sir,” a feminine voice answered, probably Clark’s AI, Kelex.

Suddenly, there was a glow inside his tower and Clark was there by their side, project in a blue hologram form, looking shocked as ever.

“You installed a hologram projector in his apartment?” Bruce asked, exasperated. “Why?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Tony retorted, grinning at Clark. He knew that, on his apartment, a projection of his lab had taken form as well, complete with his and Bruce’s form.

“Wow… This is –“

“Superfluous?” Bruce finished for him, rolling his eyes. “A complete waste of money?”

“Well, a little bit, yes, but also very cool,” Clark said, impressed.

“You’re taking this a lot better than Cap, you know,” Tony said. He thought for a second. “And Thor’s girlfriend, she was actually very pissed when I ordered one of these installed in her apartment, in London. Thor liked it, though.”

“I imagine Steve is still a little overwhelmed with the new technology. Natasha told me she’s having quite a bit of trouble explaining some of the things he found on the internet…” Bruce winceded at the same time Tony smiled. “Tony, no, don’t even think about sending him weird stuff!”

“I would never… By the way, what did you think about the TV? I gave mine to Thor, it wasn’t made for human’s eyes. I actually made a special pair of glasses for me and Pepper, but she didn’t like to have to wear them all the time.”
Clark’s hologram smiled. “It’s pretty awesome, but I hadn’t the chance to test if for real yet. So, I can see you two are busy, I just called to say ‘thanks’. It was very nice of you, Tony.”

“Oh, don’t mention it, I had fun with it.” He stared at Clark for a moment. “I actually thought you would be a hell of a lot more bothered by all this, to be honest. You have some kind of money-phobia, don’t you?”

Superman rolled his eyes. “From where I come from, it’s called common sense. But, where I come from, we also appreciate gifts and we don’t ask how much they cost… Even when they clearly cost a lot. So thank you again, Tony.”

Tony was a little bit embarrassed by the continued gratitude, but he didn’t show it, he simply changed the subject.

“By the way, Clark, I took a look at those schematics you sent me. What were they called… ICERs? The tranquilizer guns.”

“You’re using guns now too, Clark?” Bruce joked. “Your 300 different abilities are not enough?”

He laughed. “A scientist from SHIELD developed them some time ago and I found them very interesting. As good as normal guns, but non-lethal. Just expensive to make, so we were bouncing some ideas off to find a way to lower the costs.”

“Why?” Bruce asked. “SHIELD has no shortage of money.”

“Ideally? To exchange every lethal weapon we have lying around for one of those, at least those in the hands of law enforcement and civilians. But we’ll see how it goes.” He turned to Tony. “What did you find out?”

Tony was still a bit distracted by Clark’s announcement that he wanted to exchange all the weapons for ICERs and he could see Bruce was too; he didn’t think small, did he? He shook his head.

“I’m studying a new process that might work to lower the costs,” Tony answered, “but I’ve got nothing conclusive yet.” He tilted his head, pensive. “If it works, we can add them to my Iron Hope project. The law enforcement suits would certainly benefit from it.”

The Iron Hope project was Tony latest big venture, one that he’d been working on more or less since the Kryptonian invasion. No, that wasn’t right, the invasion wasn’t what inspired Tony: Superman was. Superman and his infinite drive to help, anyway he could. If Clark was out there saving people, then why shouldn’t he do the same?

Similar to his Iron Legion, the Iron Hope project consisted of a group of remote-controlled suits. Difference was, that the Iron Hope project had several kinds of different suits, each built to a specific task. Why send people into a building on fire when they could send instead a group of fireproof suits, equipped to extinguish the fire and rescue victims? Why send cops against armed criminals, when they could send bulletproof suits to apprehend the criminals without any need to fear for someone’s life? Why send simple humans to disaster-struck areas, when they could send a group of suits equipped to search for survivors, capable of lifting several tons of debris and fly?

He was more than aware that a project like that was massive and the political resistance he would find would be fierce. It would be expensive and it had to be very well thought, so that the very people he wanted to help wouldn’t end up losing their jobs; the last thing Tony wanted was for firemen and cops to be fired, replaced by his suits. They were perfectly capable of working
together.

But even with all those problems, Tony believed it was worth it. The Iron Hope project would save lives, just as Superman did every day. First, if it all worked out, in New York. And then, who knew? Maybe the whole world.

Clark wasn’t the only one who thought big, after all.

“So you really want to exchange lethal-weapons by those?” Bruce asked Clark, snapping Tony out of his musings. “I’m sure the NRA will love this.”

“Well, no one said it’s going to be easy, if it’s possible at all,” Clark answered, sighing. “But we’ll only gain with this. The ICERs work just as well as any lethal-weapon when it comes to incapacitating a hostile. Cops wouldn’t have to worry about shooting innocents, civilians wouldn’t have to worry about crazy people with guns and they still would be able to defend themselves from criminals... If we do it right, it’s going to be a good thing.”

“They are well-made,” Tony admitted reluctantly. “Who is the guy who invented those again? Is he looking for a job?”

“He prefers to remain unnamed and I don’t think so. But I’ll tell him that,” Clark promised, smiling. “Tony, I have to go to work, but thank you again for the apartment, it was one heck of a present. And thanks for the help with the ICERs too. If you need anything, just ask. See you two later.”

And just like that, with a last wave, Clark disappeared.

“So, what else did you install in his apartment, anyway?” Bruce asked, after a moment. “Does it fly like a Helicarrier as well?”

“Oh, this and that,” Tony said. “A hidden and secure safe for Clark to keep his alien tech, a secret passage that takes him right to the roof of the building, a top of the line computer, bulletproof walls and windows... It’s probably to heavy to fly, now that you mentioned it, but it will most likely resist a missile, even if the rest of the building collapse on top of it.”

“Why?” Bruce asked, exasperated. “It’s Superman’s apartment, he is missile-proof!”

“Speaking from experience, having your home hit by missiles... Not cool. At least his stuff will survive, even if the entire building doesn’t,” Tony answered, typing in his computer for a moment. He glanced at Bruce. “Do you know what else is missile-proof? The underground lab I built to test the Hulk’s strength,” Tony said, looking at Bruce’s surprised face with a raised eyebrow. “It makes those old bunkers from the Cold War that could withstand a nuclear bomb look like cardboard boxes. Want to see it?”

There was a long silence. Bruce looked at the Hulkbuster’s hologram, then at the place Clark’s hologram was standing; then he looked at Tony’s chest, right where the Arc Reactor used to be. He sighed.

“Let’s take a look,” Bruce finally answered.

It took Tony a lot not to cheer.

“Anatoly may be the way in,” James Wesley said, glancing respectfully at the man in front of him. “He seems more amenable to the proposition, or at least not as... vitriolic as his brother.”
Wesley was standing in the middle of a luxuriously decorated apartment, a penthouse fit for a king, with huge windows that allowed him to see New York under the afternoon sun. But at the moment his attention wasn’t on the apartment or to the city itself, it was, fully, on the man in front of him: Wilson Fisk.

His boss was an intimidating man, dwarfing Wesley with his massive size, both in height and width; he was overweight, true, but it was clear even to someone barely paying any attention that most of his immense form came from muscle mass. His head was perfectly shaved, as was his face, and his black suit was expensive and tasteful, with cufflinks shinning under the sun.

What grabbed the attention of anyone who looked at Fisk, however, was the sheer intelligence in his eyes. He was a brilliant man, a commander, and Wesley respected him as such, more than anyone.

Fisk’s face remained blank for a moment. Then he turned around and looked through the window.

“Confrontations can be expensive,” Fisk finally said, slowly, his raspy voice no more than a whisper. “And draw unwanted attention. I’d prefer to handle this quietly. How are we on the timeline?”

Wesley looked down for a second.

“Stark is being troublesome,” he admitted, finally, sighing. “I realized I won’t get anything from him but wasted time. I’m applying leverage over the sellers instead.”

“Smart. Stark can’t buy the buildings if they don’t want to sell them to him,” Fisk said. He glanced at Wesley. “How long until you get results?”

“Not long,” Wesley assured, quickly. “As for the group of buildings we already acquired, I’m in the process of removing the tenants, it’s going well.” He hesitated. “Sir, if I may ask, why are those buildings so important? Why does Nobu wants them?”

A long minute passed and there was no answer. When Wesley thought there wouldn’t be any, Fisk turned to him.

“When it comes to those people, Wesley, is better not to ask too many questions,” he said. “Nobu wants those buildings in exchange for their support and we want their support. That’s all.”

Wesley didn’t like this, didn’t like how Nobu behaved, but he kept his mouth shut. Wilson was right, the less they involved themselves on Nobu’s business, the better.

“As for the Russians,” Wesley continued, “Assuming we can settle quickly, we should be on schedule.”

“We will,” Fisk guaranteed. “One way or another.”

“What about the masked idiot?” Wesley asked, uncertain. “Madame Gao provided some sort of concoction to wake up the Russian from his coma, but I’m not certain what the Russians intend to do after that.”

The Masked Man was proving himself quite a problem, beating the Russians, interrupting the delivery of Madame Gao’s product, hurting their operation… And worse of all, attracting unwanted attention. Now more than ever, they didn’t want anyone’s eyes on them.

“If the brothers can’t handle him,” Fisk finally said, “I’ll find another solution.”
Wesley smiled a bit, with no doubt in his mind that, if it came to that, Wilson’s solution would be final and quite spectacular.

“I’m sorry to come here today, I know you have an important event this night,” Wesley apologized. “It was not my intention to distract you.”

“These matters needed to be solved,” Fisk said, his voice low. “And I appreciate the company.”

That pleased Wesley a great deal. “Nevertheless, I over stayed my welcome. I’ll leave you to your work.”

“Thank you, Wesley.”

“Thank you, sir,” Wesley said, quickly leaving the apartment. Fisk already had too much to worry about without adding his own problems to it.

He could only hope that the Russians would, for once, do something right and spare them from having to fix everything.

Aleksei “Rhino” Sytsevich was good at what he did. He wasn’t the smartest man alive, he knew that, nor he had leadership capabilities or the charisma to inspire people like a boss should or a commander would in battle.

No, what Aleksei had was a tremendous capacity for violence and the unstoppable drive to chase his prey, no matter what stood in his way. And then trample them to death, near death or permanent damage, depending on what his bosses wanted at the time.

He was a huge man, full of muscles, scars and tattoos, the very picture of a Russian Mafia’s enforcer, which was, coincidentally, what he did for a living. From Moscow to New York, Aleksei plied his trade, cracking heads for the Russians, collecting debts, killing… Whatever paid, he wasn’t picky.

Unsurprisingly, business was always booming. There would always be work for those who had no qualms about doing whatever they were told to do and even more to a big, skilled fighter during a time when guns simply couldn’t be used. If there was one thing Aleksei knew was that there were always people that needed to be hurt and since guns couldn’t be fired with that damn alien flying around, then fists had to be used.

Aleksei was more than fine with the current situation.

Which was what brought him to the present job: locating and capturing the owner of the apartment where the Masked Man hid a while back, after being almost killed in their ambush. And all he had to accomplish this were his fists, an address and the generic description of the owner, who apparently was a hot, black woman.

For once, there wouldn’t be any killing or breaking, at least not too much. They needed the woman alive so she could tell them where to find the Masked Man. After that, well… The woman would either be a corpse or a prize, Aleksei had no illusions or problems with either idea.

“This is the place,” Anatoly said, stopping the car.

He didn’t like that many people, much less admired them, but Aleksei knew his bosses were smart men; they had to be, after all Aleksei was making way more money now than he ever made before. Anatoly, for example, had all the good qualities a boss should have: he was cold, always a step
ahead of his enemies and brutal when he needed to be.

Vladimir was too, except that he, like Aleksei, sometimes allowed his emotions to take the better of him; lots of people ended up dead when that happened.

Two hot-headed people were too much in a mission like this, Anatoly said, and Aleksei had to agree.

As discreetly as they could, Aleksei and Anatoly left the car and entered the building, trying to remain as inconspicuously as they could, which wasn’t easy, considering Anatoly’s face was completely bruised and Aleksei was a huge tattooed man. Once inside, they went upstairs, their eyes scanning the place for any threats, until they finally stopped in front of the apartment. His boss glanced at him and nodded; Aleksei charged, breaking the door into splinters.

With the adrenalin flowing in his veins, he looked around quickly, looking for the woman, ready to grab her and knock her out; except there was no one there. Moving fast and with purpose, Anatoly checked the other rooms, his taser ready, but the fact that no noise came from there was a good indication that he didn’t see anyone.

Lights out, silence, dust over the furniture…

“She’s not here,” Anatoly cursed. “She has not been here in a while.”

His boss closed his eyes for a moment, thinking or simply reigning in his anger; then he opened them and stared at Aleksei.

“I want you to–“

Before he could finish his order, they heard a door opening outside. In a silent agreement, both of them left the apartment, just in time to see a young Latin American man looking at them, fear clear in his eyes. Her neighbor, no doubt.

“Hola,” he greeted, his voice shaking.

Anatoly didn’t answer. He simply glanced at Aleksei, nodding once.

Without having to be told twice, Aleksei charged.

Clark left the New York Bulletin with a smile on his face. Another story written, another story published. This one didn’t pay much, true, but it wasn’t about the money, it was about doing a job he liked and doing it well; at least now it was, since he didn’t have to worry about getting money to pay for next month’s rent anymore.

Time to fly a little bit, then. Things were relatively quiet in the world that day, especially in New York, but it was always nice for him to appear and remember criminals he was always there, watching. There were no natural disasters happening, the police and the firemen had things under control on the few situations he could hear and, surprisingly, no dire emergencies that needed his immediate attention.

All in all, it was a good day.

Using Kelex to block any cameras or satellites that could be pointed in his direction, Clark prepared himself to enter an alley, already ready to put on his skinsuit and take off. As soon as he thought about turning there, however, a woman ran to him.
“Excuse me, Mr. Kent?”

Clark stopped quickly and tried his best to appear casual, as if he weren’t doing anything remotely out of normal; he wasn’t so sure he managed to do it, but the woman in front of him didn’t seem to notice anything. He looked at her, trying to remember if he had seen her before, but he immediately decided he hadn’t.

Trying not to sound like some kind of pervert even to himself, Clark thought that he would’ve remembered the woman, because she did stand out from the crowd, with her blond hair, her beautiful face, her shapely figure and her shining blue eyes.

He stopped himself from rolling his eyes; well, wanting or not, he was kinda feeling like a perv now. Damn his brain.

“Can I help you?” Clark asked, lightly shaking his head to dispel his unwanted thoughts, smiling at her.

She hesitated for a moment.

“My name is Karen Page, I was wondering if we could speak for a moment?”

Karen was nervous and she was trying her best not to show it. Admittedly, it was a hard thing to do with her hands shaking like that, so she put her cup of coffee down and hid them under the table.

Mr. Kent – Clark, she corrected herself, internally, after he himself corrected her twice – probably noticed, but was polite enough not to say anything, simply drinking his own coffee while he watched the people in the coffeeshop from their table on the corner.

He was not what Karen expected, she admitted. After Ben Urich’s advice, Karen researched everything she could about Clark Kent, trying to find out if he truly could help her. More importantly, trying to find out if she could trust him with her story. What she found was precious little.

There was a lot about his stories and even more about all the criminals he helped to arrest with his investigations. But about him? About Clark Kent himself? Almost nothing. He was clearly a private person, not concerned about fame or even money, if the rumors of the job offerings he refused were anything to go by. He was smart, something clearly evident by the investigations he pulled off, and he seemed to know a great deal about a lot of things, from different languages to forensics.

Clark was also just, deeply concerned about doing the right thing and utterly unafraid of reprisal from the really bad people he exposed.

That, more than anything, was what convinced Karen to try to meet him. Ben’s advice was, of course, something she took into consideration, but someone in her situation had to be very careful about who to trust. And about who she would put at risk. Daniel, her coworker, suffered from her mistake and she would never do something like this again.

Still, the man in front of her was different than what she had imagined. Karen knew he was a young journalist, starting his career, but clearly someone with a lot of talent. A prodigy, someone who had a bright future in front of him. Expecting the very worse, something like that usually meant coldness, sometimes arrogance, and not a lot of empathy.

This couldn’t be further from the truth.
He was smart, that was clear for anyone who talked to him even for a few seconds, but he was also humble, truly modest. Behind his glasses, his blue eyes were kind and understanding and not cold at all. He also had a great sense of humor and an easy smile, the kind that made Karen lower her guard, even when she was that nervous.

Clark Kent was also hot as hell, but that little tidbit wasn’t relevant at all.

“So, Karen, why don’t you tell me why we’re here?” Clark said, after finishing telling her about the ‘Mutant Factory’ story, the only thing she could think to ask when she approached him in the street. He smiled. “As much as I’d like to believe that a beautiful woman just asked me out for coffee to talk about an old story, I think you have something else in mind.”

Karen could feel herself blushing a little, but the nervousness she felt quickly took first place on all the emotions playing inside her. She grabbed her cup of coffee with both hands, trying to calm her nerves.

“You’re right, I did,” she finally admitted. “I-I need help with something and Ben Urich told me to look for you.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Ben Urich? Really?”

She frowned, a little confused. “You don’t know Ben?”

“I do, it’s just… Well, to be honest, I didn’t think he liked me very much,” Clark said, leaning over the table a bit. “I crossed paths with him the second time I was in the Bulletin, delivering a story, and I was so excited. He’s a legend in journalism, pretty much took down the entire Italian mafia by himself here in New York.”

Karen smiled a little bit seeing the glow in his eyes; she could almost feel how excited he were back then.

“I was about to introduce myself to him,” he continued “, but, to my surprise, he said he knew who I was. And before I could say anything, he said: ‘Your Mutant Factory piece was satisfactory.’ And then he left.”

A giggle escaped her mouth when she saw his dumbstruck expression.

“I shared a few words with him after that,” Clark said, “but nothing gave me the impression that he thought about me as anything other than the freelance guy he crossed paths with sometimes.”

“Well, he does think highly of your skills, if his indication means anything,” Karen said. “He said a lot of good things about your work.”

“That’s nice of him,” Clark answered, pleased. Then, after a second, he looked at her with all his attention. “So, Karen, ready to tell me what you need help with?”

No, she was not, but she did it anyway.

Whatever Clark thought it would happen on that day, that wasn’t it. What Karen Page told him wasn’t simply a story, it was a conspiracy worthy of an old spy movie, something so outlandish, so impossible, that it simply couldn’t be true.

And yet, looking into her scared eyes, Clark had no doubt she was telling the truth.
Karen Page had stumbled into a criminal plot that had left a trail of bodies all over New York. From innocents like her coworker, Daniel, to accomplices like her old boss, McClintock, and murderers that tried – and thankfully failed – to kill her, like Rance and the prison guard, Farnum. A string of victims, most conveniently ending their own lives before being able to talk.

And then there was the involvement of the Masked Vigilante.

According to Karen, not only was she saved by him from being assassinated by Rance, the Masked Man was also responsible for divulging the information Karen stole, effectively exposing Union Allied’s crimes and potentially saving her life once again, since the men behind all those crimes had no more reason to go after Karen now, not with everything she knew already on the papers.

Murderers, vigilantes, a big company responsible for a great deal of Hell’s Kitchen reconstruction involved in a scandal and who knows what else.

No, this really wasn’t how Clark imagined his day would go at all.

“This is… This is a lot to take in,” Clark exhaled.

Karen looked down, her hands shaking slightly.

“You don’t believe me,” she whispered.

Without thinking, Clark held her hand.

“I believe you,” he said, in no uncertain terms. “I doubt you would make this all up just to waste my time.” He hesitated, before adding in a low voice. “And I can see you’re scared.”

Karen didn’t bother denying or pretending to be fine. She was scared and she had every reason to be. Those people were evil and they were not concerned about killing innocents. And the fact that Clark hadn’t even heard about this before she told him was enough to worry him. This wasn’t, in any way, a simple crime. It was a carefully woven plot, guided by ruthless and intelligent people with resources to bribe, hire, threaten, blackmail and eliminate pretty much anyone they needed to.

These people were creating a crime empire right under his nose and somehow the Masked Man was involved in this.

Clark was a bit surprised when Karen squeezed his hand.

“Thank you,” she whispered and Clark could feel the relief in her voice. “You have no idea what this means to me. I tried to tell the police, I-I…” Karen stopped and dried her eyes with a napkin; she took a deep breath. “So, will you help me? I asked Ben for help, but he… He sent me to you. I-I have no one else to go to.”

He didn’t even hesitate. “Of course I’ll help you. Don’t worry, Karen, we’re going to get to the bottom of this and the people who did this will face justice, you have my word.”

Karen felt as if the weight of the entire world was lifted from her shoulders when Clark said that. She didn’t know why, couldn’t possibly comprehend the reason, but she believed him. More than that, she felt safe. It was a stupid feeling, of course, Clark was just a journalist, he had no way to ensure her wellbeing, especially under these circumstances, but that didn’t change how she felt.

For someone who lived in fear ever since she woke up by the side of her murdered friend, that feeling of safeness was priceless.
“So what do we do now?” Karen asked, her voice almost cracking.

Clark was deep in thought for a moment. “This Masked Man that saved you, do you think he is the same vigilante that’s been beating people up in Hell’s Kitchen?”

That question surprised her a bit, but she answered with a nod.

“Well, there aren’t many masked men beating people up in Hell’s Kitchen, it’s gotta be him.” He nodded, still thinking. “Why are you asking?”

He looked at her. “This Masked Vigilante has been making life difficult for the Russians lately. Beating their men, getting in the way of their deliveries, destroying their products… I don’t think it’s a coincidence that he appeared to help you.”

Karen took a second to understand what he was saying. “You think… You think the Russian Mafia is involved?” she whispered, alarmed, looking around the coffee shop.

Clark waited a second to answer. “That pension fund you discovered when you worked in Union Allied, how much money did it have?”

“A lot. There were so many zeros…”

“Enough money to run an entire criminal organization?”

Her eyes snapped up. “You think it’s their money?!”

He sighed. “If it’s that much money, then it’s probably not only theirs. I’m thinking something of a joint account.”

Karen had no idea how to answer to that.

Clark was concentrated, trying to tie all scraps of knowledge he had about this. How did the Union Allied scandal, the Russian Mafia and the Masked Vigilante fit together? What was the connection? Was Union Allied simply a front for money laundry, a way for the Russians to keep their money below the radar? If so, then what about the rest of the money? He had no doubt that an organization as famous and big as the Russian mob had a lot of money, but certainly not that much. So who were the others involved in this?

“What are you thinking?” Karen asked after a while.

He looked at her. “I’m trying to make sense of all this. I’m certain the Russians weren’t the only ones hiding their money with Union Allied, no matter how profitable things may be going for them.” Clark tapped a finger on his chin, distracted. “This is not the work of a single criminal organization, more of them are involved.”

Karen just watched, in silence, as he thought things through.

“The Irish are pretty much broke,” Clark continued, “so are the Albanians. The Nigerians and the Jamaicans are running a tiny little business in Harlem, they don’t step in Hell’s Kitchen. The Cartels were broke to pieces by Superman, when he destroyed their drug labs and their production all over the world. The Italians had one big man still left standing in New York, a guy named Rigoletto, but if my sources are right, he disappeared without a trace not too long ago. Most likely murdered. The Koreans have no foothold in Hell’s Kitchen…”
“You know a lot about crime,” Karen mentioned, a little surprised.

“Part of the job,” Clark shrugged. Both jobs, really, but she didn’t need to know that. “The Yakuza is still strong in Hell’s Kitchen, even with Superman. They are mostly keeping themselves with their legal business and no violent operations, so they’re surviving. The Chinese, on the other hand, are still going well. They’re one of the few still dealing drugs and they’re making a lot of money with it.” He tilted his head, still peeved about that fact. “I heard Superman is doing his best, but they’re really entrenched in Hell’s Kitchen. And then, of course, we have the Russians.”

He took a swig of his cold coffee before continuing.

“The Russians lost almost all their territory in New York, but they managed to regain a lot after the Incident. They were among the first to bring their crews to Hell’s Kitchen after the Chitauri invaded and they managed to start a good operation. They secured the docks and, with it, they had a monopoly on the shipment business.” Clark frowned. “Which, honestly, makes the murder of another mobster boss in Hell’s Kitchen weird.”

“What do you mean?” Karen asked.

“There was another guy, in Hell’s Kitchen, also responsible for the delivery of products, but not via the docks. Guns, drugs, people… Well, not so much anymore, not since Superman, but he delivered what he could get his hands on. But he worked together with the Russians, there’s no reason for them to start killing each other. War is costly.”

“Not unless the Russians stood to gain more,” Karen suggested. “Who’s this guy that died? Who was this mobster?”

“A man named Prohaszka,” Clark answered. “He—” Clark stopped talking when he heard Karen gasp; her blue eyes were wide. “You heard that name before,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

Still shocked, Karen nodded. “More than that. The firm I work for represented the man who killed him.”

“You’re a lawyer?” Clark asked, surprised. He shook his head, realizing that her profession shouldn’t have been the main source of his surprise. “You represented Prohaszka’s killer?”

“I’m just an assistant,” Karen said, unusually defensive. “I started working there not too long ago, after I left Union Allied. They were the ones who helped me, I was their first case. They are good guys, they usually don’t pick cases like that, they like to help people…” She stopped, realizing she was getting off subject. “We were approached by some guy that wanted us to represent John Healy, Prohaszka’s murderer. I don’t know why we took the case, the guy was a complete psycho, but I guess the pay was good… Or maybe they were just curious about the man who was hiring us and wanted to find out more.”

“Who hired you?” Clark asked.

“The man never said his name, but he represented a company named Confederated Global Investments… Which was a front. I researched it myself. It was a subsidiary of a holding company, of a loan-out to a holding subsidiary and so on, so forth. But their money was good.” Karen closed her eyes and took her hands to her face, tired. “You think those guys are the same ones behind Union Allied? Trying to put us under their control or something like that? Watch us? Watch me?”

“That’s a strong possibility,” Clark admitted. “What happened to John Healy?”

“Take a guess.”
“He was ‘suicided’?”

“Actually, from what I heard, this guy actually committed suicide,” Karen said, “after he was released, which was weird. Plunged his head in a piece of metal. But I really don’t trust the official version anymore, he might’ve been killed.”

“Either way he’s dead and unable to answer questions. I’m sensing a pattern here…” Clark sighed. “I’ll take a look into it, see if I can find something else about this company and John Healy, but I think you were right in your assumption: the Russians took over Prohaszka’s operations. Which is surprising, really, because a move like that should’ve started a war.”

“Not if they had other organizations to back them up, make Prohaszka’s men fall in line,” Karen finished, eyes wide. “Organizations that, like the Russians, are using companies like Union Allied to hide and laundry money. My god, what the hell did I get into…”

Clark held her hand again, hearing her heart beating too fast; he could actually smell her fear.

“Karen, look at me.” He squeezed her hand, grabbing her attention. “Look at me. I won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.”

“How?!” Karen exclaimed, her voice almost a whisper. “How can you promise me that, Clark? Look at what we are dealing with. These people are powerful, they have eyes everywhere, they are ruthless. I-I shouldn’t have involved you, I shouldn’t put people in risk, I–“

“Karen!” Clark said, a little strongly, squeezing her hand again. She looked at him. “I know how to protect myself, you don’t have to worry about me. And I can take care of you too.” He hesitated, then added in a very low voice. “I have contacts in SHIELD.” She widened her eyes, shocked, but stopped struggling. He went on. “My stories pissed off a lot of people, but they made me some interesting friends. There’s nothing these guys can do to hurt me and you, believe me.”

That wasn’t an outright lie, but it was a severely abridged version of the truth. Sure, Clark did have friends in SHIELD, but he wasn’t counting on Natasha and Clint to protect them. But it was better than saying he was Superman and she hadn’t anything to worry about when it came to a few mobsters trying to kill him. And now her, since he wouldn’t let anything of the sort happen to Karen, not now that he actually knew this whole thing was happening.

Which was why he felt only a little bit guilty when he slipped an almost microscopic part of Kelex inside the watch around her wrist, taking advantage of the fact that he was holding her hand right now for that. He could hear and see her from far away, that was true, but with a part of Kelex on her he could keep her safe at all times.

A little creepy, maybe, but it wasn’t like he was using that to stalk her.

“You know people in SHIELD?” she whispered, still shocked. “Can they help us?”

“Yes, they can. I’m actually meeting my contact there tonight. I’ll make some inquiries about this.” Meeting a contact to make some inquiries sounded less complicated than having dinner with Natasha to tell her about the sorcerers living in New York, so he went with that. “No one is going to hurt you and you don’t have to worry about me, okay?”

For the second time in the conversation, the first being when Clark said he believed her, he felt Karen relax. She was still afraid and her heart was still faster than usual, but the knowledge that there was someone out there guaranteeing her safety made Karen feel a bit of hope.

“You have no idea what this means to me, Clark, no idea,” Karen repeated, almost sobbing,
covering her eyes. “I’m so scared, no one would help me, I-I… Not even Ben would. But you are helping me. You’re~”

She stopped talking, her voice growing weaker as she tried to dry her tears. Clark felt his heart clench a bit when he saw her like that. Karen was a good person, just someone that was at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and decided to try to do the right thing. And then all this happened. People shouldn’t be punished for doing what was right and he wouldn’t allow that to happen.

“Karen, what happened to you was awful and no one should go through something like this,” Clark said, his voice soft. “But you’re not alone anymore, alright?” He waited a second. “And try not to judge Ben too harshly, I’m sure he didn’t mean to turn his back on you. He sent you to me, didn’t he?”

“He didn’t help me,” Karen said, glancing at him, her face red. She chuckled nervously. “I don’t blame him for being scared, I understand, and no one is obligated to help me, but… But I guess expected him to,” she said, her voice almost inaudible.

Clark sighed, looking at the table. “Ben has a lot on his plate, Karen. I’m sure he wanted to help you, but it’s not up to him. His wife is sick. Some kind of degenerative disease, the kind that doesn’t kill fast, but it makes you wish it did.” She was looking at him with her jaw agape. “He doesn’t have money to take care of her, not without insurance, and if loses his job or something happens to him…”

“There would be no one to take care of her,” Karen finished. “God, I’m such an idiot!”

“You’re not an idiot, you just didn’t know,” Clark corrected.

Karen didn’t seem to agree, but she didn’t say anything else. She just dried her tears, sipped her water and tried to calm herself. Then she glanced at him.

“What now?” she asked.

Clark thought a little bit. “Now, we try to gather more information. I’ll ask some questions to my contacts, try to find out more about what’s happening. And take a look at Union Allied and that Confederated Global Investments, see if it can lead us somewhere.”

And, he added inside his mind, ask some questions directly to the Russians and, if he could, to the Masked Vigilante, but Karen didn’t need to know that.

“I have an idea,” Karen suggested, hesitant. “I said this to Ben when I met him, but… Union Allied is a construction company. Construction companies are, literally, brick and mortar. You can’t just make cranes, trailers and office equipment disappear by changing some numbers on a paper. Union Allied’s stuff is being liquidated and all that is going somewhere. It’s a trail we can follow.”

“File for bankruptcy and then restructure under a new name,” Clark mentioned. “That’s not uncommon.”

“Yes, then the ones behind Union Allied are probably the same ones buying all the stuff being liquidated. They are both the sellers and the buyers.” She smiled at him, happy that he seemed to agree with her idea. “There’s an auction going on this week, we should go there and see who’s buying this stuff.”

“It’s a good idea, except…”
“Except?” Karen asked.

Clark sighed. “Except that showing up in a place we know it’s going to be filled with the people that tried to kill you, asking questions and standing out like a sore thumb is a sure way to inform them we’re up to something. They know who you are, Karen, you can’t do that.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, as if the risks hadn’t even crossed her mind.

“But it’s a good idea,” Clark added, seeing her expression turning gloomy. “We don’t have to be there to know where the stuff is going, who’s buying what. That’s all carefully registered.”

And Clark would make sure to pay attention from afar, without having to step inside the auction; perks of having supervision.

“So this is it?” Karen asked, seemingly excited. “We’re really doing this?”

Clark couldn’t help but to smile. “We are. Here, this is my number,” he wrote his cellphone number on a napkin and gave it to her. “If you remember anything, if you have any idea, if you think anyone, anywhere, looked at you weirdly… You call me. No matter the time, call me.” He looked at her, serious. “You’re a brave woman, Karen, but don’t mistake bravery for recklessness. If you think you’re in danger, tell me. Okay?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t be offended.”

Karen was deep in thought for about five seconds. Then she got up, walked to Clark and kissed him. It wasn’t a simple peck on the lips, oh no, it was a full-blown kiss, the kind that was usually reserved for the ending of a romantic movie and Clark was too surprised to do anything but kiss her back. He heard people clapping, laughing and whistling in the coffeeshop and somewhere in his mind Clark imagined that the kiss had already fulfilled its purpose, but they were still going on strong.
Eventually, Karen stepped back, her face flushed.

“We have to do this again,” she said, loudly, to a shell-shocked Clark and an impressed audience. Just like that, she turned around and left.

Well, that had been considerably better than his idea, Clark admitted, touching his own lips. This day was really proving itself interesting.

Claire Temple was bored out of her mind. And having an allergic reaction to cat fur, which only made things worse, since besides being bored she now had a running nose and red eyes. Pissed off, she glared at the cat, that stared back at her, still refusing to eat.

“Eat, you little bastard!” she exclaimed, only to be promptly ignored.

Truth be told, the cat was the least of her problems. Ever since she helped the Masked Man – or Mike, as she called him since she didn’t know his real name – her life had spiraled out of control. One minute she is trying to save a bleeding man from dying inside her apartment, the other they have a Russian enforcer in her building, trying to kill them both.

It didn’t end well for anybody. The Russian ended up tossed from the roof and in a coma and Claire had to leave her apartment and hide in her friend’s place – that thankfully was out of town –, since none of them knew if the Russian managed to tell someone anything.

And until Mike dealt with the situation, she was stuck there, without being able to leave, work or do anything else than curse that damned cat.

It was better than being tortured and killed by the Russian Mafia, true, but not by much.

Sighing in frustration, Claire left the cat to his food and walked to the dark living room. Day, afternoon, night… The only thing that changed in her life right now was the amount of light she had, nothing else. She couldn’t bear to watch anymore TV, there was nothing good to read and the internet did nothing but piss her off even more. All in all, Claire was having one hell of a night.

She was considering taking a shower and going to sleep when the door of the apartment was simply obliterated by a huge man charging against it.

Claire had a surge of adrenalin and was moving towards her purse before her brain even caught up to what was happening; moving towards the burner the Masked Man gave her. It didn’t take a genius to know that the Russians had found her and Claire was pretty damn smart.

She reached the table and grabbed her purse, but before she could take the cellphone out of it the huge man grabbed her legs. Claire screamed and kicked, but the Russian lifted her like a ragdoll and tossed her to the other side of the room; the purse, however, was firmly held in her hand, as if her life depended on it.

It kinda did.

Claire landed painfully on her back, but instead of crying about it she started going through the stuff in her purse, until she finally found the cellphone; just when the Russian charged again, like a deranged rhino, making a straight line towards her, trampling the table and the chairs, tossing the sofa to the side and finally lifting her again and pressing Claire against the wall.

“Fight, little girl, fight!” he mocked, as Claire tried desperately to flee from his grasp.
He stopped to laugh pretty quickly when her friend’s cat jumped between his legs, its claws digging deep in a very delicate area of the male body; that kind of pain, apparently, the man couldn’t ignore.

Claire promised to buy a whole salmon to the little bastard if she survived this, seeing the huge Russian swirling madly in the middle of the apartment, the cat still stuck to his groin. Whatever reason the cat did that, it gave Claire enough time to press “send”.

“Hello.”

Right at the moment Claire heard his voice, another Russian appeared from behind her and used a taser against her neck. Weirdly, the last thing that crossed Claire’s mind before she blacked out was how the hell she would fix that damn apartment if she survived this.

“My mom wanted me to be a butcher, you know that?” Foggy said, looking at Karen, as he guided Matt through the streets of Hell’s Kitchen to a night of drinking at Josie’s, as agreed that morning.

“Oh, no, not the ‘Butcher Story’,” Matt whined.


Foggy, completely ignoring them, simply continued talking as if no one had interrupted him.

“I said: ‘No, mom, I want to be a lawyer’. I don’t remember what I said next–”

“No, you never do,” Matt mentioned.

“–But I’m fairly certain it wasn’t about bailing a piss-drunk electrician who nearly burned his house down,” Foggy finished. “And now we’re late for Josie’s. Karen almost went home! How would we celebrate Josie’s grand reopening without her, Matt?”

“That’s a very good question, Foggy,” Matt answered, pretending to think. “Maybe, and that’s just a guess, you would tell me the ‘Butcher Story’ again while we drink cheap tequila.”

Karen laughed again, as they crossed the street. “You’re serious, your mom really wanted you to be a butcher?”

“Don’t encourage him, Karen!”

“Yes, she did!” Foggy said, pleased. “I happen to hail from a long line of butchers, Miss Page. Since the dawn of Ireland, the Nelsons have been in the butcher business, famous across the Earth. Some say the first butcher shop in the US was built by a Nelson, right after he disembarked from the Mayflower itself.”

“That’s a lie,” Matt quipped.

“Damn you, Matt, let me bask in the fake family glory for a minute!”

Karen was laughing again and her laughter was contagious, because soon they all were.

“Someone is in a good mood,” Foggy said, looking at her. “I noticed when you were translating for me, but I forgot to ask. What did you do today?”

Now that Foggy mentioned, Karen did seem better. To Matt’s enhanced senses, emotions were quite easy to grasp. Stress, anxiousness, fear… All that left an impression on the person. Smells,
muscles contractions, accelerated blood flow… And Karen had all that, even after the whole deal with Union Allied was solved.

Now, though, she seemed happy and it was easy – and pleasing to Matt’s senses – to feel how relaxed she was.

“I just had a good day, that’s all,” Karen answered, smiling, avoiding the question.

“Oh my god, you met someone!” Foggy exclaimed, half-joking, half-dreading, jumping to conclusions as always.

“No! Well, I did, but not like that!” Oh, no, poor Foggy. “No, really, there was no dating involved. He was just helping me with some stuff, that’s all.”

Yeah, poor Foggy, Matt thought again.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting married and leaving us!” Foggy said and she mock-slapped him.

“If anyone is leaving, it’ll probably be you, to continue your work as a butcher,” Karen joked.

“But I could hire you two! We could be the best butchers in Hell’s Kitchen, hands down. Honestly, at this point we would probably make more money being butchers than we make being lawyers.”

The sad thing about what Foggy said, was that it was probably true.

They kept joking and laughing for the next five minutes, until they finally arrived at Josie’s Bar. Foggy opened his arms in a grand gesture.

“I present to you, Karen, Josie’s Bar!” Foggy exclaimed.

There were a few seconds of complete silence.

“It’s… Nice?”

“It’s a dump,” Foggy corrected her, then he opened a fond smile. “But it’s our dump. Shall we?” he said, giving her his arm. Smiling, she joined her arm with his. “You coming, Matt? I have other arm right here.”

Matt chuckled, but before he could say anything, his phone rang; the phone only one other person had the number to call.

“Go on, I have to take this,” he said, worry filling him. Foggy and Karen nodded and entered and Matt answered the call. “Hello.”

Claire didn’t answer, but he could hear screams and fighting sounds.

Matt was already running towards the alley before the call ended a second later.

Natasha closed her eyes for a moment, listening to the pleasant music playing in the restaurant. She liked the place, even though she avoided going there too much; becoming a creature of habit was an easy way to get assassinated in her line of business.

Still, no one there knew who she was, not under her disguise, and she had done her job and assessed the place’s staff beforehand. She heard some of the waiters guessing, trying to decide if she was a model or an actress or simply a rich customer, but they were well-trained enough not to
bother her with silly questions. Natasha made her reservation under a fake name, paid for a private

table, ordered the most expensive dishes they had and a bottle of wine that probably cost more than

the whole staff made in a month.

That was enough for them to treat her like a queen.

“Mademoiselle, your guest has arrived,” her private waiter informed her. She smiled and nodded in

response and a few seconds later Clark entered the room.

Natasha smiled when she saw him; he did clean up nicely, didn’t he? Clad in a dark suit, complete

with a tie, Clark really did put famous actors to shame. It was a bit of an unfair comparison, of

course, since no human had a body quite like that, but it was a wonder that he was able to keep a

secret identity at all.

How many tall, handsome, blue eyed men, with muscled bodies like that, were there in the world?

Not that many, she supposed.

Smiling, Natasha got up and kissed his cheek, seeing his expression flashing with surprise.

“Hi,” he said, still looking at her. “You are–“

“Beautiful?” she finished.

He smiled, probably remembering a previous conversation they had.

“That too, but I was going to say ‘brunette’,” Clark said, repeating almost the same words from last

time.

Natasha chuckled, noticing that Clark’s eyes did a little once-over; a polite and quick one, of

course, since Clark was a gentleman, but she didn’t mind the attention, especially from him. She

was a very attractive woman, Natasha knew that, and dressed in a short Superman-blue dress, with

a generous cleavage and a form fitting cut, there were few people – men and women – that could

keep their eyes off her.

Apparently not even “Supermen” could.

“I ordered for both of us, I hope you don’t mind,” Natasha said, as Clark sat down. She poured him

some wine. “Have you ever tried French food?”

“When I was in France, yeah,” Clark answered. He grinned. “But there they just call it ‘food’."

She rolled her eyes at the joke. “When were you there?”

“Most recently? Two days ago,” Clark said. “Some sailors had a small problem with their ship,

they needed a hand to go back to the coast. It was lunch time, so I figured I could eat there.” He

tilted his head. “Pretty salty prices, though, for such small portions.”

“Again with the money, Clark?”

“Hey, not all of us have an unlimited Stark credit card,” he joked. “By the way, I’m paying today.”

“I’m sure Tony will be delighted, since he paid last time.”

“I have money now, no need for that,” he said, opening the menu by the table; his eyes widened.

“Well, maybe he can pay for the wine. What is this made of? Gold grapes?”
“Sure tastes like it,” Natasha agreed, smelling her glass of wine.

Hesitantly, Clark copied her exact moves, smelling the wine before tasting it.

“So? What do you think?”

The fact that he had the gall to shrug told Natasha all she needed to know. She raised a single eyebrow.

“I do like wine,” he explained, a little guilty, “but it’s nothing I would die for, really.”

“Don’t you have ‘super-palate’ too?”

“Maybe that’s the problem, I taste too much.” He looked at the red wine, critically. “What do you taste when you drink this wine? Traces of black cherry, licorice and black pepper, all wrapped together with a touch of vanilla. A presence of leathery taste, oak – I’m thinking French, perhaps – a somewhat present floral scent… Violet, no doubt. Medium acidity and tannin, a bit more alcohol than usual… Something ranging between 13.5 and 13.8 ABV, I’d say.”

Natasha’s eyebrows went up at each word. She liked to think she understood wine, but she would be lying if she said her tasting was that accurate. Clark glanced at her.

“And that’s all fine, I like those flavors,” Clark continued. “Problem is, if I focus too much on them, if I concentrate on my ‘super-palate’, as you said, I start to taste more than I’d like.” He looked at the glass, frowning. “For example, I can tell you that this glass was washed by some kind of fragrance-free detergent – which aren’t really fragrance-free, by the way – and then sanitized by a mix of hot water and chlorine. I could give you the brands they used, if you’d like,” Clark grinned at her apparent surprise. “The person that set the table was using silk gloves, but she touched a spot of the glass without it for some reason. I say ‘she’ because it was probably a woman, since I can taste traces of moisturizing cream, but I don’t want to be sexist. And the last person who used this glass was also a woman – well, I think so, since I can taste lipstick, but again, I don’t want to jump to conclusions – and she was drinking…” Clark touched his own lips with the tip of his tongue. “Something fruity… Peach, maybe, and honeyed. Some kind of white wine for certain.”

She knew his senses were enhanced, that wasn’t anything new for Natasha, but this? This shocked the hell out of her, she wouldn’t lie, and her face showed it just how much.

“This… Is incredibly disturbing. How can you eat like this?” Natasha asked, giving up any pretense of indifference.

Clark smiled and shrugged. “Just like I manage not going crazy with my hearing, being swamped with smells every time I breathe or seeing through things or feeling every single detail when I touch something, by not focusing too much on my senses. Kryptonians really weren’t made to live under a yellow sun like this, not for so long or without our native atmosphere to ground our abilities. It makes our senses go haywire. Very few could actually do this back then, it takes too much control.” He shrugged again. “It’s not so bad once you get used to it. I mean, eating something I like is an experience I literally can’t describe, it’s too good. Eating simple food helps too. The more processed, the more it tastes like something straight out of the periodic table. That’s why I like Ma’s food so much.”

That really put things in perspective for Natasha. Clark pretended to be a human so well that even her, who knew exactly what he was, was fooled most of the time. Life through his eyes – and nose, and tongue, and ears, and skin – was probably so different than a human’s that any comparison
would be meaningless. She wondered if Thor was like that as well.

Natasha schooled her emotions once again, knowing by now that Clark didn’t like to be treated as anything other than human.

“You know,” she said, “I know some people who would pay mountains of dollars for a tongue quite like yours.” Natasha raised a single eyebrow. “Wine tasting would be optional for some of them.”

Clark’s flushed cheeks brought her no small amount of amusement.

“I’m very happy with my current job, thank you very much,” he said.

Before she could tease him any further, there was a bell sound outside the door; a second later, the door opened and the waiter entered, pushing a small food cart, followed by three other waiters. It was interesting seeing them work, almost like a rehearsed dance, as they twirled around the table serving one dish after the other.

“Bon appétit,” the waiter said, bowing and leaving the room.

Clark was staring at all the food, marveled.

“This is… A lot of food,” he said, looking at her.

“You do have a healthy appetite, I remember,” she answered. “But I do urge you to reconsider paying because this is not going to be cheap.”

“Maybe I can pay for dessert, then,” Clark said, a little guilty, but starting to eat.

Watching him eat was, for a while, far more interesting than eating too, no matter how good the food smelled. Clark was as polite as ever, he used the right cutlery, and he ate at a relatively normal rate, but he did it with such gusto that it awed her. It was nice seeing someone as powerful as him taking pleasure in the little things.

She watched him eat for a few seconds, then started too, pulling a small plate of soup closer.

“So, Clark, now that you already gulped down half the food,” Natasha said, good-naturedly, “do you think you can tell me what you found out about the sorcerers?” He stopped his filled spoon halfway to his mouth, looking around as if assessing their privacy. “Private room and it’s not bugged, we can talk.”

He nodded and put the spoon down.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t think anyone would’ve believed me anyway,” he said and started talking.

Natasha soon understood why he said that.

The car stopped right in front of the building; for a few seconds, he didn’t move, simply watching the entrance through the tinted windows, preparing himself for what could be one of the defining moments of his life. He checked his clothes, his eyes scanning his suit and shoes, trying to find any problem with them whatsoever. Finding none, he breathed deep.

Wilson Fisk opened the car door and got out, masking his nervousness, walking in large steps to the entrance, the cold wind of the night doing little to cool him down.
He barely paid any attention to whoever opened the door and crossed it, his eyes looking for someone. The place was full, as always, each table of the famous establishment occupied by couples, friends or families.

Except for one, where a single woman was sitting. Fisk walked to her.

When she finally noticed him, she got up; Wilson forgot how to walk for a moment, momentarily dazed by her.

“Miss Marianna,” he greeted.

She smiled to him.

“Call me Vanessa, please.”

Matt arrived at the apartment Claire was hiding to find the place completely trashed, the burner he gave her left behind and no sign of her.

Closing his hands into fists, Matt kicked a chair to the wall and looked out of the window, his muscles tense with rage and fear. This was his fault. He was the one who got her mixed up into this, he was the one that forced Claire to change her whole life simply because she chose to save his.

And now she was kidnapped, probably by the Russians, and Matt had no idea where she was.

How did they find her? How did they know? There was only one logical explanation: the man he dropped from the roof of her building, the only Russian that knew where Matt had hidden himself after almost being killed, had woke up. He told them about Claire’s place, that was the only thing he could think of, and from there they somehow tracked Claire to her friend’s apartment.

Matt was already jumping through the window when he arrived at that conclusion, running to Claire’s apartment. Maybe there he would find some clue.

Clark sipped his wine again, letting it stay in his mouth only for enough time for him to appreciate its flavor and nothing else. Then he glanced at Natasha. She was still unusually motionless, looking at nowhere specific, shocked by what he told her.

Granted, Clark couldn’t blame her, but he was getting a little worried.

“This is it, Clark,” Natasha said, suddenly, focusing her eyes on him. “This is what will finally kill Fury.”

“What?!”

She raised her eyebrows. “The Super-Soldier Serum was a mark in human history and it defined a war, but we adapted to that. Bruce’s transformation was surprising, to say the least, but we learned to live with that. Stark’s suits changed warfare around the world forever, but we contained it. Thor’s arrival showed us exactly how low we fare in the universe’s food chain, but we moved on. And then we had the Chitauri, the Kryptonians, the Dark Elves… Alien invasions that almost destroyed Earth, but we learned to fight them. But this?”

Natasha shook her head, slowly, reaching her glass of wine and downing it in one go.
“Magic, parallel dimensions, beings so powerful that they threaten entire universes, a magic squad that deal with supernatural threats, prophecies, an Infinity Stone that controls time… Clark, this is… I don’t even know what to say.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I was pretty humbled too.”

“You were?” she asked, her eyes shooting up.

Clark smiled a bit because of Natasha’s stunned expression. “Natasha, I was always different, but I didn’t even know aliens were a thing before my father told me. All this? The Multiverse, the Sorcerer Supreme, entities that eat entire universes for breakfast… It’s weird as hell for me too.”

He shrugged. “And given the size of those threats, I can’t punch my way out of them anymore than you can. That feeling of powerlessness, of not actually being able to do a thing if one of them appears… Well, I feel it too.”

Maybe it was what he said, maybe it was the second glass of wine, but Natasha eventually snapped out of her shock. She wasn’t scared, Clark thought, not really, but it wasn’t every day you had your entire existence turned upside down. This wasn’t like the fact that the Norse gods existed – as aliens, from all things – or that magic was real. This was proof that there were other dimensions just within their reach and that there were beings out there so powerful that none of them could do a thing against them.

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“You’re right,” she whispered, “of course. It’s just… I really didn’t expect to ever deal with something like this. I guess I was a fool for thinking Loki and the Chitauri would be the weirdest situation I would have to deal with.”

“There was me too,” Clark joked, trying to lighten the mood.

It seemed to work, because she smiled a little bit. “That’s true. So, that woman was the Sorcerer Supreme, the guardian of the Sanctums Sanctorum, the sources of the magical barrier that keep this dimension safe from hostile dimensional entities… And she has an Infinity Stone. Is this correct?”

“Yep, pretty much.”

“And she is teaching you to protect your mind, so we don’t have a repeat of what happened with Lorelei,” she stated. Clark nodded, agreeing. There was a minute of silence. “In your honest opinion, Clark, are they a threat?” Natasha asked, bluntly.

He shook his head. “Not if you don’t make them one.” Clark leaned forward, serious. “Natasha, hear me out. The Sorcerer Supreme and her Sanctums are the only thing in the way of total annihilation. I’m not talking about Earth being invaded or even destroyed, I’m literally talking about the end of the universe. For Christ’s sake, do not let SHIELD antagonize her. Not only the Ancient One is not someone you want as an enemy, even if you do manage to defeat her, your prize will be this universe’s doom.”

Clark stopped for a second, still staring at Natasha, who was holding his gaze, attentive.

“The Time Stone is safe with her, no one is taking that, especially not SHIELD, and she is not abusing its power. Her sorcerers don’t involve themselves in the events of the world, unless they need to face a magical threat, and the Ancient One is actively interested in the protection of this world, since without the Sanctums, there is no barrier. So please, for the love of everything you hold dear, convince Fury and everybody else there to leave them alone. Better yet, keep this information between you two, if possible. The last thing we need is the World Security Council doing something stupid or, I don’t know, greedy people trying to acquire magic knowledge or even
the Infinity Stone itself.”

Something in Natasha’s face shifted when he said that. She knew he noticed and, hesitantly, started to speak.

“Loki’s Scepter is missing,” she said, going straight to the point. Clark widened his eyes.
“SHIELD had it under its protection since the Battle of New York and somehow it disappeared.”

“Someone stole it?”

“That’s the problem, Clark, a theft would’ve been noticed. The Scepter wasn’t stolen, it was taken by someone with access to it and the fact that it happened was a secret even to Fury and Fury knows every secret there is to know.” Natasha was more serious than Clark ever saw her.
“Someone betrayed us.”

That wasn’t good at all. SHIELD was as powerful as an intelligence organization could possibly become. They knew almost everything, about everyone. They were everywhere, involved in everything. If there were people inside SHIELD powerful enough to steal something like that Scepter unnoticed, then that meant a group of bad guys had access to all that influence and information too. And something like that in the hands of criminals was nightmare fuel.

Something suddenly occurred to him.

“Do you think that the people who stole the Scepter could also have stolen Zod’s body?” Clark asked. “And the rest of Kryptonian technology I couldn’t find?”

Natasha shrugged, apologetically. “I have no idea, Clark. I don’t know who did this. Fury and I are looking for the Scepter, quietly. If I find anything, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

He nodded, thankful. She looked down for a few seconds, apparently considering something.

“SHIELD was compromised,” she finally said. “I don’t know yet how bad it is, but it certainly doesn’t look good. I’ll keep what you told me about the sorcerers between Fury and me.”

“Thank you,” he said and he meant it.

“It’s for the best.” She sighed. “If we couldn’t keep the Scepter safe, I shudder to think what would happen with this bit of information.”

She reached for the wine bottle and filled both their glasses again. Clark was immune to the effects of Earth alcohol, but Natasha shouldn’t be; yet, she showed absolutely no signs of being intoxicated whatsoever. Russians, huh?

“Gotta tell you, Clark, I missed the days when all I had to deal with were terrorists, criminals and the occasional politician,” Natasha said, sipping her wine. “Now we have alien invasions every year, magical objects missing, sorcerers, dimensional conquerors… It makes me nostalgic for a simple mission, like arresting a mobster. I didn’t know it yet, but those were the days.”

He chuckled, then suddenly remembered he wanted to ask some things to Natasha about that very subject.

“Say, Natasha, what do you know about the Russians?” Clark asked.

Natasha looked at him with an amused expression. “Well, we like bears, snow, vodka and Adidas’ tracksuits for some reason. Oh, and don’t try to invade our lands during winter, it never ends well.”
Clark rolled his eyes. “I meant the Russian Mafia.”

She gave him a tiny smile. “I know a bit. Usually dealing with organized crime is below my paygrade, but call it a patriotic curiosity. Why do you ask?”

Trying to remember all the details from his conversation with Karen, Clark started to explain.

Wilson Fisk tried the wine Wesley recommended. It was good, but truth was he didn’t know much about wine, so he waited, apprehensive, to see what Vanessa thought about it. She sipped hers and smiled.

“It’s delicious,” she said.

He didn’t know why that made him feel so happy. Fisk was a troubled individual, he knew that. His life was difficult and the trials he faced shaped him on the man he was. He was hard, ruthless and sometimes cruel, he had to be, but none of that brought him any pleasure. Wilson did what he did to achieve his goals and only that, but each time he was forced to go down that path it seemed he would lose a part of himself.

When he looked at Vanessa, he felt whole.

She held his gaze, unafraid, something no other person was brave enough to do.

“You don’t do this much, do you?” she guessed.

“No,” he admitted immediately. “I’ve been… preoccupied, for a long time.”

Vanessa didn’t ask for a clarification, looking around.

“This is nice,” she said, about the restaurant. “I didn’t even know it was here.”

“Yes, it just opened last month.”

“The city’s really changing,” she said.

“Not fast enough,” Wilson remarked.

“I don’t know. Be a shame to see all the character scrubbed away.”

Wilson almost smiled. “You didn’t grow up here, did you?”

Vanessa laughed. “What gave it away?”

Now he smiled.

“When I was a kid,” Wilson started, “I used to dream what would it be like to… To live somewhere far away from Hell’s Kitchen. Somewhere beautiful.”

“What made you stay?”

“I didn’t,” he clarified. “When I was 12 years old, my mother, she sent me to stay with relatives. Had a farm, middle of nowhere. Those were good years.”

“But you came back,” Vanessa said.

“Yes. Time and distance, they afford a certain clarity. I realized that the city was a part of me, that
it was in my blood.” Wilson started at Vanessa’s eyes. “And I would do anything to make it a better place, for people like you.”

She held his stare and smiled, lifting her wine glass.

“To a better place,” she said, proposing a toast.

They both drank to that.

Matt got to Claire’s apartment and heard her neighbor right away; he was breathing fast, scared, but alone inside her apartment. Santino, if he recalled. Another person that helped him that night, when he foolishly fell into the Russian’s trap; another person he put at risk.

“It’s okay, Santino, it’s me,” he said, when the young man noticed his approach.

Santino was sitting in the middle of the kitchen, on the ground, leaning against the wall. Matt could smell blood on him, but nothing serious. Whatever they did, it scared him, but that was it.

“Do you remember me?” Matt asked, speaking Spanish.

“Yes,” Santino answered, staring at him.

“Claire’s been taken by some very bad people,” Matt said, speaking softly. “I need your help. Please.”

Santino was breathing faster now, sweating, his heart beating extremely fast. He was terrified.

“I didn’t say anything,” he cried. “Not at first. Then they took me up to the roof like you did with that man… They told me if I said anything to anyone, they’d come back for my mother.”

He was crying harder now.

“Do you know where they took Claire?” Matt asked.

“No, I’m sorry,” he shook his head. “Those men are going to hurt her because of me!”

“No, no, no, it’s not your fault, Santino, it’s mine,” Matt said, holding his shoulder. Matt looked down, physically ill when he admitted that out loud. “Is there anything else you heard or saw? Anything that might help me find her?”

There were a few seconds of silence and Matt was beginning to think that was it, then Santino spoke: “I saw them get into a taxi. But not in the back, in the front. Like it was theirs.”

“What was the company?” Matt asked, feeling a bit of hope flare inside himself. “Did you see a name?”

“Veles. Veles Taxi.”

Matt was already running.

Natasha listened patiently as Clark explained everything that happened that afternoon. Karen asking for help, the Union Allied scandal, the Masked Man, the series of murders to cover it all up, the amount of money being hidden in Union Allied’s pension fund… He told her everything and then allowed her some time to think.
As the minutes stretched, however, Clark started to become a bit impatient.

“What do you think?” he asked. She didn’t look up, still focused.

“I think,” she started, slowly, “that this might not be below my paygrade after all.” Natasha looked at him. “SHIELD doesn’t usually deal with organized crime. We help when we can, but our resources are limited and if we diverge them to this instead of tending to global security, eventually a bigger threat will slip through the cracks and cause a lot of damage. The police and the FBI usually do a good enough job here in the US.”

“But?”

“But… Organized crime, no matter how successful, don’t have the kind of money Miss Page stumbled upon. And in the unlikely case they do, I’d like to find out exactly how they managed this.” Natasha stopped for a moment, thinking. “You said the Russians were involved in a takeover?”

“That’s what it looks like, at least,” Clark answered. “Old time mobsters are turning up dead, but there are no signs of a war going on. They’re being absorbed. I know the Russians are into this, but I don’t know the dept of their involvement and who else is involved. I was thinking this money could be a mafia joint account of some kind.”

Natasha nodded slowly. “Possible, but it’s still too much money. Either there are a lot more factions involved in this… Or a really big one behind all that. Anyway, I’d like to find out. What’s your plan? Assuming you already have one.”

“Follow the thread,” Clark said. “I know two parts involved in all this in some capacity: the Masked Vigilante and the Russian Mafia. If I follow one of them, I may get to the rest.”

“And by your previous question, your plan is to go after the Russians,” Natasha guessed.

“The Masked Man is already going after them. I figured that if I go after them as well, the chances we cross paths are bigger. That’s why I asked what you know about them.”

She nodded, pensive, then stared at him. “The Russians in New York are led by two brothers, Vladimir and Anatoly Ranskahov. They were big shots in Moscow once upon a time, but they were betrayed, arrested and sent to a prison that might very well be Hell on Earth.”

Clark frowned. “If they were arrested there, why isn’t no one sending them back? You know who they are and they are convicted criminals. Why are they allowed to roam through the country?”

“Now, that is where things get interesting,” Natasha said, leaning forward. “I only know they were arrested in Moscow because I have contacts there. But any record of that arrest, the crimes they committed and even their time inside the prison simply doesn’t exist anymore.”
“How?” Clark asked, surprised.

Natasha shrugged. “I don’t know. Someone with a lot of money and a lot of influence probably got interested in the Ranskahov brothers. Whatever the case, it kept the police away from them and gave them the chance to take control of the Russians and then take Hell’s Kitchen. That is what called my attention to the case. I wanted to know who was the one behind them, who allowed them to take New York, because whoever it is, not even SHIELD knows their identity.”

“Do you think this ‘who’ is the same one behind Union Allied and all that money?” Clark asked.

“I’m not one to believe in coincidences.”

Clark was in silence for a while, trying to process everything Natasha told him; then, suddenly, he met her eyes.

“Why hasn’t SHIELD involved themselves in this, Natasha?” he asked. “These guys are the worst sort of criminals and you guys already know who they are. I’m not saying you should kill them, but surely there is a way to deal with this situation.”

Natasha’s expression showed no emotion whatsoever, as always, but Clark could tell she was bothered by what he said.

“SHIELD believes,” she started and Clark didn’t miss the fact that she didn’t include herself in this, “that they should deal with the big picture. Organized crime always existed and will always exist, there is no way around that. Even if they did arrest the Ranskahov brothers, other members of the Russian Mafia would continue the work as usual. If they didn’t, other mobs would step in and steal their territory. And as I said, SHIELD resources aren’t unlimited.”

“But there has to be a middle ground, Natasha,” Clark insisted. “I’m not saying SHIELD should solve all problems, but they could help. Stare at the big picture for too long and the little picture starts to fade away. Who takes care of the little people?”

She didn’t answer for a long time, thinking about his words; then she smiled.

“You do,” she said, tilting her head. “And it’s past time you had some help. Tell me, Clark, do you like to dance?”

Clark had no idea how to answer to that abrupt change of subject. Was that some sort of code?

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It wasn’t a code, Clark realized half an hour later, looking around the dance floor. It was packed to the brim with drunk people jumping up and down, the music was loud and the lights were shining in all colors, the psychedelic display making his head hurt.

Natasha had barely allowed him time to finish eating before she dragged him out and into her car, refusing to tell him where they were going until they parked in front of the hotel. Clark had no idea hotels even had parties like that, but apparently in the Blue Moon Hotel they were common. And famous thorough the world for how good they were, supposedly; Clark really wasn’t the best person to make that assessment.

Regardless, Clark was still as confused as he could possibly be as for the reason they were there. One second they were talking about the Russian Mafia, the other Natasha was dragging him there, to the middle of a huge party fueled by alcohol. He wasn’t a fan of places like that, not with his enhanced senses and inability to get drunk, and the fact that they could barely walk through all those people only made things worse.
He had to admit, though, watching Natasha dancing to the beat was a sight to see.

It wasn’t just because she was one of the most beautiful women he had ever laid eyes on. It wasn’t because of the way her body moved, so naturally, as if she had been born dancing. It wasn’t even because of the tantalizing flashes of skin her short dress revealed occasionally when she swayed to the music.

It was because how happy she looked when she was dancing.

Natasha didn’t live an easy life, Clark knew that. He wasn’t aware of the details, but he knew enough to realize she was lucky to be alive and even more lucky to have a mind of her own. She had her guard up every second of every day and even when she appeared relaxed or carefree, Clark knew she wasn’t, not really. She was always prepared to fight, because that’s how she always lived.

And yet, when she was dancing, Clark could see her relaxing. It was subtle, very subtle, and he was sure she would be prepared to deal with any threat in the split of a second if there was need for it. But for a few moments, at least for a little bit, Natasha was able to dance her worries away and Clark’s senses picked up that immediately.

“Dance with me!” she asked, smiling, knowing he could hear her even with the music so loud.

So he did. It wasn’t any kind of dance he knew of, not like the ones his mother made sure he learned, but Clark simply allowed his body to follow the beat as he danced close to Natasha, basking in her happiness while it lasted. He still had no idea what he was doing there, but at least they were having fun.

Slowly, but undoubtably, they started to move towards the bar and as soon as they were close enough Natasha turned and ordered them drinks. Clark used the time to learn more about the place, looking around, seeing what he could gather from that hotel. The people there were young, usually good looking and clearly had money to spend, since it wasn’t a cheap place. Couples dancing together, bachelors trying to pick up dates, women dancing with their friends while they spared glances to the ones that interested them… Nothing unusual, he supposed.

Clark had to reconsider that when Natasha came back, holding not just a drink, that she made him taste almost immediately, but a truly beautiful woman by her side; a statuesque blonde, who appraised him with apparent gusto without any shame.

Natasha leaned closer and whispered by his ear. “This is Alexandra. She’ll help spice up our sex life, darling.”

He didn’t know how exactly he stopped himself from coughing his drink all over the place.

Claire was hurting all over. Her face was bruised and bleeding and her mouth tasted like blood and dirt. She coughed, desperately, trying to think of a way to escape, of a way to do anything, when a huge hand grabbed her by the neck and tossed her against the taxi again. She groaned in pain.

“You answer, he stops hitting you,” one of the men said, the one who seemed to be in charge.

There were eight of them. The one that seemed to be the boss – who was also the one who grabbed her in the apartment – the huge one who also was in her friend’s apartment and six henchmen who were content to just watch her being tortured.

She didn’t know where she was. After passing out, she woke up inside the trunk of a taxi and
almost a second later she was grabbed and tossed on the ground. It looked like a garage or a repair shop, full of cars and tools and even one of those hydraulic lifts used to fix vehicles. It smelled like oil and gasoline.

And now blood too.

“I told you, I don’t know who he is,” Claire coughed, afraid.

The big guy lifted his fist and brought it down; Claire screamed, but the fist didn’t hit her, it hit the car door behind her, leaving a perfect imprint of his closed hand. She started crying. She hated herself for it, but she couldn’t help it, she was terrified.

“I d-don’t know, I don’t know, he never told me,” she said, her voice barely coming out.

The huge guy roared and grabbed her by the neck again; that was it, Claire thought, this was how she died.

“Aleksei, put her down!” the boss ordered. “I need her alive.”

The giant did as he was told and Claire exhaled deeply as soon as she could, coughing again. The boss was looking at her with cold eyes, not a bit of sympathy there.

“This brings me no pleasure,” he said and she believed him; but it was also pretty clear he didn’t care overly much about the whole thing. “There is no way out. No one will hear you down here, not even him…” he glanced up for a moment, as if to indicate the sky. He touched her face and Claire flinched, expecting pain, but he didn’t hurt her. “Tell me who he is and this ends, you have my word.”

She started crying again.

“I don’t know! I swear to god, I don’t know! He told me his name is Mike, but it’s not his real name. I never saw his face.”

All true, but what Claire didn’t add was that she wouldn’t tell him even if she did know. No matter how afraid she was.

The Russian stared at her for a long time, those unsettling cold eyes never blinking.

“I believe you,” he finally said.

Before she could feel relieved, he grabbed a knife and raised it. Claire didn’t even have a chance to scream when the lights suddenly went out. At the same second, something heavy split the air and collided with a metallic \textit{THUD} against the Russian; Claire couldn’t see, but she felt the man falling. He didn’t get up.

He was here!

Aleksei was tense, turning from one side to the other, trying to see something, \textit{anything}, in that darkness. He heard something being thrown and then someone falling, probably Anatoly, but he had no time to check. He could vaguely see shadowy forms, but the place was so dark that he might as well have his eyes closed.

That’s when he heard something breaking and a piercing scream.

“AAAAHHHH!” a man yelled, making the hair on the back of his neck stand.
Then there was another hit and the sound died down. Aleksei was sweating, breathing fast, his heart beating so strongly his chest hurt. Something flew, passing right by the side of his head – he felt the wind – and collided against another man; he, too, fell unconscious.

Bones cracking, screams, punches, a man being tossed over the windshield of a car… Aleksei had no idea what was happening, he couldn’t see, he couldn’t fight. For the first time in his life, he wasn’t the one hunting.

He was prey.

There was silence for a moment, where all he could hear was his own breath. Then the Masked Man attacked him. Aleksei felt his nose breaking under a fist, the blood pooling inside his throat, and he was tossed back a few steps. Before he had the chance to attack, to try anything, a metal rod hit his right knee and chin; Aleksei punched, blindly, only to hit absolutely nothing.

The Masked Man, however, promptly reacted, hitting his elbow and breaking his arm. Aleksei was screaming in pain, but that too was soon stopped when his throat was punched, sending him back. Right against the car lift; Aleksei was in so much pain that he didn’t even realize when the Masked Man released the car on the lift.

Right on top of him. Aleksei felt half his body crushing under the vehicle before he finally lost consciousness.

“Is he alive?” Claire asked.

The Masked Vigilante – or Mike – had turned the lights back on after a few minutes; what greeted Claire was a vision straight out of a nightmare. People, bleeding and broken, fallen between the cars. Pools of blood and bones sticking out. And finally, a taxi on top of that giant man who tortured her, the heavy vehicle crushing the man against the ground.

“He’ll live,” he answered, helping her up. He touched her wounded face with extreme care. “Unfortunately.”

In a few minutes, Claire would find it in herself the ability to disagree with his last statement, but at the moment she just didn’t care.

“Let’s get out of here,” Claire said.

The Masked Man immediately complied.

Clark fell on the bed, his body barely putting up a fight against the infinitely weaker strength of the woman who pushed him. At the moment, all he could do was sit up and stare, frozen, as Alexandra danced for him.

Nothing in his life had ever prepared him for something like that. He simply didn’t know what to do, how to react, and his voice seemed to have disappeared. Natasha, for a reason he couldn’t possibly comprehend, had apparently hired an escort for both of them. She guided a shocked Clark towards a hotel room she also reserved, the three of them got in, she said she needed to freshen up and disappeared in the bathroom and Clark was left alone with the woman.

And now she was starting to take her clothes off.

Desperate, Clark glanced at the bathroom’s door, expecting Natasha do get out and solve this
situation, whatever that situation even was. But she wouldn’t come out and Alexandra just wouldn’t stop undressing, her black dress already halfway peeled.

What the hell was he supposed to do? Get out? Tell her to stop? Call Natasha? Clark didn’t know why she was doing that, what was her plan – if there even was one – and he certainly didn’t know what the protocol was here. For starters, he and Natasha definitely weren’t a couple trying to spice things up and Clark was pretty sure that, whatever Natasha’s plan was, she didn’t expect him to just sleep with an escort.

And now the dress was gone. There was only a tiny lingerie left and by the look on Alexandra’s face, that wouldn’t last too long either.

“My, you’re a handsome one,” Alexandra purred, approaching him like a cat. “I’ll definitely have fun with you two.” She stopped right in front of him, smiling seductively, and grabbed his jacket. “Why don’t you get rid of those clothes?”

Clark should’ve stopped things there. Whatever plans Natasha had – considering this was part of some plan and not just a joke – this was his limit. He wouldn’t take his clothes off and he wouldn’t, in any circumstance, sleep with that woman. It was time to put his foot down.

Except he wasn’t moving, he wasn’t saying anything and he could just stare, his brain confused, as Alexandra started to remove his jacket. Before she could get far, however, a hand grabbed Alexandra’s. Natasha had arrived.

“He’s shy,” Natasha whispered, staring at Alexandra’s eyes; she touched her face, suggestively. “Why don’t you and I have a bit of fun first?”

And then they were kissing and Clark simply couldn’t look elsewhere. He tried, he should’ve, but he didn’t. He could just stare as Natasha and a very hot woman made out, hands touching everywhere, the sounds filling the quiet room. Five seconds, ten seconds, Clark lost count, all he could do was watch, shocked and marveled.

Then, out of nowhere, Alexandra collapsed on top of the bed, unconscious.

Clark looked from Natasha – her mouth still wet and red from kissing – to Alexandra, lying by his side, completely out.

“What the–” Clark breathed. “Natasha, what the hell happened?! What was that?”

“Sweet Dreams Lipstick,” Natasha answered, simply. “They’re laced with a sleep-inducing compound.” Clark kept staring at her, waiting for the rest of the explanation, but she purposely misinterpreted his look. “It’s old tech, Clark. Don’t tell Steve, but we have them since Peggy Carter was still an active agent.”

Clark simply stared dumbly for a moment, then shook his head.

“What are we doing here, Natasha?” he asked, getting up. “Why are we in this hotel? Why are we in a room with an unconscious escort?”

Natasha was pulling Alexandra to the middle of the bed, making sure she was lying comfortably.

“You did want to know about the Russians, didn’t you?” she asked. “Well, before the Ranskahov brothers took power in Hell’s Kitchen, the Russians followed another man. An old-timer named Sergei Mikhailov. Talented boss, but discreet. He retired to allow the new bloods to carry on, but he was a shrewd old man, he probably knows something about what happened.”
Clark was momentarily surprised by what she said; he certainly didn’t see that coming.

“Okay… But why are we here? More accurately, why are we here with her?”

“That’s an easy one,” she grinned. “The Blue Moon Hotel is famous for providing the best escorts in New York. They cater to the rich and powerful, from politicians to mobsters, guaranteeing privacy and a good time.”

Clark sighed. “This is illegal, isn’t it?”

She shrugged. “Probably, yes, but this is a fair place. The girls are well paid and taken care of, they’re not here unwillingly and they can leave anytime they want. There are worse ways to live.”

He wasn’t so sure he agreed with that, but that was a conversation for another time.

“And what does Sergei Mikhailov have to do with this?”

“Why, he’s a client, of course. A regular. And now that we’re in the guest room’s wing, we have access to him as well.”

“He’s here now?” Clark asked, surprised.

Natasha just smiled. “57 years old man, has a tattoo of an angel and a cross on his back. A big one.”

Clark started scanning the place as soon as she said it, his x-ray vision surveilling all the hotel in seconds.

“22º floor. Grey hair and beard, angel and a cross on his back… And a devil on his right cheek.”

Natasha frowned. “I don’t remember any tattoos on his face.”

“That one I knew nothing about,” she said, going to the windows and opening them. “Shall we go up?” He glanced at the unconscious Alexandra. “She’ll be fine, won’t remember a thing, only that she had a good time.”

He didn’t enjoy leaving her there, especially not drugged, but he chose to believe Natasha. Jumping out, they both stood on the outside of the building, on the edge of the window of the 17º floor; the wind was howling.

“Usually, climbing would be such a boring task… Lucky us you can fly,” Natasha said, embracing his neck with her arms; he felt his cheeks getting warmer when she got so close, especially after a show like that, but he lifted her and said nothing as he started to fly up.

“You do realize we could’ve done this from the beginning, right?” Clark said. “No need for escorts whatsoever.”

“Huh… It never crossed my mind.” He didn’t believe her for a second. She grinned, approaching to whisper in his ear. “But it worked out. Now I know why they call you ‘Man of Steel’.”

If he were flying fast, Clark would’ve probably crashed when she said that.

“Are you sure about dessert?” Wilson asked. “They have an incredible Zuppa Inglese,”
Vanessa laughed. “Don’t children have that at birthday parties?”

“Yes,” he agreed, smiling. “When I was a kid I loved it. Probably loved it a bit too much.”

Wilson had never felt like that before. Free, able to expose himself, to show weakness, to poke fun at himself. It was a feeling unlike any other he ever felt and he lost himself in bliss when he looked at her.

“Well, now I have to know what it tastes like,” Vanessa said. He smiled and ordered it. “Chocolate was always my downfall. Milk chocolate, not the dark stuff they say it’s better for you.”

“I can order something else.”

“No, no, it’s good to try new things. Get out of the comfort zone.”

He could agree with that sentiment.

“Yes, we get caught up in what we’re doing… Who we think we are.”

“So…” Vanessa stared at him. “Who are you, Wilson?”

“Tonight I’m just a man, enjoying the company of a captivating woman.”

They stared in each other’s eyes, feeling a truly powerful connection. Maybe this was possible after all, Wilson thought. Maybe he could lower his guard, allow someone to get close, feel love. Maybe his life didn’t have to be only darkness and war.

The doors of the restaurant opened with force. Every single one of his guards, sitting around him, got up. And just like that, the dream shattered.

Slowly, Fisk turned, seeing Anatoly approaching, eyes widened with a crazy glow and bruises all over his face.

“Sir, I need to speak to you,” he said, fighting to pass through his guards.

“What’s going on?” Vanessa asked. She was afraid.

“We need to go, now,” Wilson said, getting up and leading Vanessa out. “I’m sorry.”

“I wanted to tell you my brother and I gratefully accept your–“

“Wesley will take care of you,” Wilson said, not even looking at him as he guided Vanessa out.

He was foolish for thinking he could have both worlds.

Clark and Natasha advanced through the long corridor, seeing the two guards posted at the door in the end. Two Russian bodyguards, by the look of it.

“He’s alone in the room,” Clark whispered. Kelex had already taken care of the hidden cameras, but the men would hear him if he spoke loudly. “The woman left a few minutes ago and hasn’t come back yet.”

“Good,” Natasha said. “Follow my lead.”

The bodyguard’s eyes followed their moves as they approached, glued to Natasha’s legs, Clark
noticed. They probably believed she was one of the hotel’s girls.

“Hi, boys, I brought a gift for Mr. Mikhailov, with the compliments of the Blue Moon Hotel,” Natasha said, her voice oozing seduction. The men couldn’t keep their eyes off her, but they did when she added: “Oh, no, not me: him.”

And then she pointed at Clark.

Clark was sure that ruse would never have worked in the first place, but whatever small chances it had were promptly destroyed when his eyes widened like saucers. Realizing they weren’t who Natasha said they were – as if they actually believed in the lie for even a second –, the men tried to attack, only to be immediately put to sleep by quick – but gentle – punches.

“Really?” he asked, looking at her.

She just smiled and grabbed the keycard from the fallen man, getting into the room. The room was much like the one they were before, except a bit bigger, full of candles and a little more richly decorated. The big change, however, was the naked Russian mobster lying on the bed, ass up, proudly displaying his tattoos to the world; Clark scratched his eyes again.

“The Devil on the right cheek is a new one,” Natasha mentioned, loudly.

Clark watched as the overweight Russian mobster froze for a moment; then, in a show of speed that honestly surprised him, he turned around and lunged for what was probably a hidden gun by the side of the bed. Natasha, however, was just too fast. Before he could dream of taking his weapon, she already had her pistol out.

One single shot echoed in the room, hitting Sergei’s arm.

“ARGHHH!” he screamed, falling back; apparently, though, it wasn’t the pain that made him terrified. “You stupid bitch, the noise!”

“Calm down, Sergei, the room is soundproof,” Natasha said, completely calm, getting closer.

“I don’t give a fuck about the Hotel, he will hear!”

“‘He’? ‘He’ who?” Natasha asked, as if she didn’t know.

“You-Know-Who!” he yelled.

Clark rolled his eyes, sighing in exasperation. Natasha glanced at him, grinning.

“I think we’re safe, Sergei,” she said. “But, just to be sure, you should cooperate. Otherwise I’ll shoot you again and Superman will surely appear. But since I’m one of the good guys now, only you will have to worry about drawing his attention.”

He whined, clutching his bleeding arm. “I’m clean! I have nothing to hide.”

“Don’t lie to me, Sergei.”

“I run a few games here and there, what do you care?” he barked. “Goddamn it, girl, why the hell are you shooting me?! You know I’m out!”

His brave defiance ended pretty quickly when Natasha put the pistol against his head. It wasn’t, Clark noticed, the gun that scared him; it was her eyes. The woman in front of him wasn’t Natasha anymore, it was the Black Widow.
“That’s exactly why I’m here, Sergei,” she said, forcing him to lean back as she pushed the gun on his forehead. “I want to know why you’re out. Who forced you out. Who allowed the Ranskahov brothers to take control, who wiped clean their records, who the fuck is pulling the strings!”

The Russian was sweating, his heart beating fast. Clark could understand why, but he didn’t like it. He didn’t like seeing his friend disappearing inside the Black Widow. So he got closer and put a hand on her shoulder.

It was subtle, but he felt her muscles relaxing a bit.

Clark looked at the mobster.

“Talk,” he ordered, without any niceness whatsoever.

“Who the hell are yo–“

Clark didn’t give him the chance to finish, he simply grabbed him by the throat and lifted him a few inches from the bed, pressing him against the wall.

“I’m the person that’ll listen to your confession,” Clark said, leaning over him, his eyes threatening. “And only that. Someone is making a mess in Hell’s Kitchen and is using the Russians for that. Money is being moved around, people are dying. You will tell me who is behind it.”

He pressed his neck for a few more seconds then released, letting the Russian fall back to the bed, coughing.

“They’ll kill me,” he said, his voice hoarse. “They’ll–“

“I can protect you,” Natasha said. “SHIELD can.”

Sergei started laughing. “Not against them, girl.” He shook his head. “I told those idiot brothers not to get mixed up with those people. I told them it never ends well.”

Natasha got closer.

“Mixed up with who?” she asked.

The old mafia boss looked up and Clark saw true fear on his expression.

“Yami no Te,” he whispered.

Clark was surprised to see the same fear reflected on Natasha’s expression as well.

Anatoly looked at Wesley. They were inside Fisk’s car, moving to an unknown location, where they would finally make that deal and surrender their territory. He hated it. His brother hated it even more, but after what happened, after they missed their one chance to defeat the Masked Man, what choice did they have?

It was making a deal or losing everything and he swore he would never lose everything again.

“Even after all that, you didn’t even get a name out of the girl?” Wesley asked.

Anatoly despised him, but he concealed that feeling. Now it wasn’t the time for pride.

“No. She knew nothing,” he said. “And the Man in the Mask arrived before we could find out
more.”

There was a moment of silence.

“You were right to reach out for us,” Wesley said, his voice calm, as the car entered a building and started to go down. “Although a call would’ve been more appropriate.”

“I wanted to meet in person, put the past behind us,” Anatoly said.

The car continued going down and down, underground, far away from meddling aliens where they could speak. They arrived in a garage, dark, and stopped.

“They say the past is etched in stone,” Wesley started, as the car stopped, “but it isn’t. It’s… Smoke, trapped in a closed room, swirling, changing. Buffeted by the passing of years and wishful thinking. But even though our perception of it changes, one thing remains constant. The past can never be completely erased. It lingers, like the scent of burning wood.”

Anatoly had no idea what this guy was talking about, but he said nothing. Wesley’s cellphone rang.

“Sir? Yes, passenger side.”

“Was that him?” Anatoly asked.

“Hmm. He’d like to have a word with you.”

He nodded; and then the window by his side exploded and Fisk grabbed him. Anatoly was tossed out of the car like a ragdoll, confused, not knowing what the hell was happening, but before he had any way of finding out he was punched.

Anatoly fell, but he was soon lifted again and punched one more time. And again, and again, and again, each hit feeling like a hammer. He felt his nose break, then his jaw and teeth, and as soon as he tried to fight back he was tossed down again. Fisk was yelling like an avatar of rage, his massive strength breaking every bone of Anatoly’s body.

“You embarrassed me!” he yelled, tossing him against the car. “You embarrassed me in front of her!”

Fisk headbutted him again and again, until Anatoly’s face was pretty much destroyed and he couldn’t keep himself up anymore. There was still a slip of conscience left, a tiny bit of life in his body.

That’s when Fisk grabbed him, placed his head against the car and repeatedly smashed the door against his skull. Anatoly didn’t live past the first hit, but Fisk kept going until his head was completely removed.

Wesley got out of the car, walking slowly. Wilson was standing over Anatoly’s body, shaking with rage, a drop of blood on his face; he took a handkerchief and offered him.

“Tell Mr. Potter I’ll need a new suit,” Wilson said, cleaning the blood drop, slowly.

He nodded, looking at Anatoly’s corpse.

“And what do we do about him, sir?”

There was a moment of silence, then Wilson said:
“What any upstanding citizen does when he is threatened by a criminal: call the police.” Then he looked up. “And call for Superman.”

Wesley smiled. Maybe the problem with the Masked Man, the Russians and Superman would solve itself, after all.

Hey guys, how are you doing? Sorry about the delay, I’ve been working a lot. I’m traveling right now, but I managed to finish this chapter, finally. I hope you like it.

Hope you are all doing great!
The God and the Devil

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Chapter 34 – The God and the Devil

Matt started to make breakfast in silence, already dressed to work. In the distance, with his enhanced hearing, he could listen as Claire showered, slowly, carefully, most likely trying to clean herself not only from all the dirt and blood, but from the very experience she went through.

Kidnapping, torture, near-death… All because of him. His fault.

No one deserved to go through something like this and Claire deserved even less. She was a good person and the only reason she was involved in this at all was because she chose to save his life, to take him all bloody and hurt out of a dumpster and then care for him, all because she believed he was doing the right thing.

Sometimes, like at that very moment, Matt wished he had Claire’s certainty, because if what he was doing resulted in innocent people getting hurt, then maybe it wasn’t the right thing at all.

Trying to relax his thoughts, Matt focused on the smell of the freshly brewed coffee, waiting until Claire finally finished showering, got dressed and entered his living room. She was limping, walking stiffly and – even though his eyes couldn’t see – he knew her body was covered in bruises; he could feel the difference in the temperature compared to the undamaged skin.

“You cook for every girl you bring home?” Claire asked, pulling the bathrobe he lent her closer.

Matt couldn’t help but to smile at the carefree way she spoke; hurt she might be, but Claire was indeed strong.

“Nah, just the ones that keep me alive,” he joked, opening the fridge as she sat down.

“You have a job or something to get to?” Claire asked. “Or are you one of those billionaire playboys I’m always hearing about?”

He laughed. “No, I have a job.”

“Damn! Thought I lucked out. What do you do?”

“Lawyer. I have a practice, so I’m my own boss,” Matt said, serving two glasses of juice.

“Lawyer by day, vigilante by night… How the hell does that work?”

Matt chuckled. “Yeah, I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

Claire got up and sat at the table, wincing in pain. “Oh, shit.”

“You just opened one of the cuts on your back,” Matt mentioned, taking the plates to the table.

She was surprised. “How do you know that?”

“I can… taste copper in the air,” Matt answered, grabbing the first-aid kit nearby.

Claire laughed at the absurdity of his answer. “Copper in the air,” she repeated.
Matt just smiled and leaned close, hands almost touching her bathrobe. “May I?”

She hesitated for a moment, then said: “Knock yourself out, Houdini.”

Slowly and very carefully, Matt touched Claire’s back, feeling everything his heightened senses could grasp. He couldn’t see, sure, but the amount of information he got from simply getting near her was much superior than what any normal person could gather with only their eyes.

“The swelling is down,” he informed her. “Rib fracture is only a hairline. I couldn’t tell before.”

He opened the kit and grabbed some bandages.

“You have x-ray fingers now?” Claire asked.

“I can hear your bones shift when you breathe,” he explained. “No grinding means nothing’s broken.”

“What does a hairline fracture sound like?” Claire asked.

He thought for a moment. “An old ship.”

She laughed, eyes light glowing with surprise. “How do you… I mean, I know that you’re blind, but you… see so much.” She turned to stare at him. “How?”

Matt started to clean her wounds.

“I guess you have to think of it as more than just five senses,” he started to explain. “I can’t see, not like everyone else, but I can feel. Things like balance and direction… Micro-changes in air density, vibrations, blankets of temperature variations… Mix all that with what I hear, subtle smells, and all of the fragments form a sort of… Impressionistic painting.”

Claire was in silence, thinking about what he said. “Okay, but what does that look like? Like, what do you actually see?”

Matt stared back at Claire, his senses drawing a painting of her.

“A world on fire.”

They shared a moment of silence, both of them seeing each other using their own means.

“If all I saw was fire,” Claire said, finally, “I’d probably want to hit people too.”

They laughed and Matt got quiet for a few moments, allowing her to eat in peace as he got ready to leave for work. As soon as she touched the coffee mug, however, she said something that made him turn to her immediately.

“I met a guy that could do the same thing you do, once,” Claire mentioned, wincing when the hot beverage stung her wounded lips. “Or something close, I don’t know. I don’t think he was blind.”

Matt stared in shocked silence for a moment.

“What?”

Claire put the mug down, glancing at him.

“In the hospital, I met this guy… Don’t really remember what he was doing there, I think he was
checking on some patients, anyway… He was, well, he could see a lot too,” Claire explained.

“How so?” Matt asked, curious.

“Well, he could tell people’s injuries, just like you did now,” Claire said. “Like, he glanced at a boy and told me his arm wasn’t broken, just dislocated.” Matt opened his mouth to say something, but Claire simply interrupted him. “I know, I know, could’ve been a guess, but after that he just looked at one woman and knew she was pregnant. Not only pregnant, but carrying twins.”

Okay, that was a bit weirder, Matt admitted.

“The impressive thing, however, was what he did after,” Claire continued. “We had this patient in the ICU, no one knew what the hell was wrong with him. Seizures, headaches, his heart stopped twice… He was gonna die soon at the way things were going and we didn’t know shit about what was wrong with him.”

“Let me guess, this guy found out?”

“One look! He looked at the guy for less than a minute and BAM! Turns out the guy had been shot a few years back and a piece of the bullet was still stuck in his leg. He was dying from lead poisoning.” Claire smiled, clearly amazed. “We took the guy for surgery, removed what was left of the bullet and he lived.”

Matt was still in silence. Could this man have gifts like his? In a world like this it wasn’t impossible, but it was still remarkable.

“Did you ask him how he did what he did?”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes. He said he could ‘do things that other people can’t’. And then he told another doctor that he was a magician.” She sighed. “Somehow I don’t think he was telling the truth.”

Matt chuckled. “Well, in his defense, it’s not something you advertise.”

She nodded, half-agreeing. “True, but imagine if he did. If you did. How many people out there have to hide their gifts when they could be using it for good things, like this? I mean, you use yours to beat up criminals, which I guess is a way of helping, but you could’ve been an excellent doctor.”

He smiled. That was something that had never crossed his mind.

“I’m flattered, but I think you’re better at the stitching part than me,” Matt joked.

Claire sniggered. “You did provide me with a lot of occasions to practice. Not complaining, though, it’s better than staying inside feeding the cat all day.”

Sensing her excitement vanishing, Matt leaned closer. He didn’t want to say this anymore than she wanted to hear it, but they didn’t have any option.

“Claire, they know who you are now,” he said, serious. “And they are not going to stop. I’d like you to stay here, with me, just until I figure something out.”

Claire was terrified, he could sense. She smelled of fear. But at the same time Matt knew that, if he hadn’t heightened senses, he would never know. She was afraid, but she was not showing it, at least in a way normal people could see.
He knew Claire was brave, but it wasn’t until that moment he saw how much.

“That’s a hell of a way to get a girl to move in,” she joked, even though her voice carried no amusement.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Matt asked, continuing the game.

And then he did something he wanted to do for a long time. Touching her lips, very carefully, Matt leaned closer and kissed her. She hesitated for a moment, then kissed back.

“I was wondering if you were ever going to do that,” she said.

“Well, I’ve been a little busy,” Matt defended himself.

Claire just chuckled and started eating.

“So, do you have any idea what to do now?” she asked, as Matt finished getting dressed to work. “Why don’t you go to the police? With all that you have on the Russians?”

“I wear a mask and beat on people,” Matt answered, normally, as if talking about the weather. “Doesn’t exactly mesh with police policy.”

That’s without mentioning the fact it wouldn’t work. As a lawyer, he knew very well that any evidence he collected beating people up would simply be thrown out of the window, if it even got that far with the amount of corrupt cops and bribed officials out there.

Claire sighed. “You’re going to end up in another dumpster if you try to take down the entire Russian mob yourself.”

“Maybe I only need to take down one man,” he suggested.

“Fisk?”

“Cut off the head of the snake, the body dies.”

“And how do you know he is the head of the snake if you can’t find anything on him?” she asked.

“There was a murder in a bowling alley, a man named Prohaszka, owned a majority in Kitchen Cabs.”

He saw the light turning on top of her head. “The cabs! They were turning those over in the garage they took me to.”

“Right,” Matt agreed. “I think Fisk hired the man that killed Prohaszka so the Russians could take over his business. The garage they took you was enough proof. I have a trail to follow now.”

Claire simply stared at him.

“Good to know my near-death experience was worth something,” she deadpanned.

Matt grinned. “It is, isn’t it? Usually people only get traumatized.” He put on his jacket and turned to the door. “I’ll bring some clothes for you on the way back.”

Vladimir Ranskahov was worried. His brother, Anatoly, was missing and no one in town was able to find him. That had never happened before. Vladimir and Anatoly were inseparable; while not
joined at the hip, they were always looking out for each other, at all times. It was how they survived so long in this business.

And now he couldn’t find him.

Normally, Vladimir wouldn’t be this worried, his brother was a strong man, just like he was. He knew how to take care of himself. But things were far from normal. They had Fisk breathing down their necks, Madame Gao unhappy with the lack of delivery of her product, a Masked Vigilante beating up their guys every single night and a fucking alien flying around, looking at them from up there as if he was an eagle and them rats to be hunted.

They were forced to accept Fisk’s terms, to basically surrender their operations to the man. Vladimir had a bad taste in his mouth just by thinking about this, but the situation spiraled out of control. Liking it or not, they needed this to survive. And Anatoly needed to be there.

It was not the moment for disappearing.

Walking from one side to the other in his room, Vladimir tried to imagine where his brother could be, when someone knocked at his door.

“Come in,” he said.

As if his day couldn’t get any worse, the door opened to reveal Fisk’s maid, James Wesley. Vladimir did not hide his contempt for the man as he stared at him.

“My employer sends his regards,” Wesley said, smiling as he walked to him, “and his gratitude that his offer was accepted. There are still a few details we’d like to iron out before…” He looked around. “Where’s your brother?”

Vladimir stared deeply into Wesley’s eyes, not unlike a wolf.

“This is a thing I was going to ask you,” he said. “Last time I saw him he was heading to see Mr. Fis– your employer.”

Wesley smiled when he stopped himself from saying Fisk’s name out loud; Vladimir almost snapped then and there.

“He practically kissed me when we agreed to terms,” Wesley said. “He have a girl? Or a… boy he might be celebrating with?”

Vladimir’s eyes were still unblinking, staring at Wesley, but before he could say anything the door to his office opened again. His man entered, face somber.

“We found him,” he whispered.

Vladimir felt his chest hurt.

Clark watched as Natasha grabbed a bottle of expensive vodka and filled two glasses, pushing one to Sergei Mikhailov. The old Russian mobster – his arm properly bandaged after being shot by the same woman serving him a drink –, grinned and lifted the little glass.

“Breakfast of champions, huh?” he remarked, getting a tiny grin from Natasha as she lifted her own.

“The secret for a long, healthy life,” Natasha agreed and both of them downed the vodka in one go.
The alcohol obviously wouldn’t affect his Kryptonian physiology, but Clark almost felt his stomach twist simply by watching them drinking the vodka as if it were water, the morning sun glowing through the window of the old apartment. They had arrived not even ten minutes ago, directly from the Blue Moon Hotel, still dressed in the same clothes; Clark wearing a dark suit and Natasha her blue dress.

Sergei, thankfully, was dressed now, no longer punishing Clark’s eyes with his inappropriately placed tattoos.

According to Natasha, that was a safe place, one of the many locations she owned throughout the city under fake identities. Not even SHIELD knew about it, or at least that was what she told Sergei when he very nearly panicked after whispering a single name.

_Yami no Te._

Clark still didn’t know what that was, who they were, but the very mention of the name was enough to spook Natasha and that didn’t bode well for anybody. Natasha Romanoff was a SHIELD agent, a master assassin, the legendary Black Widow herself. She had faced gods and aliens and things that would make experienced warriors weeping in fear.

And she still trembled when she heard that name. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good news.

“This brings me back to the old days,” Sergei smiled. “It’s good to drink with you again, girl. Even if you had to shoot me first.”

She grinned. “Shooting you also feels nostalgic.”

The old mobster pulled his shirt down, showing an old scar on his shoulder. He stared at her with an eyebrow raised.

“I remember,” Sergei deadpanned and then he laughed.

Clark really had no idea what kind of relationship he was seeing there. Friends? Enemies? Rivals?

“How do you two know each other?” he finally asked, curious.

The Russian turned to look at him, his expression not nearly as friendly as before.

“Who’s the pretty boy?” he asked Natasha, still looking at Clark.

The question seemed to amuse Natasha.

“The ‘pretty boy’ is a friend,” she answered, glancing at Clark with a small grin. Then she turned to Sergei, her face losing the previous mirth. “And don’t call him that.”

Sergei nodded, apparently taking what Natasha said as permission to answer.

“Hell, we’ve met years back,” Sergei said, thinking; then he glanced at Natasha. More accurately, he stared directly at her cleavage, without any attempt to disguise what he was doing. “She didn’t even have any tits back then.”

To his surprise, Natasha wasn’t even remotely bothered by the commentary. She just looked back at him, her eyes going down from his face to his chest, and deadpanned:

“Neither did you.”
The overweight mobster guffawed, looking down at his own chest.

“Touché, girl, touché. Ah, age will do that to you,” Sergei lamented, still amused.

“Food and lack of exercise will do that to you,” Natasha corrected, pouring him another glass.

“You really let yourself go after retirement, didn’t you?”

“The mark of a successful man!” Sergei exclaimed, boisterous. “You start poor and thin and finish rich and fat.”

Natasha glanced skeptically at him, but apparently chose not to say anything else. Instead, she turned to Clark.

“I’ve met him during a mission, before I worked for SHIELD,” Natasha said, tactfully.

When she was still a ruthless assassin, was the unspoken part. Sergei wasn’t as tactful.

“Shit, it was a bloodbath!” he described, and Clark heard Natasha sighing. “It was a card game, you know, the high-stake ones held by the bosses. So obviously, everyone had to surrender their weapons to enter.” Sergei grinned as he looked at Natasha. “Imagine our surprise when a little red-haired tyke fell from the ceiling with two pistols and started shooting everyone.”

Clark widened his eyes. He already knew Natasha had started her “job” early – was forced to, really –, but still, getting confirmation that she truly killed people as a child was heartbreaking.

Sergei, of course, didn’t think so. By the way he was talking, he thought it was awesome.

“The men started to run towards where the guns were stored,” the Russian continued, “but the moment they got close the whole thing exploded.” He laughed. “Holy fuck, you can’t imagine the carnage. I thought everyone was doing to die, but I realized soon enough that the girl was choosing her targets very carefully and I apparently wasn’t on the list.”

“Lucky you,” Natasha mentioned.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you still shot me.”

“Why?” Clark asked, surprised.

“One of my men panicked and tried to hit her with a chair,” Sergei explained, as if it were the most common thing in the world. “Idiot didn’t realize she was killing the competition, not us, so I tried to stop him. The chair fell, she got startled and BANG! Right in my shoulder,” he finished, showing the old scar again.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Big baby. As if I hadn’t already apologized.”

Sergei laughed again, drinking more vodka. “You never did! The Red Room did. They gave me a ‘murder coupon’. I still have it.”

Clark didn’t know what this “Red Room” was, but by the context of the conversation they were Natasha’s old employers; a tiny glance from her confirmed his suspicions, as if she was promising an explanation later on.

If Natasha wanted to speak about that it would be her choice, Clark decided. He wouldn’t ask anything about that, not now and not later, he knew her past wasn’t good – to say the least –, but one part of the conversation needed to be addressed.
“Murder coupon?!” Clark couldn’t help but exclaim.

“Yeah, standard Red Room ‘mea culpa’ gift,” Sergei explained. “I wasn’t the intended target and I got hurt by one of their own, so they apologized.” He grinned and tilted his head in Natasha’s direction. “The girl visited me on the next day and gave me the news. But not any apology, not until today.”

He looked at her, expectantly. Natasha just filled his glass again, her eyes never leaving his.

“Keep dreaming,” she deadpanned and Sergei roared in laughter. Natasha looked at him. “Sergei here was a boss back then and it was a contact my employers didn’t want to lose, thus the ‘coupon’.” She turned to Sergei. “Too bad you waited so long to redeem it, it seems it expired.”

Natasha pushed her glass away, eyes still fixed on Sergei.

“Now that we drank and talked about the good old days, let’s move on to the real reason we are here, shall we?”

Just like that, the illusion of lightheartedness was shattered and what was the meeting of two old colleagues became an interrogation. Sergei’s expression turned somber, no traces of his earlier cheerfulness present anywhere.

“Girl, like I said before, leave this alone,” he said, seriously. “You know as well as I do what these people are capable of.”

Natasha, surprisingly, nodded in agreement. “I do,” she said, but before Sergei could feel any relief, she added: ”That’s why I’m against them.”

Sergei shook his head slowly, as if Natasha was being purposely stupid.

“There is no ‘against them’, girl! There is ‘alive’ and there is ‘dead’. Guess which you’ll be if you continue with this madness.” He sighed, looking every bit as stressed as his voice indicated. “Followed swiftly by me when they realize I’m here.”

“No one knows you’re here but us,” Natasha repeated, maybe for the tenth time.

“No? And what happens when I don’t go back to my apartment? What happens when I don’t show up to manage my business, to feed my damn cat, to show them that I simply didn’t disappear off the face of the Earth?”

In silence, Natasha opened her purse and pulled a small, black notebook from it. She opened it, her fingers turning the little pages fast.

“First of, you don’t own a cat,” Natasha started. “You do own a cactus, simply because it’s easy to care for and won’t die if you forget to water it regularly, which you already did it, last night at 07:42 PM, before leaving for the Blue Moon Hotel. Secondly, you do disappear from time to time, or, more accurately, you fly under the radar for as long as you can, not exceeding, ever, the period of 48 hours.” She glanced at him. “I suppose that’s as far as you’ll go to challenge their authority, which, of course, is not really a challenge if they allow it.”

She eyed Sergei.

“Your bodyguards are in my custody, safe and sound in the next room, and I haven’t alerted anyone about it. No one knows you left with us from the hotel and the footage will show you leaving with your bodyguards, in your vehicle, as if nothing happened.” Natasha closed the
notebook, eyes still unblinking. “So, I dare say we have, at least, a day and a half to talk before they notice something is wrong and decide to hunt and kill you. I suggest we make good use of it… For your sake.”

It was like watching a dance or, better yet, a battle. Hit by hit, Natasha had cornered Sergei until he simply had no way to escape. Sensing that this was the moment, Clark approached the table.

“What exactly is this Yami no Te?” he asked.

There was a moment of silence.

“Yami no Te, La Mano, Pyka, La Main, Tentáculo... The Hand, as it is known here, is a very old, very powerful criminal organization,” Natasha answered, slowly. “And one responsible for unspeakable horrors all across the world, if stories are to be believed.”

“They are more than just stories,” Sergei added, his eyes glassy. “They are very, very real. And even worse than you imagine.”

Clark tried to imagine the scope of an organization like that, capable of scarring even SHIELD agents and mobster bosses, an organization that apparently was big enough to extend its reach all over the world.

Worse, an organization capable of doing all that without Clark even knowing it existed. How was that possible?

“My… Old employers,” Natasha started, slowly, “had precious little information on them and SHIELD has even less. But I did come across some stories, tales that spanned decades long on several countries. I would have believed them nothing but myths, a boogeyman to scare people… If not for Pyramiden.” She looked at Sergei’s pale face. “That’s where you first met them, wasn’t it?”

The old, tough and dangerous mobster just nodded, as if too scared to talk.

“What is Pyramiden?” Clark asked, confused.

Natasha took a deep breath. “Pyramiden is an old coal-mining settlement, located on the archipelago of Svalbard, in Norway. As I understand, it was founded by Sweden and sold to the Soviet Union in 1927.”

“It’s right next to the North Pole, cold even for Russians,” Sergei added, his voice rough. “I swear you could see penguins waving at you from the distance.”

“There are no penguins at the North Pole, only at the South,” Clark interrupted, only to for Sergei to stare evilly at him. “But never mind that, please continue.”

“The settlement continued to mine coal all those years,” Natasha went on, “but by the end of the century, when the Soviet Union finally broke in 1991, it became less and less profitable until it finally closed all its operations by 1998. It’s all but abandoned now.” She raised her face and looked at Sergei. “But that isn’t the true reason Pyramiden is a ghost town, is it?”

The Russian mobster was in silence for a moment.

“It is not,” he finally sighed. Sergei scratched his eyes and took a deep breath. “Look, after the Soviet Union broke, we were living the golden days of the mob. We had an empire that controlled half the planet in our hands, a military superpower with no war to fight and no one to oversee it.
The whole thing shattered, the government didn’t know what it was doing anymore, and no one was taking care of anything.”

Natasha nodded in agreement.

“That was a nightmare for intelligence agencies everywhere,” she said, clearly for Clark’s benefit, “so maybe it was a good thing that it happened before I worked for SHIELD. Corrupt government officials, ex-KGB agents, greedy military officials… They were all suddenly operating freely, with direct access to everything that used to belong to the Soviet Union. Military equipment – and I don’t mean a few guns and bullets, but tanks, aircrafts, submarines, battleships and even some nuclear warheads were sold to criminals, terrorists, warlords and dictators all over the world. Some of those warheads remain unaccounted for to this day.”

“And it all got through us,” Sergei added. “We were the middlemen for all those deals. Not only weapons, but land, oil, technology, gas… Even mining operations.” He sighed again. “That’s how I acquired Pyramiden. Some corrupt politician traded it for… Hell, I don’t even remember, but it made money, so I got it. And that was when they approached me.”

Before continuing, Sergei grabbed the vodka bottle and took a long sip directly from it. Clark couldn’t help but to notice that his hands were shaking.

“A Chinese old lady went to see me,” he said. “Short, walking with a cane, completely harmless at first sight. She had some guy with her, a translator, that introduced her as Madame Gao.” Sergei shrugged. “Never heard of her in my life, but she told me she was aware I was in possession of the mining operations in Pyramiden and that there was a certain archeological artifact on the island. Buried, so it would have to be dug out.”

He glanced at Clark and Natasha, raising his eyebrows.

“In return, she would pay me an absurd amount of money. So I thought ‘why the hell not?’. I had people and the mining equipment. She would pay for everything and if I happened to come across something really valuable I could just take it for me and give the old lady the finger. I mean, it’s digging a hole, how hard could it be?” He shook his head. “Well, pretty fucking hard, as it turned out. What did I know about mining, right?”

Sergei slapped the table, frustrated.

“The soil was too hard, the drills had to be replaced every half hour and the fucking artifact was buried deep. I had to hire new people, buy new equipment, take all that to the island… All that to dig a hole in the fucking ground. My guys spent a year digging and got nowhere and that old lady kept pestering me every week about it, until I finally said ‘fuck it’ and told her the deal was off and if she didn’t like it she could stick one of the drills up her ass!”

He breathed deep, his face red with anger.

“I told the workers to leave that alone and go back to mine coal and then I forgot about it.” Sergei took a sip of vodka. “One year later, when I was checking my books, I found a discrepancy. Money flowing to the mining operation in Pyramiden. I questioned my guys, if anyone had authorized some sort of investment there – new machines, vehicles, stuff like that –, but no one had. So I tried to get in touch with my guys on the island, see what the hell was going on.”

“Let me guess, no answer,” Natasha said.

“No answer,” he confirmed. “Phone wasn’t even working. So I grabbed a couple of my people, got
us a boat and went there to see it for myself just what was happening.” He stopped, eyes looking at nowhere. “First thing I noticed, no one was waiting for us at the docks. That was unusual, since we always had people stationed there. Second thing? There was no one anywhere. Not a single soul. We walked through the streets, we got into some houses, shit, we went everywhere and we didn’t see anyone.”

He drank again, this time for a long while.

“I had this feeling on the back my head that something was very wrong, but I still didn’t know what it was. That’s when we heard it, the sound of machinery. Not coming from the mine, but from the old excavation, the one I had shut down. So we went there. Imagine my surprise when I saw a hole bigger than this room, going so deep we couldn’t even see the bottom. There was mining equipment all around it, vehicles, and even an elevator installed. The noise was coming from deep down.”

Clark also had a really bad feeling about what was about to happen.

“We got in the elevator and then all the way down,” Sergei continued. “It took minutes until we finally got to the bottom and there was a tunnel leading somewhere, to where the noise was coming from. We were holding our guns when we went through the tunnel, trying to see under that shitty lighting, until we finally reached the end. And there it was, the missing people.”

The haunted eyes on Sergei’s expression were terrifying.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget that. They were alive, working with pickaxes and shovels and the drills, but… At the same time they were not.” He looked at Natasha, as if he couldn’t comprehend what he’d seen. “They were thin, you could see their bones, and their skin was pitch black, as if they hadn’t showered in months. And not only the men were there, but the women and the children too, working nonstop, never saying anything, never resting. I was so shocked that I watched it for what it must’ve been about ten minutes and no one there acknowledged my existence.”

Clark’s horrified expression mirrored Sergei’s; Natasha was impassive, but Clark could tell she was just as affected.

“I-I had enough after a while and I shouted at them, but they didn’t even react. They just kept working. So I grabbed the closest man and tossed him down – you can’t imagine how little he weighted –, but the man just got up as if nothing happened and continued to work. That’s when a voice startled the fuck out of me. I remember the words to this day. ‘Focused, are they not?’”, the voice said. We pointed our guns to the voice’s direction and there she was: Madame Gao.”

Sergei was sweating now, breathing fast.

“That Chinese bitch was smiling at me, like nothing wrong was happening. And then she said: ‘You will be properly compensated for this, as agreed. Now it is time for you to go.’.” Sergei laughed nervously. “I lost my shit. I pointed my pistol at her, but when I fired one of the workers jumped in front of the gun.” He turned to Natasha again, shocked. “I hit his shoulder, but the man didn’t even flinch. He just kept coming at me even when I shot him again. It’s like, hell, like he didn’t have blood at all if that makes any sense, but when I hit his head, he stayed down. And then the rest of the people in the room attacked us.”

This time, Sergei drank for half a minute and Clark almost took the bottle from him, worried.

“Have you ever watched one of those zombie movies? Where the main guys are pursued by a horde of cannibal monsters? Well, that’s pretty much what happened to us. I don’t know how we
got to the elevator, but when we finally got out of that damn hole, there was a wave of those fuckers waiting for us outside.” His eyes were wide as he recalled this. “We ran out of bullets in seconds and then we just took off, running towards the boat. One of my guys tripped and was swallowed by the horde, but me and the other guy just kept running until we finally got to the docks.”

Clark’s mind was filled with as much questions as it was filled with horror. What happened there? How was that possible? Some kind of drug? A disease? Magic? What Sergei described was the plot of a horror movie, but he could see in his face that the old mobster wasn’t lying. He was terrified.

“I honestly thought I was going to die there,” Sergei admitted, his eyes unfocused. “But when we got into the boat, they just stopped and went back. Then I left.”

There was a long silence as everyone in the room tried to process what they’d just heard.

“What about the people?” Clark asked, suddenly. “You just abandoned them there?”

Sergei didn’t appreciate the accusation.

“No, I didn’t,” he answered, pissed off. “I went to Moscow, grabbed a small army, lots of guns and went back to the island a week later.” He shook his head. “There was no one there anymore.”

“No one alive?” Natasha asked.

“No one, dead or alive” he clarified. “No people, no bodies, no tracks in the snow, not even a drop of blood.” Sergei breathed deeply. “Just a ghost town.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I told my men to blow up the elevator and cover that hole. Then I left and never came back. If God’s willing, I never will.”

How could the people of an entire city just vanish? What happened there?

“The money was in my account, just like Gao said,” Sergei continued. “Every cent. I tried to use it to track her down, but I got nowhere. It was years later that I even learned who those people were. The Hand. And that what happened there wasn’t the first fucked up thing they did.”

“What were they after?” Clark asked, still unable to comprehend why would someone do such a thing. “Why did they do that?”

Sergei shrugged. “I’ve no idea. They did some stuff like that in other places, decades before, all over the world. Cities burned down, people killed, some weird rituals… Shit, crazy stuff.”

“Are they cultists? Zealots?” Clark questioned, trying to make sense of this.

“Perhaps,” Natasha muttered, pensive. “While they dabble in pretty much every criminal enterprise out there, from drugs and guns to people trafficking, it seems to me that money is a means to an end, instead of an actual goal. They have ties to every big criminal organization in the world. The Russian Mafia, the Triad, the Yakuza, the Cosa Nostra… But they’re also just pawns in the Hand’s game. Whatever their objective is, I cannot tell.” She was in silent for a few seconds. “No one I know can. Not many even know what the Hand is and from those who do, few actually believe they’re even real. Had I not truly looked into it, I would be one of those people.”

“An entire city vanished,” Clark said, raising his eyebrows. “And you said it’s not the first time that happened. How do people not notice this?”

“Ghost towns weren’t an uncommon sight after the end of the Soviet Union,” Natasha explained.
“Many small towns, villages and settlements were created by the government to aid the war effort, most of them with a single purpose. Some were created to make weapons and ammunition, others to generate energy, some were mining settlements, factories to build vehicles… After the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union with it, they had no more purpose. And without a sustainable economy, people had to abandon them to live elsewhere.” She shrugged. “Despite the stories and urban legends, most people assumed that’s what happened to Pyramiden.”

“No one wants to believe a secret organization is responsible for killing every single person in a city,” Sergei added, somber. “Not in Russia, not anywhere. There’s always a ‘perfectly reasonable explanation’, even if it’s bullshit. And the higher ups who do find out? Well, they know better than to look too closely. Better to deny everything and move on.”

It truly seemed too outlandish to be true, Clark thought; and that was coming from an alien, more than used by now to deal with weird situations. He imagined that to the average person, something like that would seem like a conspiracy theory at best; completely madness at worst.

But it was real. And they were in New York right now.

He looked to Sergei. “Tell me how they got in New York.”

Sergei stared to the table for an entire minute, his face twisted in a grimace.

“I wanted nothing to do with them,” he finally said. “Not after what happened. Not after I knew with whom I was dealing with.” Sergei chuckled mirthlessly. “I wasn’t in Russia anymore by that time, I was already here, managing our operations in New York. So, of course, a few years after Pyramiden became a ghost town, they showed up. Gao and a Japanese man called Nobu.”

“You met them, face to face?” Natasha asked.

“Yes. Well, more like ‘face to blade’. Guess which one I was,” he answered, raising a single eyebrow. “They got into my apartment and made me an offer. They wanted to expand, to establish a foothold in the US, starting with New York. And since we were already established here, they wanted a hand, pun not intended.” His eyes became fiery with anger. “I refused,” Sergei said. “I told them to fucking shoot me already, because I wouldn’t have anything to do with them.”

That surprised Clark. A criminal he might be, but it seemed he had standards. Natasha, however, barely reacted, as if expecting this answer.

“They didn’t kill me, obviously,” Sergei continued. “No… What they did was forcibly retire me, clear the charges of those stupid Ranskahov brothers after they escaped from the hellhole in Russia and put them in charge of the New York operations.” He laughed, but his eyes were still hard. “I warned those boys, I said they had no fucking idea what they were doing, that they were going to get themselves, and everybody else, killed. Did they listen? No, the ‘Princes of Moscow’ knew better. And here we are. Getting our asses handed to us by You-Know-Who and a fucking Masked Man, almost unable to make money and still forced to continue onwards, because the fucking Hand has a sword pointed at our backs. Wonder when it’s all going to blow up in our faces.”

From Sergei’s ranting, Clark focused on a single thing: “The Masked Man, what do you know of him?”

The question seemed to surprise the Russian. “I know he’s crazy to do what he’s doing… But tough as hell. He’s fucking the Ranskahov brothers’ shipments almost every night.” He let out a laugh. “And he beat up Anatoly. Holy shit, that must’ve been embarrassing. Other than that…” He ended with a shrug.
Sergei shook his head and filled a glass of vodka. While he did that, Clark was trying to piece together the puzzle in his mind, using the new information to shed light in what he already knew. The Masked Man, for good or ill, was working against the Russians, just as Jessica told him. Was he an enemy of the Russian mob or simply a vigilante going against a random target? Hard to know with only that much information, but no one seemed to have more.

The money – the *absurd* amount of money – that Karen had come across while working for Union Allied now had a likely owner: a joint account, like he imagined, probably consisting of the Russians, the Yakuza, the Chinese… and the Hand.

The takeover that left bodies left and right all over New York? Probably these criminal organizations working together, eliminating the competition. Prohaszka, Rigoletto, other bosses from other factions found dead or not found at all... They were pulling their resources together to take New York whole.

For what purpose, Clark didn’t know, but it certainly wasn’t anything good.

“Who’s working with them?” Clark asked Sergei, trying to determinate if his theory was right.

The old mobster was thinking for a few seconds. “Here in New York? The Yakuza, certainly. The Chinese too. We, obviously, though I’m not in the loop anymore.” He frowned for a moment, then added: “And a new guy. Someone called Wilson Fisk.”

That’s a name that Clark had never heard before.

“Who?”

Sergei shook his head. “I don’t know him, but he’s dangerous. He’s got his fingers in every pie. Cops, judges, politicians… You want to do serious business in New York, you need him.” He chuckled. “Never seen people so scared of anyone before, other than the Hand, of course. This new guy is someone to watch out for.”

“He’s got that many people under his thumb?” Clark asked, unwilling to believe so many supposedly good guys were involved in this.

“Ha! That and many more. And the Hand?” Sergei turned to Natasha. “You’ll find that even SHIELD is tainted. You want my advice? Trust no one. That’ll get you killed faster than a bullet through your skull.” He stared at both of them. “You two are playing a very dangerous game. For my sake, I hope you don’t fuck it up.”

Neither of them answered, but Natasha glanced at Clark and tilted her head, getting up. He followed her, leaving Sergei alone at the table. Natasha leaned close to him and whispered:

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking?”

Clark nodded. “We need to know what is in Pyramiden. You’re coming?”

“Of course,” she answered.

“I’ll tell Kelex to send a pod for you. Don’t forget your coat,” Clark joked, then he nodded towards Sergei. “What you’re going to do with him?”

Without answering, Natasha simply turned back and walked to Sergei. And before the old mobster could blink, she grabbed a syringe from somewhere under her dress and stabbed Sergei’s neck with it.
The mobster’s eyes got wide as he stared astonished, then his head hit the table with a loud *THUMP*.

“That should give us a few hours,” Natasha casually said to a shell-shocked Clark, as she cuffed Sergei to the table. She walked to him. “Shall we?”

Vladimir stared at his brother’s body, lying on top of his table, his blue eyes wide as if he still couldn’t believe in what he was seeing. Anatoly was dead. His brother was gone, murdered by someone, decapitated as if they had executed him.

They did not find his head.

“Where?” he asked, his eyes not moving.

“He was dumped in the lot around the corner,” his man answered, his voice respectively low.

Not even realizing he was walking, Vladimir approached the table. Around him, everyone looked in silence, his men and Wesley, just as dazed as he was.

“My brother,” Vladimir whispered, feeling a soul-crushing sadness inside his chest. He felt the tears running down his face, but he couldn’t care less. His brother was dead, what else mattered? He was alone. “We should’ve returned to Moscow, like you wanted.”

Slowly, Vladimir touched his chest, leaning over him in pain; that’s when his hands felt something. Puzzled, he lifted his brother’s jacket and pulled what he felt.

A black mask.


“He sends us a message!” one of his men said.

Vladimir closed his fist, feeling the sadness inside him being replaced by rage. Had the Masked Man killed his brother? Murdered him? Took his head off?! He must’ve been ambushed after he spoke to Fisk, alone, in the darkness of night.

He would pay.

“Put every man we have on the streets,” Vladimir said, eyes never leaving his brother. “Find him.”

“All of them?” one of the men asked.

“EVERYONE!” Vladimir yelled. “And bring me his head!”

An eye for an eye, a head for a head. The Masked Man would pay for this.

Clad in his Kryptonian skinsuit, Clark watched as his ship’s spherical pod landed, it’s two wings folding themselves as the powerful thrusters turned off, not before blowing away all the snow around it. Natasha jumped out of it as soon as the pod was opened, walking to him, no longer wearing her blue dress, but a long and thick coat over her usual black suit.

A wise choice, since Pyramiden was every bit as cold as Sergei warned them, completely covered in white snow.
Natasha smiled as she walked to him, half her face hid under her hood.

“I want one of those for my birthday,” she joked, gesturing towards the Kryptonian pod. “Our Quinjet seems like a slug compared to it.”

“You’d really trust Tony with that?” Clark chuckled. “He does like to test the limits of every vehicle he gets his hands on.”

She seemed to reconsider. “Hmm… Well, that is true. Better leave it to Kelex, she’s clearly the responsible pilot here.”

Stopping by Clark’s side, both of them turned to gaze at the small settlement, their faces losing any semblance of the previous mirth. Pyramiden, the ghost city, stood in front of them. As expected from a mining settlement, the place wasn’t big. It was a collection of long buildings, positioned around the few streets, giving the place a very orderly look, and around it they could see mountains and the sea.

A hospital, a school, buildings full of apartments… All completely empty, Clark confirmed with a quick glance of his x-ray vision. He already knew that, there wasn’t a single sound in the island save the wind and the sea, but to actually see the abandoned school full of children’s toys and not a single kid around – after hearing Sergei’s tale – made him sick.

And very, very angry.

“No one around,” Clark said, seriously. “Not a single soul.”

Natasha nodded, somber, and said: “We already knew that, Clark. Let’s see if we can find something that can lead us to the ones responsible for this. Which way is it?”

He looked around for a moment. “There’s the coal mine… And there is the excavation site.”

Clark pointed at the general direction of the place, maybe a mile away from the settlement, and they started to walk towards it. The eerie silence of the place – and the reason for it – bothered him at each step and not for the first time since he heard Sergei’s story he tried to make sense of all this. What could be precious enough to justify such atrocity?

In his mind – and in most people’s, he knew – absolutely nothing. But if he wanted to understand the Hand, Clark needed to try to think like them.

Until he had more information, however, it was useless to speculate, so he did his best to try and put it out of his mind. Anger would just get in the way right now.

“Is your coat keeping you warm?” Clark asked, suddenly, when a powerful gust of wind actually pushed Natasha back a few inches.

He knew, as soon as the words left his mouth, that he should’ve kept quiet.

“Why, Clark, how brazen of you to offer to warm me with your body heat!” she mock exclaimed. “What would Ma Kent say?”

“That’s not what I…” he sighed. “Forget I asked.”

She grinned. “If you must know, I don’t actually need this coat at all. Russians are immune to the harsh winter.”
Clark, obviously, didn’t believe her, but the surprising thing is that Natasha actually didn’t seem bothered at all.

“You’re wearing the Kryptonian skinsuit, aren’t you?” he realized. That would work to keep her warm, better than any clothes on Earth. Krypton was, after all, much colder than this, according to everything he’d read.

But of course, that was also the wrong thing to say to Natasha.

“You’re welcome to take a peek,” she said, winking.

He sighed. There was just no winning against her.

“What about you, Clark?” Natasha suddenly asked. “Can you actually feel this?”

“Well, yes. Super-senses, remember? Sense of touch too.” Clark raised a hand, feeling the wind. “I can feel every variation of the air currents, the nearly microscopic ice crystals, the amount of humidity in the air—“

“Yes, yes, and if you taste the snow you can probably tell the exact breed of saber-tooth tiger that the locals used to craft their boots 10,000 years ago,” Natasha interrupted, rolling her eyes. “I didn’t forget your trick with the wine, that was last night. What I’m asking is if you can actually feel cold. Do you even know what’s that supposed to feel like?”

“There were no saber-tooth tigers here, they roamed some parts of the American continent,” Clark couldn’t help but to correct, but before he got a taste of Natasha’s glare, he added: “As for feeling cold… Not on Earth, no. But I did feel cold before.”

“Where?” she asked, interested.

“During the Convergence, when I was fighting Malekith with Thor, we actually crossed a rift and got to Jotunheim, the Realm of the Frost Giants,” Clark explained, remembering the brutal fight against the Dark Elf. “It was pretty chilly there.”

“The Realm of the Frost Giants was chilly… Who would’ve known?” Natasha joked.

“I know, right?” Clark quipped back. “But it wasn’t on Jotunheim where I learned the true meaning of the word. Like they say, to feel cold in my bones? It was on Niflheim… Or at least I think it was Niflheim, by what I read about in my ship’s archives and in the books Thor brought from Asgard.”

Clark still remembered vividly the very brief time he spent on Niflheim as he flew through it by accident during the Convergence. Darker than Svartalfheim, colder than Jotunheim and extremely ominous; not a place he wished to visit again, ever.

“Really? That bad?” Natasha asked.

“That bad,” Clark confirmed. “According to one of the books Thor lent me, it is actually possible for Frost Giants to freeze to death in Niflheim, so that should give you an idea of how inhospitable that place is.” He sighed. “It’s no wonder Asgardians consider Niflheim their very own frozen Hell. Well, that and the fact that it’s actually a gateway for souls to pass through.”

He realized Natasha was no longer by his side a second too late.

“Excuse me?” Clark stopped as well, confused as to why Natasha stayed behind, but soon enough
she started walking again. “Gateway for souls?”

“Oh! Yeah… Well, to sum it up, it turns out that the big questions humanity still can’t answer, like ‘do souls exist?’ or ‘is there life after death?’, were actually already answered a long time ago by advanced civilizations such as the Asgardians and Kryptonians,” Clark explained, slowly. “The answer for both of them is ‘yes’, by the way. When any living being dies, the soul leaves the body through the Astral Dimension and pass through the veil to the other side. In some locations, the veil is actually thin, like on Niflheim and Asgard, so souls naturally converge to those places so they can move on. Krypton even explains all this mathematically, if you can believe it. I’m good with numbers, really good, but even I still can’t understand half of that.”

Natasha wasn’t saying anything, but she hadn’t stopped staring at him yet.

“That is not the kind of conversation that you can ‘sum it up’, Clark,” she deadpanned.

That made him stop. “Are you, umm, religious?” Clark asked, uncertain. He hadn’t even considered this. Had he said something that went against Natasha’s faith? He was already starting to feel guilty when she rolled her eyes.

“No, I’m not,” she answered. “And even if I was, if it’s proven, then it’s proven. Nevertheless, it is still a pretty big deal to know there is life after death. What is it? Heaven and Hell? Valhalla?”

Well, at least he hadn’t offended her, he thought, relieved.

“I don’t know,” Clark answered, shrugging. “They proved there is something, but they don’t exactly know what. There are theories backed by scientific experiments, glimpses of powerful sorcerers and seers, and even supposedly ‘gods of death’ that actually draw power from souls and whatever lies beyond, much like Thor draws power from Storms… But what is it? I don’t think anyone knows that for sure. Maybe Heaven and Hell, maybe Valhalla, maybe all of them existing at the same time, just like we have countless planets in this universe and an infinite number of dimensions coexisting alongside us. Who knows?”

They spent long minutes in silence, walking towards the excavation site, the howl of the wind and their steps in the snow the only sounds they could listen. Clark remembered he spent a long while to digest everything he learned about that subject and Natasha probably wasn’t different; he felt guilty again. Maybe he really shouldn’t have dropped that particular bomb on her, not at that moment.

“You know what, Clark?” Natasha said, ending the silence. “For once, I’d like to have a conversation with you where I didn’t end up reevaluating everything I know about the universe. Magic, the multiverse, life after death… Can’t we just talk about mundane topics sometimes?”

The smile on her face told Clark she was joking and he felt relieved; she would have a lot to think afterwards, he had no doubt about that, but at least she wasn’t angry with him; or experiencing a major existential crisis.

He really should be careful with that topic.

“I’m trying to convince Jessica to teach me how to play guitar,” Clark said, suddenly, smiling. “She told me she would soon learn ballet than teach me, but we’ll see.”

“I can teach her ballet,” Natasha offered.

“Yeah, make sure to film her when you make that offer,” Clark chuckled, then looked forward, his face getting serious. “But we can talk about that later. We are here.”
They stopped in front of the excavation site, still surrounded by the heavy machinery from all those years ago: rusty and covered in snow, now, but still there. The hole was covered, just like Sergei had said, and a great deal of ice had formed on top of it. If Clark didn’t have x-ray vision, he wouldn’t even know it was there.

There wasn’t any sign of people, anywhere. Living or dead.

His eyes glowed red for a moment and without warning he unleashed a blast of heat vision, moving his head to cut a circle around the ice. The heat was so extreme that most of the ice evaporated instantly, a vapor cloud rising as the rest of the ice cracked, falling down inside the hole, opening a round entrance bigger than his apartment.

Clark and Natasha approached, looking down at the incredibly deep and dark hole in the ground.

“Shall we?” Clark asked, extending his hand to Natasha.

She nodded, taking a set of night-vision goggles from under her coat, and grabbed his hand. Clark floated down, carrying Natasha.

The car stopped at the underground meeting spot and Wilson Fisk and James Wesley got out of it. In front of them, Madame Gao, Nobu Yoshioka and Leland Owlsley were waiting for them.

Leland, of course, was the first to say something.

“Why aren’t we meeting at the usual place?” Leland asked, clearly impatient. “And what’s all this?”

Wilson Fisk ignored him for a moment, meeting the eyes of everyone there.

“An opportunity,” he started, his voice deep, “for those willing to seize it.”

Nobu and Leland remained impassive, clearly unamused by Fisk’s delay to explain. Madame Gao, however, laughed and started to speak in fast Chinese.

“She is happy to see you,” Wesley summarized, translating the long speech.

Fisk nodded and approached. He owed much to Madame Gao and he respected her a great deal.

“My apologies for my absence of late,” Fisk said. “And for calling you here on little notice.”

“Where are the smiley twins?” Leland asked as Fisk stopped by his side. “Sleeping off another failed kidnapping attempt?”

There it was, the moment to disclose the truth.

“The Ranskahovs are no longer part of this organization,” Fisk announced.

His announcement was met with curious and suspicious eyes.

“Since when?” Leland asked.

Fisk sighed.

“Since I removed Anatoly’s head… With my car door.”
Madame Gao let out a stream of words, all in Chinese, as soon as he said that, clashing her cane against the ground. Nobu, eyes glowing with pure danger, took his hands out of his pockets and stared at Fisk. Leland was mostly too stunned to react.


“Deal me in on that,” Leland finally exclaimed. “What the hell happened?!”

That wasn’t something Fisk was about to explain. Anatoly wasn’t dead because of his failures or because he couldn’t hold his end of the bargain; Anatoly was dead because he showed up in the restaurant, scared Vanessa and most likely made sure she would never come back.

Truth of the matter, Fisk had lost his temper and the reason for that could be interpreted as a weakness.

“It was… A personal matter,” Fisk finally said.

There was a long silence.

“What?!” Leland exploded, his voice failing in his indignation. “That’s… Vladimir isn’t exactly a hug-it-out kind of guy!”

“The Masked Vigilante killed his brother,” Wesley interrupted, “or at least, that’s what Vladimir believes.”

Taking the cue, Fisk continued: “It will distract him until preparations can be made.” He stared at his associates one more time. “We all knew that we would need to eliminate the Russians one day. They were too unpredictable and we cannot afford that in this new world.”

Leland scoffed. “This from a guy taking heads off with a car door.”

Madame Gao said something and Wesley was fast to translate.

“She wants to know how her product is going to be moved now.”

Fisk met her eyes, respectfully.

“For the moment, keep sending your deliveries to the Russians, as though nothing has changed,” he explained. “And when this is all over, I’ll assume their responsibility.”

“And move their share to your column in the ledger?” Leland asked, accusingly.

Nobu agreed with the accusation, if his deadly stare meant something.

“A rising tide raises all boats, Leland,” Fisk said. “Profits will be divided up equally among us. Four shares, instead of five.”

And then he waited their response.

Slowly, Madame Gao nodded. Nobu followed after a second.

“Leland?” Fisk asked, since the financier was still in silence.

“What?” Leland exclaimed. “I’m going against the three of you? I like my head where it’s at.”
“Then we’re in agreement,” Fisk declared. “Nothing changes, until I’m ready to move on Vladimir.”

“And what if he finds out the truth before that happens?” Leland asked, raising his eyebrows.

Fisk stared at him.

“That would be unfortunate for all of us.”

Leland just shook his head, clearly unsettled by everything that was happening.

“Masked Vigilantes, flying superpowered aliens, crazy Russians… I’m too old for this,” Leland muttered, walking back to his car.

Nobu approached Fisk. “Remember your promise to me,” he said, “and those I speak for.”

Fisk nodded and watched as Nobu left as well. He turned to Madame Gao, extending his arm to the old lady.

“Madame Gao,” Fisk started, “may I walk you to your car?”

She smiled and said something in Chinese, grabbing his arm and as she got up.

“She thinks you want something,” Wesley translated.

“I want to put all this behind us,” Fisk explained, as they walked slowly to her car, “as quickly as possible. I would appreciate your help in the matter.”

The powerful old lady just smiled at him.

Matt followed the cab from the top of the buildings, not needing his eyes to know where it was. There were three people inside it: a blind passenger, singing what seemed to be a Chinese lullaby, and two Russians, one driving and one on the passenger seat.

At the moment the cab turned into a deserted street, Matt acted.

Moving with all the grace of an expert martial artist, he jumped from the edge of the building, delayed his fall by holding on the fire escape ladder, and twisted his body midair to finally land on top of the car. He fell so heavily over it that the roof bent, but Matt was already rolling, his hand grabbing the side of the cab’s roof.

And then he twisted his body, kicking the driver’s window with both feet, knocking him unconscious in one blow.

Before the second Russian could react, Matt climbed back to the top of the car, rolling again, just as the mobster opened the door. Matt fell on him with incredible precision, his knee colliding against the Russian’s nose with such power that he was tossed on his back.

Matt grabbed the Russian by the neck and leaned over him, his masked face stopping inches away from him.

“No, please!” the Russian exclaimed just as soon as he realized who he was. “Oh, God, please! I’ll tell you what you want, just don’t cut my head off!”

Well, that was new, Matt thought, actually freezing for a moment. Where did that come from?
“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Anatoly!” the Russian cried. “We all know what you did to him! Everyone knows you took his head!”

Everyone but Matt, it seemed. Still completely puzzled by what the mobster told him, Matt heard police sirens approaching; the downside of working during the day, he realized. Someone must’ve seen him attacking the cab.

Sparing a glance to the cab, Matt confirmed that the blind, Chinese passenger was still in the cab, still singing, as if nothing was happening. He had no idea what that man was doing with the Russians, if he was involved in some capacity in their crimes, but he wasn’t about to attack a non-hostile blind man. The police could deal with that.

So, looking back at the Russian, Matt punched him, knocking him out.

He had no clue of what was going on, why this man seemed to think he had decapitated his boss, but at least now he had someone to ask questions now, Matt decided. Lifting the unconscious Russian on his back, he ran towards the alley, away from the police cars, leaving the cab and the Chinese blind man behind. Hopefully this man knew where his bosses were.

Or was it “boss” – singular – now? Matt had a feeling this day would get even more weird.

Natasha couldn’t say she particularly enjoyed walking through a dark tunnel several hundred meters underground, a place that might or might not be the mass grave of the entirety of Pyramiden, but at least she was doing it in good company.

After Clark flew them all the way down, they found out that the hole led to a large tunnel, just like Sergei described – no doubt excavated by the citizens of Pyramiden – and that the tunnel continued for a miles, probably passing under the mountains around the settlement. There was no source of light anywhere, no sound, and nothing to indicate what happened to the people of Pyramiden.

All in all, it was a horrible place to be, but after almost an hour of walking it became a boring place to be as well.

Clark had scanned the place with his super-vision and stated there was nothing in the tunnel, until the end, but Natasha couldn’t help but to feel the adrenalin coursing through her body as soon as they arrived there, making her ready to fight; that changed after a while, once she truly accepted that Clark was indeed right.

So they walked. And walked and walked some more. There was nothing to see, not even with her brand-new Stark night-vision goggles, nothing to hear but their footsteps and nothing to do but move forward and think.

Seeing Sergei again after so long was not something Natasha ever expected to do. That part of her life was over, as far as she was concerned, and bringing people who were a part of it to the life she lived now was weird, to say the least. Even weirder was to introduce one of them to someone who had never met her as the Black Widow, master assassin of the Red Room.

Standing in a room with both past and present was uncomfortable. Natasha usually felt like two people, one that she had left behind when Clint gave her a chance, and a new one that had crafted a life trying to be better, working for SHIELD. Though the new person still carried the memories – and sins – of the past one, it was easier for Natasha to think of herself like this.
It was, however, hard to do it when she was in a room with Clark and Sergei at the same time.

“You must be curious about what you heard,” Natasha caught herself saying, before she could actually think this through. Clark frowned, confused. “About the things Sergei said. About my past.”

To her surprise, Clark shook his head immediately.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” he said, before she could go on. ”Yes, I’m curious, but it doesn’t matter. If you don’t want to tell me about it, I won’t ask.”

She raised a single eyebrow, looking at him.

“Aren’t you curious about the person standing right at your side?” Natasha asked, knowing that she couldn’t possibly fully trust someone knowing so little about them.

“I know the person standing right at my side,” Clark retorted. “She was the one who kept my name out of SHIELD’s database, even though she never had to. The one who kept my mother’s identity a secret. The one who fought for the safety of this world countless times, even against terrible odds.”

He looked at her. “I don’t need to know what you did back then, Natasha, to know who you are now.”

That was oddly touching, Natasha admitted, even if she didn’t really believe in it.

“I… I appreciate your trust in me, Clark,” Natasha said, after a few seconds. “But I would like to tell you about it so you can make an informed decision.”

He held her stare for a long while, then he nodded. “If you want to tell me, I will listen.”

Natasha gathered her thoughts for a minute, imagining how to start.

“I told you before that I was raised as an assassin since I was a child,” she began, remembering their talk in Clark’s farm at the very day they met. “What I didn’t tell you was who raised me: the Red Room.”

“Sergei mentioned that name,” Clark remarked.

“He would, the Red Room was famous back then. And incredibly feared by anyone with common sense.” Natasha raised a single finger. “After the end of WWI, when Stalin took the reins of the Soviet Union following Lenin’s death, he created an organization called Leviathan. Think of them as the Soviet’s SHIELD. They were created to ensure that the USSR would become the world’s leading superpower, using science, intelligence gathering and many, many others unsavory methods.”

Clark was listening in silence and Natasha continued.

“At some point during that time, Leviathan created the Red Room Academy, a project designed to train assassins from a young age. Young girls, trained from infancy to develop complete loyalty and to become masters in the art of assassination. Capable of infiltrating anywhere, kill without guilt and taught to never question an order, no matter how… How terrible it could be.”

“How… Why?” Clark couldn’t help but to ask, his face showing true horror.

“The game of influence of the very powerful,” Natasha shrugged. “A perpetual tug-of-war that the world has been playing ever since humanity existed. And the Soviet Union wanted an edge. As to
the ‘how’… Brutal training, experimental drugs, mind-conditioning, punishment… It’s easier to mold a child than it is an adult. Adults question, they have a set of morals already instilled in them. Kids do not.” She shrugged again, with an indifference she didn’t actually feel. “Teach a little girl never to question her superiors, never to feel guilty by accomplishing her mission, never to hesitate… And she won’t. It will become her default state of mind.”

She could see by the look on his face that Clark was imagining vividly what those kids went through. What she went through.

“During the Cold War, the Red Room became Leviathan’s greatest weapon,” Natasha continued, “and the program grew. They created techniques, trainings, new forms to ensure loyalty, drugs to enhance their efficiency and new technology and soon the Soviet Union had spies and assassins all over the world.” She stopped talking for a moment. “I wasn’t a part of that. By the time I was born, the Soviet Union was already on its last legs, but the Red Room was still strong. It had collected information on, well, everyone. It had blackmail material, infiltrated agents, information on anything happening in the world. It had grown far more than its original purpose and it actually outlived the Soviet Union.”

Natasha looked forward, trying to gauge the distance they still had to walk until the end of the tunnel, then continued.

“I don’t really remember my parents,” she admitted. “I have flashes, feelings, but no true memory of them. For as long as I remember, I was there, in the Red Room, amongst my sisters. We were part of a special program, called the Black Widow Program, supposed to create the very best assassins in all history. Weapons in human form. Leviathan’s last gamble to try to win the war.” Natasha chuckled, humorless. “It didn’t work, but the Red Room survived and so did the program. They trained us… And then they unleashed us upon the world.”

She glanced at Clark.

“There is a reason why even people like Sergei, who led cold blooded criminals, were afraid of us,” Natasha went on. “Afraid of me. We did things, Clark, things that still haunt my dreams. Things that I wish I could undo. But the worst part? At the time I felt nothing. Nothing at all, as if killing innocents was as normal as breathing.”

“When did that change?” Clark whispered, eyes fixed on her.

Natasha thought hard about that answer, without meeting his eyes.

“I don’t know for certain. It happened slowly. But eventually, slowly, drop by drop, my ledger became soaked in blood and I started to question ‘why?’. Why was I killing? Why did I have to kill? Why was I hurting all those people?” She tilted her head. “Even then, it wasn’t enough to make me stop, to make me betray the Red Room. Not until Clint.”

“Clint?” Clark asked.

“Clint.” She smiled. “I became exceptionally famous, you see. Not in a good way. SHIELD took notice and sent Clint to eliminate the threat. He made a different call. He chose to give me a chance, to give me the opportunity to wipe out the blood on my ledger, even if a little bit.” Natasha shrugged again. “I accepted.”

“Did you?” Clark questioned, after a moment. She frowned, until he added: “Wipe it out?”

Natasha actually chuckled. “There isn’t enough water in this world capable of that, Clark, that’s
something I already accepted.” Then her eyes became resolute. “But that doesn’t mean I will stop trying.” She turned to him, suddenly. “Do you think people can change?”

Instead of answering, Clark pointed at his own chest, at the “S” symbol on his skinsuit.

“Do you know what this means?” he asked.

“Hope,” Natasha answered, remembering the conversation they had.

Clark nodded.

“Yes. ‘The symbol of the House of El means hope,’” he said, as if quoting someone, “and embodied within that hope is the fundamental belief in the potential of every person to be a force for good.’ My father told me that.” He looked directly into her eyes. “You have found your potential, Natasha. You can’t change what you did, but you can still be a force for good. I can tell that you truly regret what you did and you gave everything you had to be better. You are not the same person you were, not anymore. You’re Natasha Romanoff, Avenger, and my friend. Don’t forget that.”

Natasha was embarrassed when she felt her eyes getting wet and she was glad to be wearing the night-vision goggles; she would never be able to live that down otherwise, she knew it.

Neither of them said anything anymore, as Clark allowed Natasha to think about what he said. She wasn’t sure if she truly believed him, if she shared that philosophy, but she realized that she wanted to. Maybe that would count for something.

Deep in thought, Natasha barely paid any attention to the minutes passing and before she noticed, they had finally arrived at the end of the tunnel: a huge stone door, that most certainly hadn’t been crafted by the people of Pyramiden, stood in front of them.

That was the place the Hand was looking for, the reason for all those deaths.

It was certainly impressive, she had to admit, and it definitely didn’t fit with the local architecture. The door was made of stone – which kind, she couldn’t tell –, immensely big and sturdy, and in Natasha’s opinion it wouldn’t be out of place in an ancient temple. Its surface was filled with weird symbols, many resembling oriental alphabets, and in the middle there was a drawing, a long serpent.

Or a dragon.

“What language is that?” Natasha muttered, more to herself than to Clark, studying the symbols.

While not completely fluent, she could speak and read a bit of Mandarin and Japanese, enough to communicate. The symbols resembled the alphabet in some capacity, but it was clearly not the same language. Perhaps an older dialect?

“I don’t know,” Clark said, slowly, eyes never leaving the door. “It doesn’t seem like anything I’ve seen before.”

If he said so, Natasha would believe; she knew Clark had one hell of a memory.

“So what’s behind it?” Natasha finally asked.

Taking a step back, Clark stared at the door. And, surprisingly, frowned.
“I can’t tell,” he whispered. She looked at him, as if she had heard him wrong. “I can’t see through it.”

Natasha’s eyebrows shot up. That wasn’t normal. She wondered if it had anything to do with the kind of stone the door was made or – god forbid – if it was something unnatural; she had enough of magic to last a lifetime already.

“Stay behind me, please,” Clark asked, stepping forward and sinking his fingers in the huge door.

As soon as she took cover behind him, Clark forced the door open, his arms pulling both halves of the door to the side, sliding the stone apart; with a thunderous sound, the immense doors were finally pried open.

A huge and dark room appeared behind it. Natasha unholstered her gun.

Alexander Petrov woke up with a gasp. For a moment, he didn’t know what was happening, he couldn’t remember where he’d been and why did his body – especially his face – hurt so much. He didn’t know why he appeared to be held upside down and why he couldn’t see anything.

Then the memories came flashing back: the Masked Man!

Holy fucking shit! His heart was beating like crazy now, pumping fear to the rest of his body. That son of a bitch had really kidnapped him! He had beat him up, strung him upside down like meat and put some kind of sack over his head, so he couldn’t see anything.

Alexander had never been more afraid in his entire life.

“Finally up,” a voice spoke from close by.

The Russian did his best to remain still, to pretend he was still unconscious, so he could gain time to find a way to survive; it wasn’t easy. There was nothing unnatural about the voice, the Masked Man hadn’t yelled or modified it somehow, but to Alexander it was like the Devil himself had spoken to him.

He’d seen what that man did to everyone that crossed his path. He’d heard what he did to Anatoly, the freaking boss of the Russian Mafia in New York. And now he was at that monster’s mercy.

“I know you’re awake,” the Masked Man continued, speaking from the opposite side now; Alexander couldn’t see with that damn sack over his head, true, but shouldn’t he have heard his footsteps? Apparently not. “I can listen to your heartbeat, your breathing… You are right to be afraid.”

Alexander very nearly started to sob.

“I’m going to ask you some questions,” the Masked Man continued, his voice sounding even closer now. “Don’t answer, I hurt you. Lie to me, I hurt you. Scream, I hurt you. Do you understand?”

He wanted to answer, he really did, but his voice seemed stuck in his throat; that is, until the Masked Man’s hand closed around his neck.

“Yes, yes, god yes!” Alexander exclaimed, fast.

“Good,” the Masked Man retorted. There was a second of silence. “What were you doing in the cab? What were you delivering? And to whom?”
Alexander knew that Vladimir would kill him if he told the Masked Man anything, but he wasn’t the one being held upside down under threat of torture and death.

“W-we deliver t-the Chinese’s heroin,” he stuttered, feeling sweat dripping from his face. “That Chinese fellow on the backseat? He’s one of them, their delivery guys. We pick them up at some random point in the city and deliver them somewhere. It’s always different places, always different guys.”

“He’s blind,” the Masked Man deadpanned.

“Hey, I think it’s weird as shit too! I just do as I’m told.” He breathed deeply. “Look, man, I’m just a grunt. They don’t tell us anything. You can beat me up all you want, it’s not gonna change that!”

There was a long silence and Alexander started to really regret his outburst.

“Not that I want you to beat me, y-you know,” he added, fast. “I just–“

“Anatoly Ranskahov,” the Masked Man interrupted. “When was he found? Where was he found?”

What? Why the hell would he even ask that? He was the one who killed the guy!

“Umm, today,” Alexander answered, confused. “They found him in a parking lot… Minus the head.”

“Who did?”

“I don’t know! I just know they did. And now Vladimir is looking for you. He’s called everyone back, that was our last delivery today. A whole army.”

He felt the Masked Man approaching and started to shake.

“Good, because I’m looking for him too,” the Masked Man whispered. “Where can I find him?”

“Please, they’ll kill me!” Alexander begged.

The Masked Man said nothing for a while and Alexander dared to hope he would show mercy; that’s when he heard the terrifying sound of a chainsaw right by the side of his head. Even tied upside down, Alexander started to struggle, desperately, trying to get away from the fucking thing. He twisted blindly like a worm, not even realizing he was screaming, until the Masked Man’s hand grabbed his face, covered his mouth and kept him immobilized.

“I’m going to ask you again, just once,” the Masked Man said, his whisper competing with the chainsaw sounds. “Where is Vladimir?”

“T-They told us to go to these places!” Alexander said, fast, almost crying. He tried to remember, before that son of a bitch really used that chainsaw. “47th and 12th, 48th and 9th, 42nd and 10th and – fuck, what was it? – 44th and 11th. Vladimir has to be in one of those, I swear!”

The Masked Man grabbed him by the head and pulled him closer.

“What about Fisk?” he asked. “Where can I find him?”

“Who?! I don’t even know who this is!” Alexander screamed, desperately.

The roar of the chainsaw got even closer and Alexander could almost feel it against his neck. He
was yelling all kinds of nonsense, praying to whoever would hear, begging... Then the noise
simply disappeared.

“I believe you,” the Masked Man stated.

And before Alexander could have the time to feel relief, the Masked Man punched his face and he
passed out.

Matt sighed, not even glancing at the unconscious Russian mobster swinging softly like a
pendulum. In his other hand, he was still holding his phone, the video he used to broadcast the
chainsaw sound muted; the accessibility options for the visually impaired certainly were one of the
marvels of the modern world, he thought for a moment.

None too carefully, he brought the tied up Russian down so the man wouldn’t be permanently
injured. At least this hadn’t been a complete waste of time, he considered. Fisk remained a mystery,
but he finally had the location of the Russian Mafia’s boss, Vladimir Ranskahov.

The man whose brother’s Matt had apparently decapitated; that tidbit of information was news to
him.

Unless he truly was getting crazy, Matt had never killed anyone, much less taken anyone’s head as
a trophy. The only conclusion was that someone had killed the boss of the Russian Mafia and
blamed him for it. And while he didn’t mind all that much that scum like Anatoly Ranskahov was
dead, he didn’t like being blamed for it.

Nor did he like the dangerous tension it brought to Hell’s Kitchen.

Vladimir, by all accounts, was a hothead. An impulsive, angry and highly violent man in control of
an entire criminal organization. He would burn the city down to avenge his brother, Matt was
certain of it.

Matt was not afraid of him, not even against those odds, but he was worried about all the innocents
that would be caught in the crossfire.

He needed to find Vladimir and stop him that night, before he did something stupid. Before people
began to die. If he could deal with the head of the snake, the Russians would go back to laying low
in fear of Superman.

But with Vladimir out for blood? Superman or not, he would bring war into Hell’s Kitchen.
Revenge was a powerful motivator.

Calling 911 from a burner, Matt gave the location of the tied-up Russian to the police and hang up,
jumping out of the window. He had four locations to scout and luckily Vladimir would be in one of
those; with an army, yes, but right now was not the time to hesitate. The Russians needed to be
stopped – for Hell’s Kitchen and Claire’s safety – and Vladimir could very well be Matt’s only
clue to find Fisk.

He could only hope things would go well.

“My god...” Clark whispered, amazed.

He was beyond impressed. Whatever he imagined they would find under Pyramiden, it wasn’t that.
Before their very eyes, was what seemed to be an ancient temple or monastery, not unlike some of the Chinese temples Clark had already seen, both flying above them as Superman and in the movies. The architecture, though not exactly the same, was remarkably similar, with an extensive courtyard right behind the stone doors – complete with trees made of precious stones and even a well –, a main path that led forward sided by pillars, statues depicting long and fearsome dragons, the familiar gracefully curved roofs – with the upturned corners design – appearing on top of the many towers they could see in the distance, and a paved way that led to an immense stairway, wide and long.

The most impressive thing, however, was the sheer size of the chamber, able to house the entire temple as if it were above ground, the ceiling of the cave so high up that it didn’t seem they were underground. The many towers, big as they were, were not even close to reach it.

It was as if someone had picked up an ancient Chinese temple whole and put it underground, in a chamber located under a Soviet mining settlement in Norway.

It made no sense.

Natasha was as impressed as Clark, seeing everything with her night-vision goggles because there was no light anywhere. Both of them stood still, gazing marveled at the temple, still trying to understand what that was.

More importantly, what the Hand wanted with it.

Still entranced, they started walking through the courtyard, looking at the trees made of precious stones, a work of art that stood immaculate. On the pillars, Clark could see more of those weird symbols, resembling an oriental alphabet.

“Kelex, can you tell what language that is?” Clark asked, wondering if Thor could help him decipher that with his Allspeak fluency; he had to learn that sometime.

The little robot assumed its drone form and floated closer to the markings.

“Some of the marks bear resemblance to a few ancient dialects spoken in the Chinese territory,” Kelex started, “but they are not quite the same, sir.”

“Take pictures,” Natasha said, “lots and lots of pictures. Of everything, including these symbols. We can cross-reference with other databases later, see if we find a match or if we can translate it.”

Clark agreed and nodded, giving Kelex permission to fly around, filming everything. He and Natasha went on, walking the paved path surrounded by pillars. The dragon statues were everywhere, carved in stone or metal, their likeness very similar to the Eastern dragons from Chinese and Japanese mythology – which lent credence to the theory of that language being an ancient Chinese dialect.

Both of them walked for several minutes, in stunned silence, going up the imponent stairway until they finally arrived at the upper courtyard, in front of the massive cave wall; a place that seemed more of an altar than anything else.

And then, once again, they were astonished beyond words. Maybe even more than when they saw the temple for the first time.

Because carved in the stone wall were the marks of what seemed to be a very old fossil; more accurately, where a fossil was supposed to be, except all that was left were the marks engraved on stone, as if an ancient skeleton had been pulled from the wall.
It wasn’t the marks of the fossil or even its existence that shocked them, however. It was the size of it. The wall went up to the ceiling of the cave, so far that Natasha’s eyes probably couldn’t even see it; Clark could see the marks following the wall to its very end, hundreds of meters long.

Like a long, gigantic, serpent. A serpent suspiciously shaped like the several Eastern dragon’s statues all over the temple. Could it be?

“What is that?” Natasha whispered, eyes fixed on the marks. “Some kind of dinosaur?”

Clark, stunned, shook his head. “There are no dinosaurs that big.” He hesitated. “I think… I think that might’ve been a dragon.”

Natasha’s head turned so fast to look at him that he was surprised she didn’t suffer whiplash damage.

“Explain,” she demanded.

He simply raised his hands. “I don’t know, it’s just a guess. I don’t even know if dragons are real or not.”

She visibly relaxed. Natasha already had her share of headaches with aliens, gods and sorcerers on top of her usual problems.

Kelex shattered that relaxation with a single phrase.

“The beings you designate as ‘dragons’ exist in several planets across the universe,” she said, “in several different species, subspecies and races. There was a species of dragon in Krypton, though they were long extinct before you were born, sir.”

Both of them looked at the fossil marks again, eyes wide.

“Is that a dragon?” Natasha asked, her voice weirdly calm.

Kelex scanned the marks for a moment. “There is a high possibility, but without a sample I cannot be certain.”

Natasha stared at Clark as if the whole thing was his fault.

“See if you can find a sample, Kelex,” Clark asked, walking to Natasha. Kelex flew up, testing the stone wall for any remains of the supposed dragon. “Well, I guess we know what the Hand wanted here.”

“Do you think they got the fossil?” Natasha asked.

With his super-vision, Clark studied the wall, seeing marks of tools. Slowly, he nodded.

“I think so. There are tool marks all across the wall. I just… Why would they go through so much trouble? Kill so many?”

Natasha turned to him. “Clark, I know people that would start a World War for a drop of your blood. Or Thor’s. Or even Bruce’s and Steve’s. The secrets they could learn from it…” She glanced at the wall. “I don’t know if that… dragon,” she all but spat the word, “is anywhere near as powerful as you, but if it was, well, that’s a good enough reason for some.”

To make a biological weapon? Clone the creature? Develop some kind of Super-Soldier Serum out of it? Sell it to someone who would do even worse? All valid – and very worrying – possibilities. If
there really was a way for such things to be achieved, then the Hand shouldn’t be allowed to keep the fossil in any circumstance.

“You seem worried,” Natasha said, eyes on him.

Clark nodded, agreeing. “I am. This is… far more complex than I thought. The Hand is much worse than just fanatics and criminals and then there’s this.” He gestured around himself, to the temple. “Who built this? When? What was a dragon fossil doing here? If, of course, Kelex confirms it really is a dragon, which I suspect it is. And more importantly, how did the Hand know about it? What’s the connection?”

Natasha glanced at the wall again, tracing the fossil marks.

“Guess we’ll have to ask them when we catch them,” she finally said.

“Yeah,” he nodded, somber. “And then there are all those people. I know they’re most likely dead, for a long time even, but… I was hoping to find something here, some closure.” Clark looked at Natasha. “No one deserves that.”

She touched his shoulder. “No, they didn’t deserve that. But not every story has a happy ending in the real world, you know that. All we can do is give them justice.”

By ending the Hand and punishing all involved. He just didn’t know exactly how they would do that yet.

Clark was about to say something else when his phone began to ring, distracting him. Obviously, given that he was in another country and underground, Kelex was the one redirecting the call; so, excusing himself for a moment, he touched the small Liquid Geo part Kelex left of herself on his bracelet and accepted the call.

“Clark, where the fuck are you?”

Clark didn’t need to ask to know who it was.

“Hey, Jessica, how are you? I’m…” He looked around, seeing the underground quasi-Chinese temple in Norway that possibly contained the fossil of a dragon at some point. “I’m working,” Clark simplified.

“Are you in New York? Or flying around solving everybody’s problems?”

“The second one.”

“Well, come back then, we’ve got a problem. A big one.”

He got worried immediately.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked, fast.

“I’m fine… Look, I was doing this job earlier. A guy wanted me to follow his fiancé, to know if she was working as a stripper.”

“…What?”

Whatever he was expecting Jessica to say, it wasn’t that.

“Just listen, it’ll get somewhere! So, there I was last night, following this chick, and she was indeed
working at a strip club, just like hubby was afraid of. But, you know, I needed confirmation, so I pretended to play for the other team for a moment and got in, ready to take pictures with my phone. Long story short, the girl wasn’t stuffing her panties with dollar bills, she was actually working at the bar.”

“Happy ending,” Clark said, pleasantly surprised. Most jobs Jessica took usually ended up with her taking horrible pictures of cheating couples.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But no, the girl wasn’t stripping, but she was fucking her boss. Not my problem though, I wasn’t paid to find out that.”

“Shouldn’t you, you know, tell her fiancé about this little detail?”

“Why? So he can blame me for ruining his relationship? He didn’t hire me to find out if she was cheating, he hired me to find out if she was a stripper. Mission fucking accomplished. Anyway, that’s not why I’m calling.”

“You didn’t call me to talk about strippers?” Clark asked, getting a funny look from Natasha.

“No. Well, yes, but no. The club the girl was working happened to be owned by the Russians.”

That made Clark pay complete attention to the conversation. “How do you know?”

“Not hard to know that when the bouncers speak Russian, the bartenders speak Russian, most of the fat guys drooling over the strippers speak Russian… It’s obviously a front. But that’s not what I wanted to tell you. You see, today I went there again, to get more pictures of the girl. She apparently took an evening shift. I followed her there, but the place was closed.”

“Well, it was the middle of the afternoon, wasn’t it?”

“Apparently some of those clubs are opened 24/7, if you can believe it. There are some sad fucks who actually spend their lunch breaks watching strippers. That was one of those places, it should be opened, but it wasn’t. She went there and the bouncer at the door told her to take the day off. She didn’t ask questions and left, but I was curious.”

“Please tell me you didn’t beat anyone up,” Clark almost begged.

“No! I asked the guy, politely, if I could go in. He told me it was closed, said some bullshit about maintenance and something else and that they would re-open next week. So I asked if they were hiring new dancers.”

“Oh, Jessica…”

“Shut it, Clark, I needed to go in and take a look.”

“Did it at least work?”

There was a brief silence.

“No, he told me to get some new tits first, then he would think about it. That’s when I hit him.”

Clark didn’t know if he laughed or reprimanded Jessica, so he chose the next best option: he shut his mouth.

“I dragged him to an alley and… Persuaded him to tell me what was happening.”
“Did he?” Clark asked, letting the confession of violence slide for now.

“Yeah, he did.” She sighed.

“And?”

“And you were right, Clark. The Masked Man did cross the line. Apparently he decapitated one of the bosses of the Russian Mafia, Anatoly Ranskahov, and his brother Vladimir is out for blood. He’s calling everyone back, stockpiling weapons… Clark, you need to come back. Hell’s Kitchen is about to go to war.”

Clark felt his blood chill. He didn’t know what was worse in what Jessica had just told him. The threat of a gang war, the fact that a man had died – bad guy or not, that didn’t sit well with him – or the fact that the Masked Man had done what Clark feared he would.

He had let the Devil out and finally killed someone. And now Hell’s Kitchen was about to burn.

“Clark, you’re there?” Jessica sighed again. “Look, you can tell me ‘I told you so’ later. I fucked up, I know. But we really need you here. This Vladimir guy is a complete psycho and he’s pissed.”

Jessica wasn’t usually wrong about someone’s character and Clark could tell it was bothering her. But it wasn’t her fault, of course; she thought the best of someone, just like Clark usually did. It truly was a pity that her trust had been misplaced.

“I’m coming back right now. And Jessica? Don’t beat yourself up over this. You were not the one who made a mistake.”

There was a second of silence.

“Yeah, whatever… Just try to come back before they wreck Hell’s Kitchen again. The place is already a dump.”

When she hung up, Clark looked at Natasha. She was looking at him puzzled.

“We need to go back, fast. And we need to talk to Sergei. The Russians are about to go to war.”

Natasha just rolled her eyes and said: “When it rains, it pours, huh?”

_____________________________________________________________________

Wilson Fisk couldn’t stop himself from standing up when Vanessa appeared in the empty restaurant, looking as beautiful as she was suspicious. She spoke to the maître d’ for a moment, glancing at him at every two seconds, and was finally directed to the table where she would, hopefully, dine with him; given that there were no other guests in the restaurant, it wasn’t hard to point her the way.

It was clear to him she was scared – even though she had no need to be, not with him – but she held her head up. Brave and beautiful.

“I didn’t know if you’d show,” Fisk said, feeling incredibly nervous; a novelty to him.

After what Anatoly did, scaring her away from their first date, Vanessa would be well within her rights to never want to see him again.

“Neither did I,” Vanessa admitted. She looked around at the empty tables before saying: “I thought you didn’t go in for grand gestures.”
“No, it isn’t… I didn’t want to be interrupted again,” Fisk explained. “We can go somewhere else if you like.”

She stared at him.

“And if I just want to walk out that door by myself?” Vanessa questioned.

“Then I would dine alone,” he answered immediately. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

There was a long silence as Vanessa just looked at him.

“I’ve been lied to before,” she said. “By men. Some were even decent ones, but they still felt the need to be dishonest about things that mattered. Do you feel that need, Wilson?”

Fisk met her eyes.

“I don’t like to be in public,” he started, “and I don’t like to be questioned. But you can ask me anything, Vanessa, and I will always be honest with you.”

And he meant that, despite the fact that he was afraid she would leave and never return.

For a whole minute Vanessa didn’t say anything and Fisk was certain she would leave. Then she said:

“Let’s start with something simple… What are we drinking?”

The happy smile that took his face was something that hadn’t graced his expression for far too long.

Sergei felt like crap. He groaned, his vision blurry, and tried to move his inexplicably heavy limbs; his tongue felt too big inside his mouth.

Suddenly, his memory came rushing back, like a jolt of electricity.

“You conniving little bitch,” he muttered, drooling all over himself as he tried to talk.

“You’re hurting my feelings, Sergei,” Natasha’s voice answered. “How are you feeling?”

“Like a huge turd.”

“As usual, then?”

“Ha-ha...Ha.”

“Come on, get up. We need to talk, it’s urgent.”

Something in her tone made Sergei believe she wasn’t just being a bitch. Fighting against the drug she injected him, the old mobster forced his head up, groaning as if he was trying to lift a ton of bricks. And then, finally, he stood back on the chair, eyes fixing on the redhead and the pretty boy by her side.

Both of them looked serious as fuck. Ah, hell, what happened now?

“Well, what is it?” he asked.

Romanoff’s impassive expression softened for a fraction of a second.
“Anatoly Ranskahov is dead,” she told him. “He was killed last night by the Masked Vigilante.”

That fucking boy! Hadn’t he warned them what they were getting into? He wouldn’t say they were exactly friends, but he had groomed those two so that one day they could continue his work.

Sergei couldn’t help but to feel a pang of sadness; quickly replaced by frustration.

“Goddamn it! I told them to stay out of it!” he roared, kicking the table. “What the fuck happened?”

“We don’t know,” Natasha answered, calmly. “As far as we know, Anatoly crossed paths with the Masked Man last night, they fought, he lost.”

“And now Vladimir wants to blow up the city to find the Masked Man, right?” Sergei finished the story for her, knowing well just how close the brothers were.

This was a disaster, to say the least. The Russians were in no shape to start any kind of conflict, much less a war. They could barely keep up in normal times; what did Vladimir think it would happen if people started to die, the whole law enforcement took notice of them and, worse of all, they attracted Superman’s attention?

It would be their doom.

But rationality was probably the last thing Vladimir was relying upon right now. He wanted revenge, no matter the cost.

Sergei sighed, looking at Natasha.

“What do you want of me, girl?” he asked, feeling tired in his bones.

“Help me to stop it before it starts,” Natasha answered, right away. “Tell me where we can find him.”

He chuckled, humorless.

“You’re asking me to betray our family? I thought you were smarter than that, Natasha.”

Natasha’s expression changed. It was subtle, but he knew immediately that he was now speaking to the Black Widow. She leaned over the desk, face close to his.

“Let me tell you what’s going to happen, Sergei,” the Black Widow started, her voice calm and low. “Vladimir will start a war. Innocents are going to be caught in the crossfire. Superman won’t like that.” Sergei actually shook a bit just by thinking of it. “You know what he did to the violent gangs all over the world. You know what he thinks about the ones that harm innocents.”

She pointed her finger towards the window.

“Vladimir is a pit of rage and violence. He just lost the only person in this world he gives a damn about. He doesn’t care if he lives or dies in the end, as long as he gets the Masked Man. And for that he will send all your men to a war they cannot hope to win, just so he has enough time to find and kill the Vigilante. No matter the cost, no matter how many have to die.”

Suddenly, the Black Widow grabbed his face and got even closer, her eyes unblinking.

“If that happens, Sergei, I promise you one thing: it will be the end of the Russian Mafia. Not only here, in Hell’s Kitchen, but in the entire world. Superman will devote every bit of his power
against you. He will find you wherever you are, he will destroy your shipments, he will make the very presence of a Russian mobster something to be avoided. *He will break you.* She pressed her fingers so hard against his cheeks that he flinched. “And I will help, alongside the full might of the Avengers. We will not stop until the last vestige of the Russian Mafia is wiped off the face of the Earth.”

She released him and stepped back; her terrifying eyes, however, still hadn’t left his.

“If you want to save your people, Sergei, now is the time. I want to know where he’ll be and I want to know it now.”

Sergei looked down, unable to hold her staring. When did the world change so much? That one person could threaten the entirety of the Russian Mafia and actually mean it? Natasha hadn’t lied, he knew that. Sergei had indeed saw what happened to the gangs, cartels and minor mob families that tried to go against Superman, to keep their violent ways.

Simply put, they were completely torn to shreds.

Oh, he hadn’t killed anyone, it wasn’t his way, but that didn’t make the statement any less true. He destroyed their business, arrested their men, found out every bit of evidence against them, took and broke their guns, even sent the most stubborn ones directly to the hospital, where they stayed for a very long time thinking about their mistakes.

Most importantly, he had sent his message: those who practice violence against innocent people are fucked. And everyone around them is too.

It got to the point that other gangs went out of their way to avoid those that kept doing it; in some occasions, they even helped Superman and the police to arrest them, just so they wouldn’t be considered accomplices. The violent gangs became akin to lepers in the old days, something to be avoided and kept at distance for their own safety.

And now Vladimir planned the ultimate show of violence, a war.

All that without even accounting for the Avengers. Sergei could barely predict the shitstorm that would hit them in the face if they joined Superman against them. A literal god that could control storms, that big green monster that almost destroyed Harlem, goddamn Tony Stark and his fucking advanced weapons that made theirs look like stick and stones, Captain freaking America that would probably get a hard-on when beating up Russians… Shit, even that dude with a bow and arrow that liked to hang out with Natasha would probably singlehandedly dismantle their soldiers.

And of course, the Black Widow herself, a master assassin that knew the Russian Mafia with the back of her hand and almost made a career by killing them in increasingly gruesome ways in the old days.

Vladimir would destroy, in a single act, the entire organization. Everything they built, all their history, all their accomplishments… Tossed in the toilet by a revengeful brat, just because he needed to kill the man who killed his brother, the same brother who had entered this business fully aware of the risks.

Sergei was sympathetic to Vladimir’s plight, he really was, but sometimes the good of the many outweighed the good of the few.

Breathing deeply, Sergei let out a long sigh; then he looked at Natasha.

“Vladimir is brilliant,” he started, “but he’s also predictable. Piss him off enough and he will get as
many guns as he can and go after you. And as far as I know, there are four big weapon’s deposits in Hell’s Kitchen, where we hid all our guns once Superman made them useless: 48th and 9th, 42nd and 10th, 44th and 11th and 47th and 12th.” Sergei looked at Natasha. “He’s going to be in one of those places.”

Natasha nodded, looked at the pretty boy who was silent all this time, and walked out, leaving him to deal with his guilt.

“You did the right thing, Sergei,” she said, closing the door.

Alone, cuffed to a table and feeling like crap, Sergei had his doubts.

Clark was already back in his Kryptonian skinsuit when Natasha closed the door where Sergei was cuffed. She glanced at him.

“You’re going?” Natasha asked, already checking her guns.

“Yeah, I’ll get there much faster by myself,” he answered. “If I’m lucky, I’ll find Vladimir there, before they start anything.”

The clock was ticking, after all. At any moment, Vladimir might launch an attack on the city, hoping to find or attract the Masked Man.

She nodded. “I’ll start to evacuate the civilians around the locations, stealthily, without raising anyone’s suspicion. Best to hold our cards close to the chest right now. A gas leak, perhaps? That excuse always works.” Natasha opened the window for him. “I’ll meet you there. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Clark answered, and took off to the sky, booming when he broke the sound barrier.

Finding a bunch of armed Russians gearing up for war right in his neighborhood wouldn’t be very difficult – not with his vision and hearing –, but he was still glad Sergei decided to help them. It would make things easier and, more importantly, it would make that much harder for Vladimir and his men to slip through the cracks during the confusion, so they could try something like this again when no one would be prepared to react.

Clark would not allow them to hurt any innocents. He would find and capture Vladimir, to stop him and to learn more about his deal with the Hand.

And then he would deal with the Masked Vigilante.

It would be quite the night, Clark decided, reaching the clouds over New York and looking down, searching for his target.

“This wine is even better than the others,” Vanesa complimented, sipping the red drink. “Did you pick it?”

Dinner was going surprisingly well, Fisk thought, as Vanessa and he talked. The city at night was incredibly beautiful from the restaurant and, since they were the only ones there, they could talk in silence. And about anything.

Fisk sipped his own wine and gave her a tiny smile.

“I’ve never had it,” he admitted. “My assistant.” She arched an eyebrow. “I said I’d be honest.”
“You did,” she answered, amused.

“Wesley is more than an assistant, he’s my friend,” Fisk explained, slowly.

“So you do have those,” Vanessa countered, smiling. “Yet the man says he was lonely when he looked at my painting.”

His memory jumped back at the art exhibition where Fisk had met Vanessa, where she had caught his eye. Not only because she was beautiful and sophisticated, but because of her talent. When he looked at her paintings, he felt things he thought he would never feel again.

“So why does a man like you,” Vanessa went on, “feel alone?”

“Nature of my business, I suppose.”

“And what kind of business is that?”

There it was, the conversation he was dreading. But for good or ill, honesty was the way to go, he had promised her that. He looked at the windows, to the city under the night sky.

“Rebuilding this city,” Fisk finally said. “I want to carve something beautiful out of its ugliness, set free its potential.”

Vanessa held his stare without flinching. When he remained in silence, she said:

“We’ve been sitting here talking for a long time and you’re going to insult me like I have no idea what you really do?”

Fisk kept looking inside her eyes.

“What I said, about what I want for this city is the truth,” he said. “But money and influence is not enough to usher change on such a scale.” Fisk turned and looked at the city. “We’re living, perhaps, a new Age of Heroes. We have the Avengers, we have Superman, we have SHIELD keeping the world safe. I ask you, though: have things really changed?”

Vanessa listened raptly to him, eager to know what truly drove him.

“From high up there, from the top of the Avengers Tower and the sky, I’m sure New York looks beautiful, even peaceful,” Fisk continued, “but down here? Amongst the men and women? Things remain as they were. Crime still exists, victims are made every day, the powerful prey on the weak.”

“Things got better, surely,” Vanessa argued.

“To some. And for now,” Fisk countered. “How long do you think it will take until the criminal underworld learns to survive in a world that has Superman? How long do you think they’ll take to adapt? I can tell you, from personal experience, not very long. Soon enough, crime will be rampant again, stronger, but since we have such brave heroes to protect us,” he said, sarcastically, gesturing to the sky, “most will say all is well. And all the while, the city will fester.”

He looked into her eyes again.

“Crime is part of the human nature, Vanessa, we cannot eliminate one without the other. While there is mankind, there will be those behind the shadows to prey on them. And the ones supposed to protect us? Politicians, law enforcement, judges… You’d be surprised at how easily most of
them can ignore terrific things happening all around them with the right incentive. The entire system is corrupt to the core.”

“So what’s the solution, Wilson?” Vanessa asked. “Do nothing? Become powerful enough to defend your own and abandon the rest?”

He leaned forward.

“These… heroes have good intentions, I don’t doubt that. So do many other men and women in positions of power. But their mistake is to think they can end crime, erase the underworld as if it never existed. But that is impossible.” Fisk stopped for a moment, looking at her. “No, the solution is to rule both worlds, Vanessa. To keep both in check, to force them into the right direction from within. That is what I want. I love this city. It is a part of me. When I was a boy, I dreamed about setting things right, making it a better place so we can all live in harmony.” He breathed deeply. “But to do so, I will have to sully my hands, to conquer the criminal underworld as well as the lawful world of heroes and politicians and cops.”

There was a long silence, where Vanessa’s eyes never left his.

“Would you like to leave?” Fisk finally asked, resigned.

She reached across the table and grabbed his hand.

“No, I’d like a reason to stay.”

His hand closed around hers, gently.

“I’ve done things that I’m not proud of, Vanessa. I’ve hurt people… And I’m going to hurt more. It’s impossible to avoid for what I’m trying to do. I take no pleasure in it, in cruelty. But this city isn’t a caterpillar, it doesn’t spin a cocoon and wake up a butterfly. A city… Crumbles and fades. It needs to die before it can be reborn.”

Slowly, Vanessa let go of his hand and reached for her purse. Very carefully, she opened it and pulled a pistol from within. A .22 that Fisk already knew it was there, since the beginning. Without saying anything, he watched as she pulled the pistol from the purse.

“So I don’t need a gun?” she asked.

Fisk smiled at her.

“No. By my side, is the safest place that you could ever be.”

Without ever taking her eyes from his, she put the pistol – and effectively herself – in his hands.

Wilson Fisk vowed that he would never betray that trust.

He looked at his watch and got up, offering his hand at her.

“It is almost time… I want to show you something, if you allow me.”

Hesitantly, puzzled, Vanessa took his hand and got up. Fisk led her to the immense windows, gazing at the beautiful city; at the corrupt city.

It was time to begin changing it.

In the distance, an explosion illuminated the night.
Clark’s eyes pierced the cloud veil, looking down from very high up, focusing directly on one of the Russian warehouses. His x-ray vision revealed the warehouse’s interior, showing him the small troop of mobsters, opening crates and more crates of guns, bombs and various weapons. Obviously, their entire armory, hidden away when criminals realized guns were a sure way to draw his attention.

For a moment, he wondered what Vladimir’s plan was. Would he spread his men all over the city and order them to find the Masked Vigilante at any cost? Would he unleash his troops at various targets across Hell’s Kitchen, hoping the chaos would draw the man who killed his brother?

But what about Superman? What was Vladimir’s plan to deal with Clark himself? Would he simply sacrifice his men as bait, throwing them at different locations in Hell’s Kitchen for him to capture, while he could find the Masked Man by himself? Or he didn’t even have any plan and all this was just pure wrath?

Clark had no idea, but at the moment it changed nothing. He still needed to stop the Russians and find Vladimir.

At the second he reached that conclusion, something weird appeared near the warehouse. While the interior was buzzing with movement, full of Russians grabbing weapons to fight, the two men stationed outside were manhandling what seemed to be a blind Chinese man that had just arrived, for some reason very decided to go into the warehouse.

He hesitated, confused at the sight. Was the blind Chinese man a civilian that took the wrong turn? A hostage? Someone they kidnapped?

That moment of hesitation almost cost him the chance to react, when the blind Chinese man pulled a small trigger from his pocket and pressed the button.

“NO!” Clark yelled, already flying down, going so fast that the clouds parted on his path.

Clark’s reflexes were so unbelievably sharp as he accelerated that he could see things almost moving in slow motion. The blind Chinese man wasn’t a hostage or a civilian, like he previously thought.

He was a suicide bomber. And he had just activated the bomb he was carrying.

As he flew down, the air booming as he pushed himself to go even faster, Clark watched as the explosion formed. The trigger activated, the bomb’s mechanism reacted and the whole thing ignited, generating flames and unbelievable force. There was absolutely nothing he could do to save the suicide bomber, nor the two Russians that tried to stop him; Clark could only watch in horror as the explosion engulfed them, the impact killing them immediately.

But there was something he could do to save the other people that would soon be caught in the blast radius.

Filling his lungs as he descended, Clark unleashed a powerful blow, the air coming out like a concentrated tornado. The wind blast clashed against the explosion, stopping it just in time from reaching the warehouse and the men within, redirecting the flames and debris towards the empty parking lot by the side of the building.

The shockwave generated by the clash of his super-breath and the explosion wasn’t stopped, though.
Every window of the warehouse shattered immediately and the brick walls cracked. The lights turned off and everything shook, tossing down every single man inside it. The crates filled with guns broke and the weapons were thrown everywhere, just like everything else in the warehouse, from tables and furniture to the heavy machinery.

But at least the explosion was stopped before it could destroy everything, killing everyone.

Clark arrived a moment later, breaking the ceiling of the warehouse as if it weren’t there, entering the place like a missile. The Russians were still on the ground, groaning in pain, confused, but Clark had no intention of allowing them to get up; on that day, he wouldn’t be gentle.

They had crossed the limits.

The first mobsters didn’t even see him, as Clark clashed like a blur against them, slowing down just before making contact to not kill or permanently injure them, but otherwise hitting them with enough strength to send them flying and unconscious. One, two, three, four… The men on the upper level didn’t even have the time to react before Clark was done with them, breaking the floor to reach ground level.

The Russians there were finally getting up, some still holding their guns, all of them as confused as they could possibly be.

And they were all tossed down again when Clark landed, his legs hitting the ground so strongly that the entire warehouse trembled again, a crater forming under him. The Russians were thrown away, some falling immediately, other flying away with the impact.

Before their minds even had the chance to understand what was going on, Clark moved.

He was a blur of red and blue, hitting the Russians still in the air with enough power to put them to sleep, and at the same time directing their fall so they would collide against each other in the center of the warehouse. The ones that fell down were simply picked up, bashed against the head, and also tossed with the others, without a chance to even see what was happening.

In few seconds, all hostiles were unconscious, piled up in the middle of the warehouse, and Clark took off, flying with all his speed to the next one.

He didn’t know who the blind Chinese man was and why he had blown himself up in a suicidal attack, but he had a few theories and the Hand appeared in most of them. The war Vladimir was planning couldn’t be good for the Hand’s business and they would be interested in stopping them, if possible. That could be it, Clark imagined, but as he saw the approaching second warehouse down below he put those thoughts – and his regret for being too late – away for the moment.

Because there was another blind Chinese man walking towards it, a trigger already ready to be pressed in his hand.

Without thinking twice, Clark’s eyes glowed red and he unleashed a powerful – but incredibly precise – blast of heat vision. The pair of red energy beams cut off the blind man’s backpack and before he could even notice, Clark flew down – so fast that the man wouldn’t see more than just a blur even if he wasn’t blind – grabbed the backpack, knocked-out him and flew back up in the air.

The explosion that followed lit up the sky, but Clark was the only one caught by it and the heat and impact didn’t even bother him.

The sound and light-show, however, were enough to draw the Russians’ gaze, some of them running outside the warehouse to see what was happening.
Superman, smoke still around him, looked down at them. His eyes were glowing red.

“FUCK!” one of the yelled, tossing his gun to the side, turning back and running away from him.

The rest of them weren’t far behind. As if they could possibly escape.

Clark floated in the sky for a second more, then he dashed down, a sonic-boom echoing, and clashed against the warehouse’s wall. The brick wall turned to dust when he touched it and he stopped an inch away from one of the mobsters inside, the impact of his body against the air sending the man flying without the need to even touch him.

Not allowing the mobster to fall back to the ground, Clark advanced, moving faster than the human eye could perceive, and grabbed him, smashing him back down with just enough strength to incapacitate him.

The rest of the Russians could only look, eyes wide, shaking with fear. And then Clark attacked.

Calling it a battle would imply that both sides at least had the chance to fight; it wasn’t what happened. The Russians didn’t shoot, didn’t throw grenades, didn’t even try to punch or stab. Not because they were too afraid to do it – which they were –, but because they simply couldn’t react in time.

Clark was holding back enough not to kill and not to cripple them, but that was all. He blurred from one mobster to the other, slowing down just in time not to destroy them, and hit one after another. His punches, taps and sometimes finger flicks were enough to send the men down immediately, before their reflexes could even comprehend that someone was attacking.

What followed was a few seconds of blue and red blurs zooming across the warehouse, mobsters flying everywhere, men being put down against the ground strongly enough to shake it and guns and knives being broken, as if they simply disintegrated out of nothing.

And then there was one Russian left, eyes filled with terror, as he stared at Superman while holding a small radio.

Clark glanced at the terrified man, not a shred of his usual good mood present in his expression. Someone was screaming on the other end of the radio, asking for their status, probably confused by the explosions and all the recent noise.

“Su-Superman!” the Russian stuttered, falling down as he tried to walk away, his expression taken by true fear.

He looked at the man for another second, then dashed forward.

“AHHHG!” the Russian yelled, before Clark bashed his palm against the side of his head, tossing him down.

The small radio fell down, but Clark had already taken off, flying to the third warehouse.

“Holy—“

“–Fuck!” yelled the Russian, dropping the radio when he heard the sonic-boom in the sky.

Near the second-floor window, the Russian mobster could only watch as Superman descended from the heavens like a vengeful god, flying directly to the guards at the entrance – who were, at
that point, trying to turn away one of Madame Gao’s blind delivery boys that for reason was trying
to get inside – and landed just by their side.

With such force that the three men were sent flying, the street breaking under him.

Superman completely ignored the two Russians as they fell, using his time to grab Gao’s delivery
man while he was still in the air and take his backpack, only to put the blind Chinese guy on the
ground again – gently, but with enough force to knock him out. Then he kneeled down, crouched
over the backpack, as if using his body to completely cover it.

The Russian’s jaw was agape when the backpack Superman was holding blew up, breaking the
ground beneath it, letting out smoke and a bit of flame, but otherwise completely contained by
Superman’s indestructible body.

“Holy fuck!” he let out again, almost pissing himself, way too afraid of Superman to even process
the fact that Gao’s delivery man was carrying a bomb in his backpack.

That was when Superman decided to crash against the warehouse, flying so fast that the man
wondered if he had teleported.

The walls and windows provided the same amount of protection that they would against a nuclear
warhead, which was nothing at all. The entire front of the building cracked when Superman hit it,
pulverizing the big door to enter the ground floor.

What the hell was going on?! The man was frozen on spot, his hand clutching the useless fucking
gun by his side, the little radio he used to talk to the other soldiers echoing the terrifying sounds
from whatever the fuck was going on down below.

Crashing noises, screaming, things – or people – hitting the ground and the walls, glass breaking,
metal screeching as it was ripped apart... The place trembled from time to time and the sonic-
booms that Superman made every time he moved were enough to dislocate everything around him,
sending things flying everywhere.

He still hadn’t been able to move an inch from his previously spot, paralyzed by fear, when two
motherfucking red beams appeared from the level below, cutting the floor, machinery that
happened to be in its way and even the ceiling like they were all made of butter.

The whole thing collapsed at the next second, taking himself and every soldier with him on the
second level alongside it.

It was like time itself stopped as he fell down. The could see the pieces of the broken floor, the
furniture, the machinery and every one of his men floating for a but a moment, as if someone had
turned off gravity.

Then they started to fall, screaming.

Except none of them actually crashed against the ground. Superman – moving so fucking fast that
the Russian had to wonder why the hell they were still on business – flew against them, grabbed
the falling people midair and tossed them out the warehouse, not allowing a single one to hit the
floor or be crushed by the debris but putting them to sleep nevertheless.

The Russian mobster actually shrieked like a 9-year-old girl when he felt Superman grab him.

No rollercoaster, no race car, no plane, absolutely nothing he ever felt could compare to the feeling
of being grabbed by a super-powered alien and carried to the sky in a split-second. Everything was
a blur around him, the sound was horrific, and before his brain could even process what was going on, he was being held by Superman high up in the sky of New York.

Holy fuck, he thought again, this time pissing his pants for real.

“Your boss,” Superman said, his voice hard and his eyes glowing red.

The Russian could only point towards the general direction of their last warehouse, shaking like a leaf in a storm, before yelling like a 9-year-old girl once again when Superman flew back down with him, fast enough that his heart almost stopped.

It was almost a mercy when Superman flicked his forehead, knocking him out. His last thought before passing out was that he would never commit a crime again, not after this.

Matt listened to the people inside the warehouse, perched on the roof above it while covered by the shadows of the night. There were a lot of people inside, a lot of guns and bombs. Like the Russian he captured told him, the Russians truly were preparing for war.

A war not only against him, but against New York as well. Revenge against the Masked Vigilante that had killed Anatoly Ranskahov.

When Matt found out who killed Anatoly and pinned the blame on him, he would have a very lengthy conversation with him. Fists would be involved.

It was madness. He knew it, the entire Russian Mafia knew it and Vladimir probably knew it too, but they were still going on with it. What was the plan here, if there even was one? Start shooting around New York, hoping the Masked Man would show up? Superman would be there in a matter of seconds and 90% of these men would go to jail – for a long time – before even firing the first shot.

Vladimir was willing to sacrifice the entire organization to find him and that told him a lot about his motivation. He would not stop, he would kill anyone that got in his way and he was even prepared to use his men as bait to lure Superman away and give him the opportunity.

Madness or stupidity, he didn’t know how to call that plan.

And yet, Matt was there, so maybe the plan had worked in some capacity.

There was an upside to all this, at least. Vladimir was unlikely to be thinking clearly right now. He was furious and he wanted revenge and he probably didn’t even care if he died or not at this point. It made him dangerous, yes, but liable to make mistakes.

Also, it made him a poor leader. It was unlikely that the Russians would continue to follow him if their boss was using them as cannon fodder against Superman.

If Matt could stop him, now, then it was over. At least for a while. Claire would be safe, the Russians would be unwilling to start killing innocents and Matt would have a lead on Fisk, the true mastermind.

Leaning forward without really needing to, Matt concentrated, trying to listen to the beginning of a conversation happening in the room right below him. It was in Russian, he couldn’t understand most of it, but he did understand a single word:

“...Vladimir...”.
He also recognized the voice that answered, from the time he almost captured Anatoly Ranskahov a while back; if his memory served him right, the voice that answered to this conversation was the same that had called Anatoly “brother” back then, before attacking him like an enraged pit bull.

Vladimir was there, Matt realized, eager to finally put an end to this.

But when he realized that, he also noticed the probable topic of the conversation between the Russian boss and his underling. Tilting his head slightly, Matt listened to a discussion between the two guards on the front, trying to send away a man that was answering only in Mandarin. Immediately, his memory went back to a point earlier that day, when he captured the Russian mobster to interrogate; to the Chinese blind man sitting on the backseat of the cab, supposedly a delivery man for the Chinese mob.

Before he could actually understand why the Chinese was making a delivery now, at that very moment, Matt listened to something else with his enhanced hearing; something in the distance, that even the Russians could probably hear if they paid attention to it, but that to him was so incredibly loud.

Three explosions, one soon after the other. In the general direction of the other Russian hideout’s addresses that the mobster he interrogated had given him.

Matt froze for a second, his brain working fast to understand what was going on, but there was just one answer: someone had attacked the Russians. Probably the same “someone” that had killed Anatoly and blamed him for it, making sure the Russians would ready themselves for war, like they were doing right now.

And the one piece of the puzzle that didn’t fit in all this was the Chinese blind man trying to enter the Russian hideout.

At that moment, he heard a small – but very significant – click.

Matt jumped from the roof and grabbed the fire escape, almost as if by reflex alone, twisted himself to go into the warehouse’s direction and curled himself into a ball midair just before crashing against the warehouse second-floor window, falling inside with a thunderous bang. Every Russian inside turned, alarmed, weapons pointing at him.

Then it happened.

BOOOOM!

He was expecting it, but not even Matt could remain standing when the entire warehouse shook, sending everyone down. The windows shattered and the dim lights went off instantly; the noise was almost unbearable to Matt’s enhanced hearing and he felt the heat of the flames, even from afar, almost as if they were running on his skin. The vibrations of the blast shook every single bone in his body and he was so utterly lost for a second that he might as well have been blind.

But he couldn’t allow Vladimir to die there, not without telling him about Fisk.

Somehow, the warehouse didn’t collapse and the second-floor was remarkably undamaged, even though some parts of the floor had, indeed, crumbled. Flames spread through it and sections of the ceiling were falling down. Matt’s senses were going haywire, making him incredibly dizzy, but he forced himself up, trying to focus so he could follow Vladimir’s voice, breathing, heartbeat… Anything.

He heard a groan, a piece of wood hitting the floor, a curse in Russian; every single one uttered by
the voice he was looking for.

At the same time, he heard the ceiling finally giving away, right above Vladimir.

Matt was running towards Vladimir before he even realized what he was doing, screaming to try to follow the vibrations of his own voice against the surfaces in front of him, not unlike a bat. Vladimir heard him and turned, his heartbeat fast, his expression going from pained, to startled, to finally realization.

And then fury.

But it was already too late, because Matt clashed against him, sending them both through the second-floor shattered window, just at the moment the ceiling caved in. It was a long fall and they might break bones, Matt knew that, but there was nothing he could do; it was either that or being crushed by the collapsed building and burning to death soon after, if they survived the first one.

Matt couldn’t help but flinch, waiting for the impact.

Out of nowhere, a loud sonic-boom shook the sky. A second later, something appeared under them, impacting them hard, but not the unforgiving clash against the ground, like he expected. Instead, it was something that actually slowed them down for a moment, before finally stopping their fall and dropping them safely on the ground.

Not “something”, Matt suddenly realized, but “someone”.

Turning his head up unnecessarily, Matt gazed with his blind eyes at Superman, floating in the sky.

*That* was not something he had planned on happening, that was for sure. But what Matt *really* hadn’t planned was for him to actually recognize the man flying above them. Eyes could be easily deceived, but his senses couldn’t. It was the same almost too slow heartbeat, the exact same shape of the body and face, the same smell, the same shockingly unwavering body temperature, the same high density of his skin, bones and organs, the same calm way to breathe, even though the situation they were in was anything but calm.

The man flying above them, clad in Superman’s clothes, was the same man that he and Foggy met during their “guys’ night out”. The same man that played pool against them, the same man that was happily drinking alongside Thor and Captain America, both using terrible disguises. The same man they helped get out of jail after they fought the biker gang.

Clark Kent was Superman, Matt confirmed, surprised by the turn of events. And by the expression in his face, he somehow also knew exactly who was under that mask; and he was *not* happy with what was happening.

Clark was too late to arrive before the suicide bomber detonated his charges, killing himself, the two guards at the entrance of the last Russian warehouse and three others close to the entrance. But at least he got there in time to minimize the casualties, breaking into the warehouse and redirecting the blast outside with his super-breath, preventing the death of all the remaining survivors in there.

It was not the outcome he wanted, but at least the lives of most there were spared. He would have to settle for that; he should not have lost precious seconds to confirm Vladimir’s location with the mobster on the previous warehouse.

After the bomb blast was stopped, Clark blurred through the warehouse, getting everyone out – while knocking them out at the same time –, saving the Russian mobsters from burning to death or
being crushed by the debris.

That was when he heard someone screaming on the second-floor and jumping against another person; right through the window.

Taking off fast, Clark went through the wall, breaking the sound-barrier to arrive just in time to stop their fall, slowing down under them to be able to save them from quite severe wounds or maybe even death.

It was only when the two of them were already saved that Clark realized who he’d just saved: the Masked Vigilante and the Russian Mafia’s boss, Vladimir Ranskahov. Both alive and relatively unharmed.

Floating above them, Clark glanced at the two men, both groaning in pain, when the Masked Man finally turned and looked back at him; his eyes widened when he used his x-ray vision to look through the man’s black mask.

Because the man under the mask was someone he’d already met before: Matthew Murdock, the lawyer that had played pool against he, Steve, Thor and Jessica in Luke’s Bar, the same one that helped them out of jail after they fought against the Dogs of Hell.

Matt Murdock, the blind lawyer, was the Masked Vigilante.

The same Masked Vigilante that had been beating criminals to a pulp all over Hell’s Kitchen and forcing the entire Russian Mafia into despair. The same Masked Vigilante that had already captured, with his bare hands, several other escaped or non-convicted criminals, sending them to jail so injured that they probably would never recover.

The same Masked Vigilante that had decapitated Anatoly Ranskahov, one of the two bosses of the Russian Mafia, and sent the entire mob into a war frenzy.

Clark really had no idea how that was possible, how could the same blind lawyer he met that night be the Masked Vigilante, but Matt was clearly not just a blind lawyer. Using his x-ray vision he could confirm that Matt wasn’t simply a man in the wrong place at the wrong time – wearing the wrong outfit --, because his skin was littered with scars and bruises, his bones were full of old lesions and his muscles were clearly built through years of martial-arts training.

There was no mistaking it: Matt Murdock and the Masked Vigilante were the same person.

And unless Clark was very wrong, by the surprised look on Matt’s face, he had also realized that Clark Kent and Superman were also the same person. Whatever allowed Matt to “see” the world was clearly better than mere eyesight, that was for certain.

Neither of them spoke, neither of them moved, they simply remained there – Clark floating and Matt on the ground --, staring fixedly at each other. Until Vladimir groaned in pain again and opened his eyes.

“You!” the Russian mobster roared, his voice slurred, but before he could even raise his arms to do anything, Matt punched him in the jaw, knocking him out.

There was silence, broke only by the far away police and fire trucks’ sirens, the sound of the fire and the debris from the warehouse that would occasionally fall.

“So, I guess we both have questions… Clark Kent,” Matt finally said, looking at him with his blind eyes.
Clark stared back without answering for a moment, studying more than just Matt’s face and old injuries, more than just his lack of sight – because he didn’t doubt for a second that he was really blind. No, Clark was remembering the conversations he had with the man, more importantly, the impressions he had. Clark was a pretty good judge of character – and so was Jessica, despite her suspicious nature – and the vibe he got from Matt that night wasn’t of a crazy, murderous vigilante.

In another universe, Clark might have taken the Masked Vigilante directly to the police, without question. He was a vigilante, he was extremely brutal and he apparently had killed a man, criminal or not. Things would only escalate from there, there was no doubt. A clearly trained man, possibly enhanced, with no morals was not something Clark could tolerate.

But in this universe he had met Matt before, he had talked to him, found out more about him. He also talked to Jessica, who had advised him on the matter, stating that while violent, the Masked Vigilante was not a killer.

Clark had thousands of questions right now, but he would settle for Matt answering just one.

“Matt Murdock… Did you kill Anatoly Ranskahov?”

Matt’s face twisted in annoyance.

“I never killed anyone,” he retorted, immediately.

Clark opened his arms, looking around. “What do you have to do with this?”

“Nothing, unless you count trying to stop it as ‘having anything to do with it’,” Matt said, getting up. “Someone blamed me for killing Anatoly, this guy wanted revenge. I wanted to stop this war before people got hurt.” He turned and looked at the unconscious Russian. “And I needed to ask him some questions.”

Matt wasn’t lying, Clark could tell that by his vitals. Words were often twisted into lies, but something in the body always gave it away; Matt wasn’t showing any signs of that.

A brutal vigilante he might be – and Clark would have words with him about that –, but he had never killed anyone. Someone else was responsible for Anatoly’s death and Clark was beginning to think that it was the same person responsible for this attack against the Russians.

The sirens began to sound closer and both he and Matt looked in their direction; it seemed his hearing was indeed enhanced, like Jessica theorized.

Thinking fast, Clark grabbed Kelex and sent a quick message to Natasha.

“Grab him and take him to that street,” Clark said, suddenly, startling Matt.

“What?” Matt asked, confused.

“Vladimir,” he clarified. “The police is coming and they will arrest you and him on the spot.”

Clark sighed. “And I have on good authority that if they do, you two will probably not last the night.” He pointed to the dark street passing by the warehouse’s side, in the opposite direction of the sirens. “Go through there, I will handle things here.”

“They’ll probably surround the entire place,” Matt argued, but he was already lifting Vladimir off the ground.

“They will, that’s why I have someone waiting for you there,” Clark said. “Put Vladimir in her car,
take off your mask and go home. The police won’t stop a blind lawyer.”

“The perks of being blind, huh?” Matt sighed, groaning with the effort to lift Vladimir. “What will you do with him? I need him to answer my questions.”

“What questions?”

“I want the man in charge.”

Clark nodded. “So do I.” He stared at Matt. “I still have question for you, Matt, a lot of them. Depending on your answers, I’ll share what I find.”

Matt met his stare, silent.

“You’re putting a lot of trust in a ‘crazy Masked Vigilante’,” he said.

“I am,” Clark agreed. Not only he was allowing Matt to take Vladimir, he was also letting him go knowing he knew Clark’s true identity. “Someone I know thinks you’re not that bad. I want to know if she’s right.” He tilted his head a bit. “But also, I will find you in seconds if you break that trust, so I would behave if I were you.

Matt chuckled, not even remotely bothered by the threat, and started to walk.

“Perks of being a super-powered alien, I suppose,” he said. “Well, you know where to find me, Clark. Or you can find out. We’ll talk later.”

“Later,” Clark agreed, turning to greet the police cars that arrived in the distance.

He hoped he wouldn’t regret allowing Matt to go. His options were a bit limited, true, but he was allowing Matt to take Vladimir and shielding him from the police because he wanted to believe in him. Even if the man knew his most precious secret.

Hope in the potential of every person to be a force for good.

The die was cast. Right now, he had criminals to deliver to justice and fires to put out. The night would be long.

“Oh, my God,” Vanessa whispered, watching the explosions in the distance.

As she watched the fires of a new world, Wilson Fisk watched her. He could see she was shocked, even afraid, but she wasn’t turning away.

“Wilson?” she asked, her voice weak.

He got closer to her.

“Every one of those places belonged to one of the most violent mobs in the world,” Fisk explained, gently. “They were gathering their men to start a war that would bathe New York in blood. Now, they will no longer infect this city.”

Vanessa listened to his every word, never glancing away from the fires. But her expression changed, from scared and shocked, to determinate.

“Good,” she said.
Fisk smiled as he looked tenderly at her.

Clark smelled like smoke and he was certain it would take more than just a quick shower to remove that barbecue smell from him.

Not that Natasha hadn’t offered, but he was pretty sure that getting naked in her apartment would lead to some terrible prank, that might or might not involve her asking to join him as a joke or something even worse.

Best not take any chances.

As they walked the stairs to Natasha’s apartment, Vladimir being carried by him inside a body bag – very much alive and unharmed, of course –, the sun was beginning to rise over New York. It had taken him a bit of time to help the fireman to extinguish the flames on the warehouses, but at least it was done.

The members of the Russian Mafia captured by him – excluding Vladimir himself – were taken by the police to a hospital, where they would be constantly guarded by Natasha’s people, even after they left to prison; Clark wasn’t certain how right Sergei was in claiming the Hand had eyes everywhere, but it was best not to take chances.

And the dead… There was nothing anyone could do about them, unfortunately. They were criminals and they were preparing for war, but Clark would still mourn for them. And for the Chinese suicide bombers as well. He had no idea the level of fanaticism that took for someone to do such a thing, but those people were victims as much as they were murderers.

The Hand was the one to blame for this, most likely, and he would get to the bottom of this.

Matt had delivered Vladimir to Natasha, as agreed, and then left, probably back to his home. That was probably the biggest surprise of the night, right after the bombs, of course. Clark was very curious about him, his motivations as well as his abilities, and he would probably meet him later on.

He was innocent of killing Anatoly, but he was still incredibly brutal and angry and Clark wanted to talk to him about that.

“Are you tired?” Natasha asked, glancing at him. “Or it takes more than that to tire one such as you?”

The line was, obviously, full of inuendo. He rolled his eyes.

“I’m good. What about you?”

“Oh, I can last a whole night, no problem,” Natasha answered, not giving away even a smile as she said it. “I still have to interrogate this one.” As she said this, she tapped – rather hard – the body bag. Lucky for him, he was heavily sedated. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Clark knew she wouldn’t torture him – not because she had qualms about it, but because she respected him enough not to do it –, but he still wouldn’t want to be in that guy’s place. Or Sergei’s, for that matter.

As they turned the corridor to get to Natasha’s secret apartment, Clark finally noticed something.

“I can’t hear anything,” he said, suddenly.
“What?” Natasha asked, her hand automatically grabbing her gun.

“In your apartment,” Clark clarified. “There’s no one there.”

They stared at each other for a second, then bolted to the apartment. Natasha quickly opened the place and ran to the room where Sergei was supposed to be cuffed, but no one was there. There was only a note on the table.

Natasha grabbed it and read it.

“‘Girl, it was very good to see you, but I’m not a snitch. I already told you plenty. I hope you find those sons of bitches and put a bullet in their heads, but I’m not counting on it. Just try not to die, I actually happen to like you. Yours, Sergei.’”

Slowly, she put it back down, looking for the room where she had cuffed his two bodyguards, which was also empty.

“That stupid…” she finally said, shaking her head.

“Where would he go?” Clark asked. “His apartment?”

“First place we would look, so no,” Natasha answered. “He’ll go to his hideout, that he thinks I don’t know about. Probably going to grab cash and documents and leave the country.” She stopped. “He’s going to get himself killed.”

Clark put his hand on her shoulder. “Well, what are we waiting for, then? Let’s go.”

Her smile – tiny as it was – was able to brighten his mood.

Wilson Fisk entered the car after Vanessa was safe inside her home. He waited for a moment, until a second car stopped by their side and Wesley walked out, entering his car a moment later.

“So, how did it go?” Fisk asked, too impatient to for the news.

Wesley sighed as he sat down.

“We had some… Unforeseen complications, sir,” he finally admitted.

Fisk closed his eyes for a moment.

“What kind of complications, Wesley? The bombs went off, didn’t they?”

“They did, sir, but… You-Know-Who somehow showed up just as they did,” Wesley explained, serious. “He managed to stop Madame Gao’s men or at least prevent the bombs to blow up as they should. Most Russians survived.” He sighed again. “We cannot hope to get rid of them all, sir, it would draw too much attention.”

Wilson was still thinking about what he said about Superman. How did that alien managed to do this? Was he that powerful? Could he actually predict the future, as some feared? Read minds? Or did he uncover some of his secrets?

This was worrying, but not exactly critical, at least not now.

“They know nothing of importance,” Fisk dismissed, after a second. “They can prove nothing and they know even less.” Suddenly, he stared at Wesley. “What about Vladimir?”
“About that…”

Fisk took both his hands to his face, frustrated.

“We don’t know yet, sir,” Wesley said, fast. “His body wasn’t recovered, but the state of some of the corpses were… Bad, to say the least. He could be one of them. The bodies are being tested by the police as we speak, we’ll know when they do.”

He didn’t share Wesley’s optimism. Not even Wesley shared Wesley’s optimism, he noticed.

“Find him, Wesley,” Fisk ordered. “If Vladimir survived… He knows some things. Nothing that would destroy us, but surely some that will hinder us. I would rather he not spoke at all.”

“I’m already on it, sir,” Wesley guaranteed. He waited a second. “And what shall we do about the explosions?”

Fisk was looking outside the window, thinking.

“The Masked Man killed one brother and he wanted to finish the job. Tell our people in the media to focus on that. He’s a criminal, everyone will believe it.” He turned to Wesley. “I want you to take Leland to a safe house, at least until we find Vladimir. Vladimir knows nothing of use, but he knows Leland’s name and Leland is the map to our treasure.”

It was Wesley turn to be frustrated, even though he masked it well.

“He will not like that, sir,” Wesley mentioned.

“Tell him I insist.”

They drove in silence, back to Fisk’s apartment. Hell’s Kitchen was still in chaos and soon people would want someone to blame; the Masked Vigilante was a convenient choice to all of them. Without the Russians, he would probably focus on someone else and Fisk would rather deal with him fast. The public opinion would force the police to act and maybe even push Superman to do something.

Something that didn’t involve almost destroying his carefully laid plans, if at all possible.

The situation with Vladimir was worse than he cared to voice, though. Vladimir was rash and sometimes single-minded, but he was dangerous and he knew things that he shouldn’t. If he survived, and if he somehow found out that he was to blame for Anatoly’s death, then he could become a problem.

He needed to be dealt with, fast.

“I’ve been thinking, Wesley…” Fisk started, suddenly, his mind back on Vanessa. “Maybe it’s time for us to leave the shadows and embrace both worlds.”

“Sir?” Wesley asked, startled.

His friend was confused and Fisk couldn’t blame him. They went through great lengths to hide his identity from the world, to make him disappear completely from the public. A veil of shadows so thick that not even his underlings knew anything of consequence about him. Not even his name was allowed to be spoken aloud.

Wilson Fisk ruled from the shadows, but maybe, like his tentative relationship with Vanessa, he
could embrace both worlds.

If anything else, it would be an excellent shield against whatever Vladimir might say and to whom he might say it to, in case it really got to that. As a criminal, Fisk was easy to hate and persecute; as a beloved member of the community, set on helping New York to grow into a beautiful city, the people would shield him in case of false allegations of murderous mobsters.

“Just something on my mind,” Fisk said, finally, shaking his head.

He would wait and see how things would play out.

Clark and Natasha arrived quickly at Sergei’s hideout, but not quickly enough. Sergei was still there, but someone got to him first.

And cut off his head with a katana, that was still impaled in Sergei’s dead body. The Hand had found him.

Natasha was staring at Sergei’s corpse without blinking. Clark knew it wasn’t her fault. Her calculations about Sergei’s absence not being noticed by the Hand was spot-on. He wasn’t dead because they had taken him, nor because he told them about Pyramiden, the Hand or even the Russian’s warehouses.

He was dead for the same reason someone had turned against the Russians and sent suicide bombers against them. The Hand had disposed themselves of the Russians and Sergei happened to be a part of that organization, active or not. He was a loose end and now they had no more use for him.

Clark didn’t know why, but the Hand – or someone under their orders – had started this war just so they could finish the Russians. They were to blame.

But Natasha probably wouldn’t want to hear that, so he just said:

“I’m sorry, Natasha. I really am. I know he was your friend—“

“He wasn’t my friend,” Natasha interrupted, still watching the body unblinking. “Barely an acquaintance, really.” She got in silence for a while, then said, suddenly: “Did you know he had a daughter?”

“I didn’t,” Clark answered, hesitant.

“She passed a long time ago, when she was still a kid,” Natasha continued. “Pneumonia, I think. She was pretty little thing, blue eyes, red hair… Sounds familiar?”

Clark turned to look at Natasha, trying to understand what she was saying.

“That was the reason the Red Room sent me to make contact with him. They thought that the memory of his daughter would be enough to give me an edge, a way to approach him.” She nodded, still staring. “They were right.”

He was glad Natasha wasn’t looking at him, because he couldn’t hide the horror in his expression. What kind of monsters these people were?

“Sergei knew about this, of course, he was not an idiot. But he didn’t care. I reminded him of someone he loved very much and sometimes I would catch him looking at me as if I were her. He
wasn’t a friend,” Natasha repeated, “but he was one of the few people that looked at me back then and saw more than an assassin. It meant something to me.”

After almost a minute of staring at Sergei, Natasha turned to Clark.

“I want whoever did this to pay,” Natasha said.

The Hand had just made a powerful enemy. And Clark would be right by Natasha’s side every step of the way.

Matt landed on the roof of his building, feeling tired in his bones. That night did not go as planned, at all. He was framed for the murder of a Russian boss, made a target for the entire Mafia, survived a suicide bomber, met Superman and discovered his true identity at the same time Superman discovered his, finally captured Vladimir only to surrender him minutes later to the Black Widow herself and then escaped a police siege.

Hell’s Kitchen was in chaos, his phone was filled with worried messages from Foggy, Karen and Claire and he needed to be up for work in a couple of hours.

All in all, a very busy night, but at least a fruitful one. Vladimir was captured, war was averted and if Clark kept his promise he would have more information on Fisk soon enough – he just hoped Clark would not turn out to be a problem as well, because that would push things a bit too far out of his dept. Claire was safe now and could go back to work, since the Russians had way more important things to worry about now than her.

The Russian Mafia in Hell’s Kitchen was over, at least for now. They would come back, Matt had no doubt about it, but it would take time. It was victory, a tremendous one.

Still, Matt couldn’t help but feeling something was wrong.

He found out the ‘something wrong’ quickly enough, when a blade passed right where his head was a second ago.

Rolling away from the attacker – that had somehow approached him without being heard –, Matt readied himself for the fight.

Only to stop when he saw who was attacking.

“Good to know you haven’t forgotten every single thing I taught you, Matty,” Stick said, sheathing his sword. “Now get rid of the woman in your apartment, we need to talk.”

Matt could only stare at the blind old man in front of him, thin and rugged and grayed, but still one of the most dangerous men in the world. The very same who had taught him how to fight and, more importantly, how to control his gifts, back when he was just a kid living with the nuns. A man he hadn’t seen in years.

“There’s a war coming, Matty,” Stick said, his voice rough and sarcastic, just as he remembered. “If you’re done playing vigilante, it’s time to prepare. The Hand is coming to New York and they’re bringing their biggest weapon.”

Matt had no idea how to respond to that.

**Hey guys, looooong time no see. First of, I’m sorry for being away for so long. Life is busy as**
hell, I’m training for a new position at work and I barely have time to write lately. But I’ll strive to update both my stories quicker (can’t very well take longer than this time, but you know what I mean).

To the ones who sent me messages, I apologize for not answering faster (or, in some cases, forgetting to answer completely). My head is full of stuff these days and sometimes I spent too long without checking. But I’ll answer as soon as I can.

Anyway, sorry again, but I do hope you like the new chapter ^^ It took me a long time to write, but I did it with love! Hope you guys are doing great!
Chapter 35 – The Hand

Everything was pain. The sounds, no matter how soft, seemed to pierce his skull like knives. The very air against his skin felt like blades, peeling the skin off his bones. The rotten smell of an entire city made him want to puke and he couldn’t even eat anymore, because food didn’t taste like food anymore, it tasted like a bunch of chemical products.

All Matt could do was lie in his bed, uselessly trying to cover the sounds of the entire world with his hands.

The door to the room opened, the sound of the hinges making him sob. Someone stepped in, the echo of his feet against the ground thundering inside his head. Matt couldn’t see him, obviously, but somehow he knew it wasn’t any of the orphanage nuns, but a man, an older man. Not a priest, if the lack of church’s garment and the absence of a crucifix around his neck meant anything.

He had no idea how he knew that, but he did.

He also knew that the man was blind, just he was. But just like Matt, he seemed to know exactly what was around him, almost as if he still had his vision.

The man simply stared at him for a long moment, taking in the way Matt was shaking in pain.

“They think you’re getting worse,” the man finally said, his rough voice sounding extremely loud to Matt, even though he barely raised it. “But… You’re not, are you, kid?”

He grabbed something from inside his pocket, something small, something metallic: a set of keys, Matt knew, even without being able to see them.

And without saying anything, the man tossed the keys in Matt’s direction.

Matt’s blind eyes couldn’t see anything, but he knew exactly where the keys were when they were thrown. It was almost as he could feel them, the vibration in the air, the little metallic noises, the very temperature variation.

Without knowing how he did it, Matt raised his hand and grabbed the set of keys before they could hit him.

“You’re getting stronger,” the man finished, almost as if he expected Matt to do exactly what he had done.

He sighed as Matt tried to understand what had just happened.

“Let’s get started.”

Without ceremony, without asking for permission or even thinking about acting like a polite guest, Stick opened Matt’s fridge, grabbed a beer and opened it with a flick of his thumb.

Matt Murdock followed the bottlecap with his enhanced senses, as it bounced first against the kitchen wall, then against the ceiling, on the floor and finally landed inside the trash can; quite the
feat for anyone, let alone someone blind, but then again Stick was anything but an ordinary, blind man.

His appearance alone was enough to fool most people. An old man, thin as a rail, with grey hair and unshaved beard, wearing shabby clothes and a cap. Add to that a pair of cloudy, blind eyes and a cane and most people wouldn’t look twice at him, unless it was to help the poor old man.

A mistake many would only have the chance to make once.

Sipping the beer, Stick started pacing around the kitchen.

“Expensive beer,” he said, his rough voice still familiar to Matt after all this time. He made a show of grabbing the air, as if feeling it with his fingers. “Silk sheets.” Then he took a deep breath. “And a woman.” Stick shook his head. “You’re getting soft, Matty.”

Matt felt the need to defend himself.

“Cotton feels like sandpaper on my skin.”

“I guess you didn’t have the same problem with the woman,” Stick retorted, drinking again. “By the way, when is she coming back?”

“She’s not,” Matt replied, not really sure how he felt about that.

When Matt told Claire that the Russian mob wouldn’t bother her anymore, Claire left his apartment as soon as the sun came up. He knew her haste had nothing to do with him and everything to do with the fact that she’d been hiding for so long, but it was hard seeing her go. Matt was happy for her, he really was, but he would be lying if he said he wasn’t getting used to her company.

Maybe it was a good thing Claire didn’t stay for too long. Stick certainly agreed with that.

“Good!” Stick stated. “Women are a distraction. Just like silk sheets and good beer, furniture, apartments… You’d be better off living without all this bullshit.”

“This is my life!” Matt snarled. “And I made something of it, without you. That’s the part that really pisses you off, isn’t it?”

Matt fought the rage piling up inside him. It had been twenty years since he saw Stick, twenty years since he walked out without a word and left him behind. Once he dared to think of Stick as a father, someone that could fill that void inside him left when his dad, Jack Murdock, was murdered by the mob for refusing to take a dive in a boxing match.

He was cured of that foolishness quickly enough.

His words, however, gave Stick pause.

“No, Matty, I’m proud of you, I really am,” Stick said, and weirdly enough, Matt believed him. “The things you’ve done, what you’ve made of yourself, but…” He opened his arms. “This is… Surrounding yourself with soft stuff isn’t life. It’s death. Someday those silk sheets are gonna crawl up behind you, wrap themselves around your throat and choke you to death.” Stick stared at Matt with his blind eyes. “You’re a warrior.”

Matt was in silence for a moment, his mind replaying memories decades old. After his father died he was left alone and sent to Saint Agnes Orphanage, an orphanage managed by nuns. A difficult fate for any child, doubly so for a blind one.
But as Matt found out, anything bad could turn worse in a split second.

The chemical waste that had taken his sight when he was nine, had also done something unexpected: it had enhanced his other senses to an unbearable level. It happened slowly, gradually, but eventually the lowest sound became a roaring echo, the gentlest touches sent shockwaves throughout his body, the softest smells were able to make his head spin and his tongue could taste things even far away from his mouth.

It got to the point that Matt couldn’t do anything but whimper in pain. Until Stick arrived.

The nuns, unable to do anything to help Matt, searched for outside help; Stick was what they found. But truth be told, Matt doubted the nuns really had any idea of who they were hiring.

Stick did what he was hired for. He taught Matt to control his gifts, to use his senses to see much more than he was able to see when his eyes still worked. He taught Matt how to meditate, how to harness chi, how to find balance.

And after all that, he taught Matt to be warrior.

Matt was still a child, but he learned everything he could. And he learned well. Stick was a harsh master, but a knowledgeable one, and Matt took to his lessons with all the enthusiasm only a prodigy could muster. His gifts were honed and soon enough he learned just how much they completed his skills.

Stick wasn’t wrong, Matt was a warrior. But not just that.

“That’s not all I am,” Matt said, finally.

“A warrior,” Stick repeated, “heir to the Spartans, baddest of the badasses. They knew what they had to do and they did it.” He stared at Matt. “What are you doing here, Matty? Having your fun beating the shit out of some petty thieves? Running around in a weird mask?”

“I’m helping,” Matt said, barely containing his anger. “I’m keeping people safe.”

“Two, three people a night?” Stick scoffed. “What’s the difference?”

“To the people I saved? All the difference in the world.”

“There’s a war coming, Matty. Bigger than any of that scum out there. You think punching Russians means anything? Look at what they did to them. Blown to little bits in a single night.”

That made Matt stop.

“Who did that?” he asked.

“The Hand, the very people I trained you to fight,” Stick countered, surprising Matt. “What? You think I go around orphanages teaching blind kids to punch? No, Matty, you’re special. A true warrior. And it’s time for you to acknowledge that and stop living a lie. It’s time for you to fight the war you were born to fight.”

Few things surprised Matt anymore, but recent days were proving themselves unusual. Not only there was all that business of being framed for the murder of a Russian boss and ending up meeting Superman in the middle of an explosion – even learning his identity –, he also found Stick on the roof of his building, a man he hadn’t seen in twenty years.
And now he learned that Stick was training him as a child to fight some war. He didn’t know what to say.

“The Hand is coming, Matty, and they are worse than anything you’ve faced,” Stick said. “Mobs? Drug dealers? They’re nothing, less than nothing. Pawns in a game they don’t even know they’re playing.”

“You…” Matt started, his voice failing. “You’re crazy. You tried to recruit me to fight an imaginary war when I was a kid? What is this? Some kind of indoctrination camp?”

“There’s nothing imaginary about the Hand, kid,” Stick replied. “They’ve been here, killing, committing atrocities, for centuries. The greatest criminal organizations in history were nothing but tools to them. They’re the real deal. And we’re losing.”

Matt stepped back, unwilling to keep listening to all this, but unable to just leave.

“You must have realized by now that this isn’t the usual game, right?” Stick said. “Criminals are not behaving as they should. Almost as if they’re—”

“Working together,” Matt finished. “Yes, I noticed. It’s a new world out there, Stick. There’s an alien flying around faster than a speeding bullet and an entire group of superheroes living in a tower in the middle of New York. Criminals are being forced to adapt.”

Stick rolled his blind eyes.

“These guys have been around for a while, Matty. This isn’t the first time they had to deal with gods coming down from the heavens, it isn’t anything new for them.” Stick shook his head. “No, this doesn’t have anything to do with Superman. Someone is organizing them, calling the shots. Who do you think that is?” Matt opened his mouth to answer, but Stick was faster. “Fisk?”

Matt felt his blood turn cold. How did Stick know about this? No one even knew who this Fisk guy was.

“Where did you hear that name?” Matt asked.

“Fisk? He’s the Hand newest busboy. Sure, an important busboy, but that’s what he is. The Hand is using him to take New York by the balls.”

“Fisk is the one behind all this,” Matt countered. “The one controlling the Russians, the Japanese and the Chinese.”

“Yeah, and the Hand is the one controlling him.” Stick stopped. “I wonder if he even knows that. Doesn’t matter. In the end, a tool is a tool.”

“He has mobsters so scared that they prefer to kill themselves than to say anything about him,” Matt objected.

“A dangerous tool,” Stick granted. “You don’t want a sword stuck in your neck, but it doesn’t make it any more than what it is: a tool. That’s what Fisk is. You’ve been fighting the wrong opponent all this time.”

“And where is this Hand you’re so afraid of?” Matt exclaimed, impatient. “Because I haven’t heard anything about them yet.”

“How long has it been since you heard about Fisk?”
Well, he had a point there, Matt unwillingly recognized.

“The Hand is everywhere, Matty,” Stick said. “They have people inside every criminal organization, inside every government, inside every law enforcement unit. Right now? I’m after the ones inside Yakuza. There’s a guy there, pretty high-ranked, goes by Nobu these days. He’s tasked to bring something inside New York.”

“What? Drugs?”


“What is it?”

“Something you don’t want in your world, trust me.”

Matt sighed, taking both his hands to his face. Talking to Stick remained as exhausting as it was when he was a kid.

“Okay, assuming I believe you,” Matt began, slowly, “what do you want? Why are you here?” He stared at Stick. “It couldn’t be to get my help, could it?”

Stick sipped his beer. “I want you to help yourself.” Matt scoffed, but that didn’t deter Stick. “Nobu and his guys are in tight with Fisk. You hurt them, you hurt baldy—“

“You know who Fisk is?” Matt asked, urgently.

“I know a lot of shit. For instance, I know you made an interesting acquaintance last night and for some reason he didn’t turn you into mush. Now, why would that happen? If I met a guy in a mask that spent his nights beating people up, I would’ve certainly called the police.”

Matt didn’t react to what Stick said, but he didn’t like where that conversation was going. He might not have known Clark for long, but his secret identity was a secret worth keeping. He didn’t trust Stick with it.

Truth be told, he didn’t trust Stick all that much with anything.

“He knows we’re on the same side,” Matt said, careful not to give anything.

“Hmm. And what side would that be? The bleeding-heart idealists one, clinging to half-measures? ‘Cause I don’t need that. I need a soldier. Committed.”

“You don’t know anything about what I’m doing here,” Matt answered, unamused.

Stick leaned closer.

“Kid, in war, people die,” he said. “If it’s not you, it’s the guy next to you. How many men have you killed protecting this city?” He waited a moment for the answer he already knew; Matt said nothing. “You’re still afraid to cross that line. The alien? He can afford it. He’s bullet proof, he’s strong, he’s fast. He’s a god playing with insects. You? Someday it’s gonna come down to you or the other guy. If it’s not Fisk, somebody else. What’re you gonna do then?”

Matt breathed deeply. No answer came from him.

“Half-measures, Matty. Sometimes they’re worse than doing nothing. They give the illusion you’re getting shit done, when you’re not actually doing anything.”
Finishing his beer, Stick tossed the bottle up, hitting the trash can behind him.

“Ah, screw it!” he exclaimed. “Let’s go. Help me stop Black Sky, keep it off the streets, and I promise you this: Wilson Fisk will know the taste of fear the day he faces you, ‘cause he’ll know that you kicked the guy he’s afraid of right in the nuts. What do you say, kid?”

Matt kept his blind eyes fixed on Stick for a long time. Then he finally stated:

“One rule: you don’t kill anybody.”

Stick groaned, but raised his hand in the air. “I swear no human being will die by my hand.” Then he added. “Pussy.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Where is this ‘Black Sky’ thing?” Matt asked.

“If my sources are right, it’ll arrive at the docks tonight.”

Plenty of time, then.

“Meet me here at the end of the day,” Matt said, turning to his room.

That seemed to surprise Stick.

“What? Where are going?”

“Work.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me! Have you heard nothing of I just said?”

“I heard plenty,” Matt retorted. “I still have to go to work. All this ‘expensive shit’ doesn’t pay itself.”

“Cut it loose, kid,” Stick said, and he sounded serious for the first time. “Your job. Your friends. People you care about. For their sake. Break their hearts if you have to, just do it quick. Relationships are a luxury men like you and me can’t afford.”

“Is that why you left?” Matt asked before he could stop himself. “To protect me?”

There was a long silence.

“I had my reasons,” Stick said, simply.

“I was a kid!”

“You still are,” Stick retorted, mockingly. “‘Boo-ho, Stick left me. Think I’ll bury my sorrows between the legs of a supermodel.’”

“Don’t push it, Stick,” Matt warned him.

“Or what?” he challenged. “I’m trying to teach you how to stay alive. Christ, you’re worse than your old man! Born to lose Battlin’ Jack! At least your daddy got paid when he hit the floor.”

Matt saw red and lunged forward, grabbing Stick by his shirt.

And before he could even understand what happened, he was spinning in the air, falling flat on his
back right in the middle of his apartment.

“Still as easy as it was twenty years ago, kid.” Stick said, slowly shaking his head. “Bury your emotions, bury your compassion or you’ll be the one ending up buried.” He waited a second. “Or your friends, depending on how it goes.”

Saying this, he walked to the door, leaving Matt on the floor.

“I’ll see you later, then. Bring your new acquaintance, if you can. I think he can be useful.”

Matt sighed, feeling the anger leaving him slowly. He didn’t know what to think.

Clark shuffled the pile of high-quality photos he had just printed until he finally found the one he was looking for: the stone door leading to the underground dragon burial site, right under the frozen ground of Pyramiden.

More importantly, the photo highlighting the unknown language etched on the door.

“This one here,” Clark said, walking to the comfortable chair where Thor was sitting, a half-eaten Pop-Tart in his hands; the one snack always available in the Avengers Tower since Thor began to visit regularly.

Many things could be said about Tony, but he was a good host or at least Pepper was.

“Can you translate it for me?” Clark asked, hopeful.

Stuffing the entire Pop-Tart in his mouth, Thor grabbed the photo and studied it. Clark and Natasha stared, almost holding their breaths, anxious for some kind of answer because the databases they checked – which were pretty much all of them – gave them nothing but disappointment.

When Thor’s eyes beamed with recognition, Clark almost cheered.

“This is an old dialect from the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven, K’un-Lun specifically,” Thor finally said, eyes going from the photo to them and then back to the photo. “They are old allies of Asgard. It reads: ‘Here lies Ao Shun, Dragon King of Winter. May you find redemption in the Final Death.’”

Clark looked at Natasha, eyes wide; so that skeleton truly was a dragon! Before he could say anything, however, Thor went on:

“By the Allfather, it has been centuries since I thought about this!” he exclaimed.

“You knew him?” Clark asked, surprised.

Thor nodded. “Aye, I was the one who killed him during the Great Culling of the Wyrms.” He hesitated, as if remembering something painful. “Loki and I. My brother pulled him down from the skies and I cut off his head with my old axe, Jarnbjorn.”

Clark was so stunned by what Thor said that he almost didn’t hear Natasha’s question.

“‘Great Culling of the Wyrms?’” she asked.

There was no emotion behind her words, no accusation, but Clark knew her well enough to notice how irked she was; yet again an important piece of information about their world’s history was completely unknown to them.
And yet again Thor hadn’t shared what he no doubt thought it was common knowledge. One of these days Natasha would grab Thor and interrogate him for days, even if she had to threaten the global production of Pop-Tarts for that to happen.

Fury would have a fit when he heard about this and Natasha, so far, was the one taking the brunt of his bad moods. Sooner or later she would find a way to redirect that to them, Natasha was crafty like that.

Clark wasn’t looking forward to that.

“The result of the Civil War in K’un-Lun, Realm of Dragons,” Thor explained, calmly, as if talking about the weather. “Many centuries ago, a group of dragons rebelled against K’un-Lun. Their war grew so fierce that in no time it spilled all over Midgard. My Father sent Loki and I to help restore the order, to protect Midgard from the Betrayers and to aid our allies from K’un-Lun.” He smiled, looking at them. “The old days. Loki, Sif, the Warriors Three and I leading a force of Einherjar against an army of dragons. We would fight all day, feast at night, regale the women with our stories – and our company – and then do everything all over again the next day.” Thor sighed, eyes far away. “I miss it, sometimes. It was a simpler time.”

Natasha’s eyes reflected the exact opposite of Thor’s.

“There was a war between Asgardians and dragons, here, in our world?” she asked.

Thor apparently noticed her less than amused tone.

“Well, the Gate to K’un-Lun is located on Midgard,” Thor explained, sheepishly. “Somewhere to the lands of the East.”

Natasha closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

“Are you telling me,” she said, eyes opening slowly, “that we have a direct gateway to a land full of hostile dragons?” Natasha asked, her eyes now fixed on Thor’s. “And you did not deem to mention it?”

Despite being the literal God of Thunder, Thor glanced in Clark’s direction as if asking for help.

“No, no, K’un-Lun is not an enemy! And the Gate is not always open,” he said, quickly. “K’un-Lun, all the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven, are located inside a – what did Loki call it? – a pocket dimension. A world within a world. And the Gate to it only opens every fifteen years or so.” Realizing Natasha was listening, he went on. “When those dragons arrived on Midgard, millennia ago, they used their powers to create this world. They crafted an entire dimension and within it they built the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven. In time, they allowed a few chosen humans to enter their Realm and live with them. They taught those chosen humans how to harness the energy of life, chi. How to use chi to heal, to extend their lifespan, to reach absolute balance. And so dragons and humans lived in harmony for a very long time.”

Clark could barely contain his surprised awe. In Ancient China, dragons were sometimes worshiped much like other people worshiped Asgardians once upon a time; now he could see why. An advanced civilization, composed of individuals so much more powerful than humans, had taken residence in those lands and even shared knowledge.

He wondered how much of China’s culture had been influenced by K’un-Lun and its dragons. Given how much the Nordic people were influenced by the Asgardians, Clark supposed the dragons had inspired their share of changes.
And it still ended in war when humans were invited to live amongst them. Clark held a sad sigh.

“Somehow I think that the ‘Great Culling of the Wyrms’ was the end of that partnership,” Clark mentioned.

“On the contrary,” Thor retorted, surprising him. “While many dragons followed the Betrayers – and many humans as well –, many more stood for what K’un-Lun represented. The dragons and the Elders of K’un-Lun, led by the Iron Fist and the dragon Shou-Lao, fought against those who wanted nothing but power. They stood at our side against the Betrayers and when the war was over, they banished them and restored order to the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven.” He pointed at the photo of the tomb. “This was what became of the Betrayers.”

“They were all killed?” Clark asked.

Thor tilted his head. “Hmm, more or less. To the dragons of the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven, the ones who mastered the art of harnessing the essence of life, chi, death does not mean the same it does for us. They die, sure, but given enough time they can come back to life. Death is more of a nuisance for them than anything else.”

He had heard of “chi”, of course, but to know it really existed and that it could be used to reach effective immortality was astonishing. Could humans do the same? Thor said that the dragons shared their knowledge, but it still was quite a leap between that and immortal humans.

Clark was impressed by all this, but it was the wrong thing to say if Thor wanted to reassure Natasha that all was well.

“So what you’re really telling us is that we have several tombs throughout the world,” she started, “filled with dangerous dragons that will, eventually, come back to life to continue their war? And you said nothing about this before?”

Thor widened his eyes almost comically.

“No, no, no! That is what the tombs are for!” he defended himself. “These are not normal tombs, they were made to prevent these dragons from coming back to life. They are heavily warded and the seals present in them are meant to keep the Betrayers from resurrecting themselves. As long as they are inside, they will not come back,” he finished, smiling reassuringly.

The smile dropped from his face when he noticed Clark and Natasha looked worried.

“What?” Thor asked, confused.

“The dragon,” Clark began, hesitantly, “his skeleton, wasn’t there. A criminal organization named ‘The Hand’ broke into the tomb and took it.”

Natasha turned to Thor. “How long do we have until it comes back to life?”

Thor shook his head. “It will not come back to life by itself, not after spending all this time inside that tomb, this I can guarantee,” he said. “I was not part of the group that built those tombs, but Loki was and he told me a great deal about it… No matter how little I wanted to hear. Without help from a powerful source of mystical energy, none of those dragons will ever come back. And I dare say there is no such source on Midgard. This ‘Hand’ cannot bring a dragon back to life, whoever they are.”

This wasn’t enough to make Clark relax, but at least it wasn’t an urgent matter. They would have to recover the bones from the Hand, of course, but the fact that they couldn’t revive it was a relief,
to say the least; the last thing they needed was a dragon war.

He tried to imagine the scale of such conflict. Asgardians, dragons, humans, fighting side by side and against each other. It was a terrifying thought.

Was the Hand connected to K’un-Lun and the dragons in some way? Or they simply found the skeletons and planned to use it to acquire power? Thor didn’t know about them, that much was clear, but according to Natasha they had dozens of different names over the years, so that didn’t mean much. They would have to find out.

“Do you know where the rest of the tombs are?” Clark asked Thor, suddenly. The thought of one dragon skeleton in the Hand’s possession was bad enough, much less a whole army of them.

He shook his head. “No… But Asgard probably has this information somewhere,” Thor added. “I could look into it.”

“That would be helpful, thanks,” Clark said, tapping his shoulder. If they knew the Hand’s targets, they could intercept them.

Thor smiled and went back to eat his Pop-Tarts; that is, until he noticed Natasha was still staring at him.

“What, now?” Thor exclaimed.

“Do you have anything more important to do now? Or are you planning to spend the entire day eating new ‘Midgardian treats’ again?” Natasha asked, her tone implying that she knew very well what Thor would end up doing.

“Well, I was going to… No, nothing more important than saving lives,” Thor suddenly announced. He stared at them for a moment. “Because that is what heroes do.”

So he couldn’t tell ‘no’ to Natasha as well; it was good to know Clark wasn’t the only one.

Stuffing his mouth with the rest of his Pop-Tarts, Thor got up, said his goodbyes to them, and ran to the top of the Avengers Tower, where he could call for the Bifrost. Clark made a note to take him out for a day of junk food when he came back, Thor would like that.

Natasha turned to him, a weary look on her face.

“I can’t even imagine Fury’s reaction…” Natasha sighed. “He’s not a young man anymore, Clark. One of these days…” She slightly shook her head, as if dispelling those thoughts. “Now, I’m going to talk to Vladimir, see what he knows about all this. He should be waking up by now. Do you want to come?”

“I was actually thinking about meeting Matt Murdock,” Clark admitted. “Unless you need a hand, of course,” he added quickly.

Natasha looked as focused as ever, but she had just lost someone. Maybe not someone she called a friend, but someone she cared about nonetheless. Nothing in her behavior indicated that anything was wrong, but Clark knew better.

She lifted a single eyebrow, as if remembering just now who actually had delivered Vladimir to her.

“That is actually a good idea. He might have important information as well.” Natasha nodded and
started walking towards the elevator. “Keep me posted. I’ll call you if Vladimir gives me something juicy.”

“See you later,” Clark said, grabbing his phone and walking to the window. Hopefully, Matt wouldn’t be busy right now.

Like most cheap places in the “Post-Incident Hell’s Kitchen”, the building where Matt’s office was located was a bit unkept – not as much as the building where he lived, before Tony got his hands on it, but nearly there. Clark got there in a matter of minutes, flying slow to give Matt at least a little bit of time to prepare himself after he called, and soon enough he was right in front of his office.

The door opened when Clark was about to knock; enhanced senses, he forgot about those.

“Please, come in,” Matt said, somewhat stiffly, greeting him with a nod.

He did so, taking a moment to look around as Matt closed the door. Like he imagined, the place looked as old on the inside as it did on the outside. The furniture was clearly second-hand, there were boxes piled up on a corner and the office seemed to have only the bare minimum to functionate.

Just what he would expect of a first office of two lawyers with limited funding.

“Nice place,” Clark said, politely.

Matt chuckled. “No, it’s not. But I like it.”

Clark smiled at that. It did have character, he agreed. More importantly, it didn’t make people feel intimidated by simply entering, which was a good thing if Matt and Foggy intended to use their profession to help people in need instead of playing with the law to get rich.

But he wasn’t there to judge how nice Matt’s office was.

“Is Foggy arriving soon?” Clark asked, already knowing that they were alone there.

Matt gestured for him to follow and entered another room, sitting down at a table. Clark sat in front of him.

“If I recall correctly,” Matt answered, “Foggy was going to visit a client this morning. We have time to talk.”

And then they just stared at each other for a few seconds, an awkward silence setting in. Matt glanced at him from behind those red lenses and Clark glanced back, seeing himself reflected on his glasses.

Truth be told, Clark was still surprised at the identity of the Masked Vigilante. How couldn’t he be? Not only he knew Matt, but there was also the tiny little detail of him being blind; by all accounts, that should’ve removed him from the possible suspects list right then and there.

There was also the sorry state he left any and all criminals he crossed paths with. Not something he would expect from someone who appeared so calm and collected.

And yet here they were.

“Are you a mutant?” Clark asked, suddenly, curious as to how Matt did what he did.
There was a moment of silence.

“No, I wasn’t born with my abilities,” Matt answered. He hesitated. “When I was a kid, I was involved in an accident. Pushed a man out of the way of a truck. He lived, but I was drenched in whatever chemicals the truck was carrying.” He gestured towards his eyes. “Burned my eyes almost instantaneously.”

Clark flinched. He couldn’t even imagine how terrible that must’ve felt, how afraid Matt must’ve been when he noticed his vision was gone. No one, much less a child, should ever go through something like that.

“But that’s not all they did,” Matt continued, grasping Clark’s attention once again. “Slowly, my other senses got better. Way better. To the point where lying down in a soft bed, inside a quiet room, was enough to send them haywire. I could listen and feel everything, at all times, so much that it hurt.”

Enhanced senses… A blessing and a curse. Clark knew that very well.

“I know the feeling,” Clark admitted, sympathetic to what Matt went through.

“Do you?” Matt asked, somehow skeptic.

Clark chuckled. “I wasn’t always Superman, Matt. I was a kid once. A kid from another world, trying to adapt to an environment my kind was not supposed to live in. My senses, like yours, got better with time. Way better. So fast and with such intensity that I barely had time to cope.” He leaned forward a bit. “I could hear people whispering at the other side of the town, taste food without even putting it in my mouth, smell a particularly foul sewer four cities away… My mom had to pick me up in school once because I started seeing inside people. Can you imagine how scared I was?”

He wasn’t sure what surprised Matt the most: the fact that he suffered with his super-senses too or the fact that Superman needed his mother to pick him up in school once.

It didn’t occur to most people that Superman wasn’t Superman at all times. Good thing for his life as Clark Kent, certainly, but it made him look like a perfect, unshakable being. Like a god. That wasn’t good at all.

“How did you learn to control your senses?” Clark asked.

“I had help,” Matt admitted. “The nuns in the orphanage found a man who could teach me how to control my gifts, how to use them so well that I could ‘see’ better now that I was blind than before when I still had my vision.”

Clark was a bit surprised to know Matt lived in an orphanage, but he didn’t pry. It wasn’t any of his business.

What was his business, however, was the Masked Vigilante’s actions.

“And how did you go from learning to control your gifts to beating up Russian mobsters?”

Matt leaned forward a bit as well.

“You said you have enhanced senses as well, didn’t you?” Matt asked. Clark nodded. “How long could you keep hearing people calling for help until you just had to do something?” He turned to the windows. “Muggings, assaults, a man beating his wife, a child being molested… There’s a
point when you have to do something, otherwise you’re just as bad as the people doing all that.” He stared. “Don’t you agree?”

“There’s a big difference between fighting to help,” Clark retorted, eyes fixed on Matt’s, “and beating someone half to death.”

“You think those guys deserve any better?” Matt exclaimed, surprised. “You think they wouldn’t do far worse to an innocent for no reason at all? Do you think they didn’t do it already?”

“This is not about them, Matt, this is about you! I’ve seen some of the criminals you captured. You didn’t fight simply to defeat them, you fought to make them suffer. How long until you make a mistake and go overboard? How long until you actually kill someone by accident?”

“That’s not going to happen,” Matt scoffed.

“How long until you kill someone on purpose?” Clark retorted.

Matt was offended by this.

“We can’t all be bulletproof and super-strong, Superman,” Matt said. “Some of us bleed. I don’t have the luxury to pull my punches. But I’m never killing someone. That’s a line I won’t cross.”

“Matt, what you did to those men wasn’t necessary, they were never a match to you. It was rage. Pure and simple.” Clark got closer, trying to convey the importance of what he wanted to say. “You knew what they did, what they intended to do, and you hurt them for it. But is that the reason you’re doing this? To hurt them? You have to decide, Matt, right now, if are doing this to help innocent people or simply to hurt the bad guys.”

“Isn’t that the same thing in the end?”

“No. One of those you’re doing for others. The other you’re just doing for yourself.”

Matt breathed deeply and Clark could feel the anger irradiating from his body. Not directed at him, he knew that, but at the very people Matt and Clark fought every day, the people who would hurt and kill anyone to achieve their goals.

“You don’t understand,” Matt finally said.

“I took a life before,” Clark said, almost whispering. He could still remember the feeling of Zod’s neck snapping as if he had committed the deed the minute before and he knew that feeling would never go away. “General Zod, the last of my kind. I didn’t have a choice, he would’ve destroyed the entire planet out of spite and there was no one powerful enough to keep him from doing it, no other way to stop him. Rationally, I know this. Emotionally?”

He fixed his eyes on Matt, trying to convey just how serious he was.

“Emotionally… Even though Zod was a genocidal murderer, the same one who killed my biological father and countless others, I still regret it. I regret that I couldn’t find another way, that I had to kill him with my own hands.” Clark exhaled. “I regret how easy it was to do it, to just… End a life.”

Matt snapped his head up, surprised.

“Easy?” he repeated.
“Easy,” Clark affirmed, completely somber. “One moment he was there, the next he wasn’t. Problem solved, right?” He smiled without humor. “Not really. I can still feel his neck breaking and I still have nightmares about it. But the killing itself? Quick. Simple. And just like that, an entire being is gone, never to return.”

He leaned closer.

“I understand better than you think,” Clark said. “I can hear it too, remember? I know how utterly evil some people are. And sometimes… Sometimes I want to hurt them too. Badly.” He inhaled deeply. “But I also know that if I do that, if I take this step, I’ll sacrifice everything I am. I’ll trade what’s right for what’s easy and this new person I would become… I’m afraid of him.” Clark looked at Matt. ‘I’m here to help people, Matt, that’s what I do. To help them to be better. What about you?’

Clark kept his eyes fixed on Matt for a whole minute.

“Find out what you really are, Matt. What’s really important to you. Because if you end up killing someone just because you wanted that person to suffer, I’ll personally take you to jail.”

Matt didn’t answer for a long while, thinking about what Clark said. Because like it or not, he was right. Matt wanted to help people, he never lied about that. It was the very reason why he began doing what he did, to save lives.

But the other part of what Clark said was true as well, Matt wouldn’t even bother trying to deny it. He liked to hurt those people, to be the answer to their evil deeds. Murderers, rapists, human traffickers, the scum of the Earth… Matt wanted to hurt them as much as he could, so they could suffer, just a little bit, what their victims suffered. It felt good.

To let the Devil out.

What did it say about him, though? Nothing nice, that was for sure. As a catholic, Matt knew that very well. There was a line he simply couldn’t bring himself to cross – murder –, but that didn’t mean he thought beating people half to death was right. It wasn’t. That didn’t mean he didn’t enjoy it.

And that was the root of the problem. How long could he keep feeding those desires? How long until the Devil inside him took the reins?

How long until he turned into Stick?

Matt let out a long sigh.

“I will keep what you said in mind,” Matt finally said. By the frown on Clark’s face, he wasn’t thrilled with the answer, so quickly added: “Did you find out anything from Vladimir?”

It was clearly a deflection and of course Clark noticed, but like it or not they did have more important things to talk about.

“Natasha was about to interrogate him when I called you,” Clark answered. “We still don’t know anything.”

“What about the rest of the Russians? And the Chinese suicide bombers?”
“The Russians are talking, but most of them aren’t saying anything new. The Chinese… They just keep singing,” he said, sounding more than a little disturbed. “I really don’t know what’s the deal with them, but I’m pretty sure they’re not helping.” Clark sighed, visibly bothered by that. “I hope Vladimir gives us something.”

Matt hoped too, but at least he couldn’t say that last night was a waste of time. The Russians were pretty much done for in New York. With the amount of weapons and bombs they were caught with, they would all stay in jail for a long time. Most would try to cut deals to reduce time, giving up the truly dangerous ones – murderers, rapists, traffickers... – and soon they would have a little bit of peace on that front.

All because of the man in front of him.

Matt still couldn’t rightly believe in what happened. It took Superman a matter of minutes to capture the entire Russian mob in Hell’s Kitchen. That amount of power was incredible and, frankly, scary. When Superman started his offensive against the Russian mob, it was never a question if he could win; it was a question of how many minutes it would take for him to win.

He could understand why Clark was so concerned with morals. Someone with that much power… If he were to abandon his ideals, the consequences would be earth shattering. Matt knew the amount of damage that he could cause if he abandoned his and he was just human.

Superman’s decisions had the power to change the entire world. Hell, maybe even beyond. It was easy to feel small next to someone like that.

And all this time, he was apparently living a normal life as a mild-mannered reporter. Matt didn’t really know what to think of that.

“What we found out, from another source,” Clark continued, grabbing Matt’s attention once again, “was the name of two other parties involved in all this. One is a man named Wilson–”

“Fisk,” Matt finished for him, his voice hard.

“You know about him?” Clark asked, interested.

“I know his name. And that he’s the one in charge of everyone involved in any criminal enterprise in New York. But no one will talk, they’re too scared. What do you have on him?”

“Nothing but the name,” Clark admitted. “It’s like he doesn’t exist. Not even SHIELD’s databases have anything about him and that’s saying something.” He lifted his chin. “But from what I’ve heard, Wilson Fisk might not be the one in charge after all. There’s another organization calling the shots. They’re called–”

“The Hand,” Matt breathed before Clark could finish, his voice betraying his surprise. Could Stick be actually telling the truth?

This time, Clark was even more interested.

“The Hand,” he agreed. “I heard some things about them… Nothing good. Had a taste of their work too, recently. They killed my source, brutally.”

“So they’re actually real…” Matt sighed, still not believing this was happening.

“You knew about them, but didn’t think they were real?” Clark asked, lifting an eyebrow.
“Let’s just say that my source wasn’t that reliable.” Matt could sense Clark wanted to know more, but how exactly could he explain Stick? That was a tough one. “You remember that I said the orphanage hired someone to help me control my gifts? That ‘someone’ was a man named Stick. He was the one who taught me how to truly use my senses… And the one who taught me how to fight.”

Clark raised both eyebrows.

“The man the nuns hired taught you to fight?” he exclaimed. “Well enough for you to beat mobsters by the dozen with your bare hands?”

“I thought it was just a way to hone my instincts,” Matt admitted. “To teach me discipline. Apparently I was wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Stick wasn’t there to teach a blind kid to survive. He was training a soldier to fight a war. A war against the Hand.” Clark sat up straighter. Matt shook his head, still shocked by the whole thing. “I had never even heard about this until this morning. Stick left way back then without mentioning anything. But he’s here now.”


“He was waiting for me after I came back last night. He wants my help.”

“With what?”

Matt sighed again. “With the war. The Hand is here and they’re bringing something called ‘Black Sky’. A weapon of some kind. It will arrive at the docks tonight. According to him, it’s not something we want anywhere near Hell’s Kitchen.” Matt chuckled when the silence extended itself. “Yeah, that was my reaction too. I thought the old man had finally cracked. But you’re not crazy, are you? The Hand is real.”

“It is,” Clark agreed, slowly, still stunned by the turn of events. “Tonight?”

“Tonight. He actually told me to pass you the message,” Matt added. Clark raised a single eyebrow. “Yeah, I know. I wouldn’t be too thrilled about jumping into this without knowing any details, but if Stick is right we need to be there.” He stared at Clark for a moment. “Is the Hand truly real? Do we have to worry about this?”

There was, once again, a long silence. Then Clark nodded.

“They are. And I think we have to worry about this quite a lot.”

Damn Stick, Matt thought, annoyed. It was just like him to stay away for years and then come back to throw a metaphorical bomb on him. A war against a secret criminal organization. A war that he was unknowingly trained to fight. This wasn’t easy to swallow, that was for certain. It didn’t seem like something that would happen outside of fiction.

But here he was: a blind vigilante warrior discussing a secret criminal organization with a super-powered alien, right in the middle of his law firm.

His life had been weird for a long time now, Matt had to accept that.

Both of them were so focused on the conversation that they only heard the approaching steps a few
“Matt, you’re here!” Foggy all but yelled, entering the office in a hurry, Karen right behind him. He stopped, surprised, when he saw Clark. “Clark? You’re here too!”

“Clark?” Karen exclaimed, eyes wide.

“Karen?” Clark asked, equally surprised; but not as surprised as Matt. How did they know each other? “What are you doing here?”

“I work here! What are you doing here?” she shot back.

“I… I asked Matt for a consultation about… The law.” He stammered. “About a case!”

“Wait, do you know each other?” Foggy asked, looking from Karen to Clark. Then he looked at Matt. “Forget about that! Matt! I’ve been trying to reach you since last night!”

“What?” Matt stopped, confused.

“The explosions? Damn it, Matt! I thought you died! Would it kill you to return any of the 156 calls I made?!”

Almost in a trance, Matt grabbed his phone; his still turned-off phone, since last night. With everything that happened, he simply forgot to check it.

“I guess my battery must’ve ran out,” he said, slowly.

“That’s it?!” Foggy exclaimed. “Do you have any idea how worried we were? Tell him, Karen!”

“We were pretty worried,” Karen confirmed. “With everything that happened with the gang war and Superman…”

“We thought you died!” Foggy added, with a lot less tact. “We even knocked on your door for almost an hour, I was this close to breaking in… Or trying to, at least.”

Matt tried to imagine how freaked out Claire was when Foggy started to knock on his door. What if he had broken in? But Foggy wasn’t done talking; He pointed at Matt.

“Next time this happens, I’m warning you right now, I’ll break that damn door, whatever the cost! You can’t scare me like that, Matt.”

He was filled with guilt. He didn’t deserve friends like them.

“I’m sorry. Both of you. I don’t know what happened to my phone,” he apologized. “But I’m alright.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Foggy retorted, still incensed, but calming down. He sighed, then turned to Clark, raising his hand. “Sorry about that, Clark. It’s really good to see you again.”

“It’s nice to see you too, Foggy,” Clark smiled, shaking his hand.

“How do you know each other?” Karen asked, looking as dumbfounded as Matt felt. New York wasn’t a small city for people to just meet each other like that.

“We met at a bar,” Matt explained, omitting the part where they played pool with the Avengers – and the part where the Avengers, and Superman, ended up arrested for a bar fight. Before Foggy
could ruin all that, he added: “How do you know each other?”

Because that was surprising. As far as he knew, Karen had nothing to do with either Clark or Superman.

“Clark has been helping me with some… stuff,” Karen said, slowly, clearly unwilling to say more.

Clark shared a quick look with Matt – something neither Foggy nor Karen picked up, simply because of the fact that he was blind –, promising a more detailed answer later. Matt was curious now.

Foggy was curious too, but quite visibly for another reason entirely: from his wide eyes and quick heartbeat, Matt could tell that he was worried.

And jealous.

“Anyway, Clark, I need to talk to you about something,” Karen said, quickly, grabbing Clark’s arm. “Could we step outside for a bit? It will only take a moment.”

“Umm, sure,” Clark answered, quickly, allowing her to drag him out. He looked at Matt. “I’ll be right back.”

When the door closed, Foggy couldn’t hold it any longer.

“Oh, no, no, no… This can’t be happening. They’re dating!” he exclaimed.

Matt sighed. This would be a long conversation.

Natasha stuck the needle in Vladimir’s neck and watched as the colorless liquid slowly traveled from the syringe into his body, his muscles spasming slightly. Then she got around the table, sat down and waited.

After the whole ordeal with Sergei’s escape from her safe-house and his subsequent murder, Natasha saw it fit to put Vladimir somewhere else, somewhere more secure; maybe the Avengers Tower wasn’t exactly the best place for that, but at least it was a place Vladimir would not leave unless she allowed him too.

Thankfully, Stark and Pepper were on a business trip, in another country, otherwise she was certain things wouldn’t be that simple. Tony had a knack for complicating things.

Vladimir was beginning to stir, the chemicals in his blood doing their work, so Natasha prepared herself to begin the interrogation. In front of her was the boss of the Russian Mafia in New York, probably their best chance of acquiring more in-depth information on the Hand and their associates. A priceless chance that they couldn’t let it pass.

Clark and Matthew Murdock had done their part in capturing Vladimir before the Hand could kill him; now it was time for her to shine.

“Urgh,” Vladimir groaned, his eyes opening slowly. He moved a bit, probably still too dazed to even know what was happening.

Right until the moment his arms were prevented to move further because of the handcuffs attached to the floor.

It was like watching a startled animal. Vladimir’s eyes opened fully and his entire body snapped to
attention, forcing the handcuffs. The chair would’ve fallen down if it were not bolted to the floor, as Vladimir tried to get up.

Natasha simply watched, without even blinking, waiting for Vladimir’s mind to catch-up with his instincts. He struggled for a few more seconds and then, finally, realized he was not alone in the room; his entire body froze at her sight.

There was fear there. Good; no introductions were necessary.

“Sit,” Natasha spoke, her eyes fixed on him. “We have a lot to talk about.”

Vladimir kept staring back for almost a minute, his body still, as if he was locked in a cage with a lion. Then, slowly, he sat down.

And chuckled, almost hysterically.

“At least my death will come from the hands of a compatriot,” Vladimir said in Russian, looking down and laughing even louder.

Natasha just waited, assessing him. He looked terrible. His face was bruised, as was most of his body, but it wasn’t the injuries that stood out, it was the aura of exhaustion. She was looking at a man reaching his limits. Stress, grief, fear… They left marks on the body and Vladimir was reeking of that.

A man who had nothing to lose. Those were always annoying to interrogate.

“I am not here to kill you,” Natasha finally said, her voice little more than a whisper. “I am here to talk.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve got nothing to talk about with you.”


His head snapped up and his entire body tensed when she uttered those names.

“Like I said,” Vladimir began, anger etched on his face, “I have nothing to say. And there isn’t anything you can do about that.”

That was not true at all, Natasha thought to herself; there were several things she could do to make him talk, about anything. If she so desired, Natasha knew she could rip him apart piece by piece, until there was nothing left of the man standing in front of her. Pain, drugs, fear… The human mind had very clear limits, no matter what Vladimir’s bravado might’ve suggested. She knew that for a fact. Everybody had a breaking point and Natasha was good at finding that point.

But that wasn’t the type of person she wanted to be anymore. There was enough red on her ledger.

No, there were other ways to handle this issue, less bloody ways. Extending her arm, not bothered in the least by his defiance, Natasha grabbed the pile of photos she had set previously on the table, slowly going through them until she found what she was looking for.

“It’s weird to see such loyalty to the people who decapitated your brother,” Natasha said, her tone almost carefree, as if she were remarking on a mildly curious tidbit.

Vladimir did not react with the same carefreeness.
He lunged forward like a rabid animal, trying to reach her, the fury etched on his face; Natasha didn’t even blink, her eyes fixed on his as she waited for him to tire himself fighting the chains uselessly.

Still ignoring him, she started to organize the pictures over the table, as if creating a montage.

“DON’T EVER TALK ABOUT MY BROTHER, YOU BITCH!” he roared. It was one of the few things Natasha was able to understand from the many unintelligible screams, grunts and snarls that came out of his mouth.

Sergei had mentioned before that Vladimir was an angry one, Natasha recalled.

“Not even if it’s about his killer?” she asked, suddenly, interrupting him before he could go on. “Or should I say, killers?”

“The Masked Man killed my brother,” Vladimir spat. “Don’t even try to lie to me!”

“Did he?” Natasha questioned, raising a single eyebrow. “A man that has never killed anyone before suddenly snaps and decapitate what would’ve been a valuable source of information? Not happy with that, he goes on and starts to use bombs instead of his fists, killing even more people? And then there is this.”

Eyes never leaving Vladimir, Natasha pushed a single photo closer to him: one of the blind Chinese suicide bombers.

For the first time since she started the interrogation, Natasha showed a semblance of emotion; nothing extreme, nothing anyone who didn’t know her very well would ever notice, but it was there. Anger.

And pity.

She, more than most, knew what brainwashing looked like. Brainwashing and fanatism, that’s the first thing Natasha saw when she interrogated the Chinese suicide bombers that Clark managed to stop. When she tried to interrogate them, she corrected herself.

No matter what Natasha said, what she threatened them with, what she promised them, the blind Chinese men said nothing back. They just kept singing, completely ignoring her and anything else. There was no fear, no rage, no regret… Nothing.

It reminded Natasha of the Red Room agents. Whatever had been done to them, it was bad. Not only mentally – one glance at their eyes was enough to tell her that their blindness had not occurred naturally, it had been inflicted. Like her, those men suffered until their entire beings were molded into something else, something horrible. Something completely subservient.

And she knew right away nothing she could do or say would make them confess anything. They would never betray their masters and Natasha had an inkling of just who those “masters” were.

Luckily, the Russian mobsters didn’t have such loyalty. Especially towards the men that tried to blow them up.

“Your men already identified them for me,” Natasha told him. “They are ‘Madame Gao’s delivery boys’, right? The ones that move around the drugs, using your cabs to do it.” She leaned forward. “Now, why do you think that these ‘delivery boys’ were carrying bombs and blowing themselves up right next to your warehouses? Did the Masked Man convince them to do that too, right after killing your brother?”
Natasha could almost see the fury leaving Vladimir’s face, replaced by doubt. It was slow, discreet at first, but it was happening.

“Face it, Vladimir, the Masked Man did not kill Anatoly,” Natasha pressed on. “Your associates did. And Anatoly was not the only one they killed.”

Then she put another picture in front of him; a picture that bothered her as much as it bothered him. Sergei’s severed head.

“The Old Man is dead?” Vladimir whispered, surprised at the sight of his dead mentor.

“He died last night,” Natasha told him, her words giving nothing away of her own feelings on the matter. “After telling me about Fisk, Gao and the Hand. You do the math. Did the Masked Man kill him too?”

This time, Vladimir didn’t say anything. He just kept looking at the pictures, at the images of the destruction of his organization. Blown up warehouses, fire, bodies everywhere, Sergei’s head… Vladimir was a hothead, but he was far from being stupid. Despite his rage, he knew that the Masked Man couldn’t have done all that.

“Fisk… He did this!” Vladimir snarled. “My brother went to negotiate a truce and came back without his head.” His eyes were going from photo to photo, almost manically. “He fucking killed my brother.”

Natasha waited for him to raise his eyes and when he did she said: “Help me get to them. To Fisk. Give me something and I’ll make sure they all pay.”

“You’re gonna bring me Fisk’s head?” Vladimir asked, challenging her. “Or you’re too ‘heroic’ for that anymore, Black Widow?”

“I will make sure they all stay in jail for the rest of their lives, Fisk included.”

“I don’t want Fisk in jail, I want him dead!” Vladimir roared. “If you can’t do it, then let me go and I’ll do it myself. I’ll settle for nothing less.”

“That I cannot do–” Natasha refused.

“Then you have nothing to offer me,” he spat. “And I have nothing to say.”

Ignoring him, Natasha went on.

“—what I can do is arrest Wilson Fisk. And if by some bureaucratic mistake he ends up in the same prison you are going to, well, that’s just bad luck.”

Vladimir’s eyes snapped back to her, almost as if he couldn’t believe what he was listening. For a long minute, he didn’t say anything, he just stared at her, pensive.

“You would do that?” he finally asked, his voice low. “Give me Fisk, just like that?”

“No… I would put him in the same jail. That’s all.”

He started to laugh, hysterically.

It was a bluff, of course. Dead men tell no tales and she needed Fisk to tell her his. So even if Vladimir gave her something that allowed her to arrest Fisk, Natasha would make sure he was kept safe until he could give everything he had on the Hand.
Vladimir was a smart man, he probably knew all that, but that was the only chance to get his revenge and the temptation was certainly alluring.

And who knows? Depending on Fisk’s crimes, Natasha might be just as tempted to feed him to the sharks.

She probably wouldn’t, not with a “Superman shaped angel” on her shoulder, whispering louder than the “Black Widow shaped Devil” on the other shoulder, but it wasn’t like Vladimir knew that. To him, she was still the monster who killed countless people without regret, so what was Fisk’s life worth to her anyway?

Natasha might not like it, but her reputation was useful in her line of work.

“Ha! Remove the problem without dirtying your hands,” Vladimir finally said, once he stopped laughing. “Gotta say, from the stories I heard, the Black Widow wasn’t afraid of a little bit of blood.”

Natasha stared at him with cold eyes; her lips twisted in a scary smile.

“Oh, I’m not. Quite the opposite. But for both our sakes, I hope you don’t get to see this side of me.”

Natasha held her stare until she could almost listen his heart rate increasing, then she relaxed her gaze.

Like she already knew, her reputation was useful.

“Now, what do you have?”

There was another long silence, as if Vladimir was considering his choices. Both of them knew, however, that if he wanted a chance to avenge his brother, then he had only one choice: to cooperate.

It didn’t take long for him to reach that inevitable conclusion.

“Leland Owlsley,” Vladimir said, eventually.

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“Who is Leland Owlsley?” she asked.

“He’s the money guy,” he summarized. “He’s the one that keeps the money clean and hidden. All our money.”

The money Clark had mentioned, Natasha remembered. The one Karen Page had stumbled upon while she was working for Union Allied, the company that had rebuilt most of Hell’s Kitchen after the Battle of New York.

The mob’s joint account, as Clark had put it.

“Go on.”

“If someone has dirt on Fisk and the rest of them, it would be him,” Vladimir said, serious. “The kind that can really hurt them.”

“If he is that much of a liability, why keep him around at all? Especially now?”
“Leland is a spineless worm, and annoying to boot, but he knows his stuff,” he reluctantly admitted. “With that fucking alien hacking every suspicious account and computer out there, we had to invent new ways to keep our business safe. Leland did that.” Vladimir glanced at her. “I’m sure things wouldn’t just crumble to dust without him, but getting rid of Leland – as nice as it would feel –, would set them back quite a lot. You want someone that can provide proof of their crimes, well, that’s the money guy.”

That made sense. Clark had certainly put a lot of pressure on crime everywhere. Adapt or die; that was true for criminal organizations as much as it was to anything else.

“And where can I find Leland?” Natasha asked.

He scoffed. “You work for a spy organization, can’t you find his address?”

“If he is as important as you say, Fisk already moved him somewhere safe,” Natasha retorted, calmly. “Especially after news of your demise proved to be greatly exaggerated. I want the safehouses.”

“There are hundreds of them in New York alone! You think I know them all?” Vladimir barked.

“If you want me to keep my end of the deal, you better narrow it down and give me your best guess.”

Natasha was certain that if Vladimir hadn’t been cuffed, he would’ve tried to punch her. It was certainly good luck that he was – for him.

Eventually, he calmed down and started to think.

“There’s a place he could’ve gone to,” Vladimir said, slowly. “Not a safehouse, though.”

“Where?”

“There’s a guy, he works for Fisk. He makes suits.”

She frowned. “Suits?”

“Not normal suits, obviously! Bulletproof suits. For protection.”

Natasha held a sigh. “Bulletproof suits are quite common these days. Every remotely rich person has one or can acquire one just as easily.”

“Not like these. These suits are the real deal. Rumor is they can stop anything. They’re works of art.”

“What does this have to do with Leland?” Natasha interrupted, impatient.

“Everything! Leland is a coward. When things started to heat up with Masked Man, Leland ordered a suit made. I know ‘cause we’ve been keeping tabs on everyone. He ordered a suit, but until yesterday, he hadn’t picked it up, not yet.” He looked at her. “A guy like him? After everything that happened last night, you can bet your sweet Soviet ass that the first thing Leland will do is grab that fucking suit.”

It wasn’t a bad guess, but in the end it was a guess. But it was more than she had a minute ago. At the very least, it was the beginning of a trail they could follow.

“Give me the address.”
“You got arrested?!” Karen exclaimed, horrified.

Karen led him to the roof of the building, where they could talk in private; well, at least she thought so. Clark was certain Matt could hear every word they were saying, all the way from his office.

It was weird to meet someone who relied in his senses just as he did. Thor also had incredible senses – not as good as his, but probably a lot better than Matt’s –, but after a few thousand years he had learned to shut down all that noise around him, just as Ma Kent had taught Clark, unless he was actually using them. Perhaps too well.

It certainly made for a more peaceful life, that was for sure, since Thor probably didn’t need to constantly pay attention to his surroundings on Asgard for cries for help – not in a place populated by gods, anyway –, but Clark wouldn’t turn off his senses even if he could; annoyance was a small price to pay to be able to hear and help those who asked for it.

He was certain Matt thought the same.

“It wasn’t as serious as it seems,” Clark explained fast. “Long story short, a few bikers decided to stir trouble in a bar we were playing pool. There was a huge fight, the police came and took everyone remotely involved to the station. Matt and Foggy helped to explain the situation and they let us go without pressing any charges.”

She was still looking at him wide eyed.

“Talk about coincidences… And how could they take you with them?! Look at you! You sure don’t look like someone who would get involved in fights.” Kare argued. Then she chuckled. “Don’t tell me they tried to arrest Matt too?”

If only she knew… It was time to move the conversation to safer topics.

“When you told me you worked at a law firm I never imagined it would be Nelson and Murdock,” Clark mentioned, still quite surprised by the turn of events.

She smiled, kindly.

“They were the only ones who would help me,” Karen told him. “I told you I was framed for the murder of my colleague, right? I showed him the evidence of the pension fund that Union Allied was keeping, the one with the outrageous amount of money in it. Well, they were the ones that saved me. The only people that believed me.” She waited a second, then added: “Matt, Foggy… And the Masked Man. I owe them my life.”

So she didn’t know Matt was the Masked Man. Clark imagined that, especially after her joke about the cops arresting Matt, but it was good to have confirmation.

“But enough about that,” Karen said, suddenly. She grabbed him by the shoulders, her eyes shining as he looked at him wide eyed. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

There were a few seconds of complete silence.

“What?” Clark asked, confused.

Oh no… Clark was suddenly feeling very, very cold. How could she have possibly found out about that? About him being Superman? He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to explain
that, but the words simply wouldn’t come out.

Before he could think of something, Karen added: “You were the one who told Superman about the Russians, right?”

Once again, Clark was frozen in place. He glanced back at her, still a little stunned. But relieved.

“Umm, yes,” he said, slowly. “Well, more or less. I-I told my contact in SHIELD what I knew and they probably warned Superman.”

Karen smile was almost glowing.

“Thank you! That’s awesome! They finally got what was coming for them.” She squeezed his shoulders. “Thank you, Clark, really.”

This time, Clark smiled back, almost feeling the relief Karen exuded. He couldn’t imagine what she went through, the fear she must’ve felt, the feeling of helplessness. To finally be able to strike back against an adversary that much more powerful… It was no wonder she felt so happy.

“I just did what I could,” Clark said, finally, touching her hand. “You were the one who started this, Karen. Without you, we wouldn’t even know about all this.”

He meant every word. It was easy to fight the mob when you were an invulnerable alien. But to stand against them being just a human, without any powers, training, connections or anything else… That was real courage.

“I was about to call you, by the way,” Clark added. “Like I said, I talked to my contact in SHIELD and apparently our theory was right. That money you found in that Union Allied’s pension fund? It belonged to several criminal organizations. ‘Joint account’ is a good way to describe it.”

Karen got a little pale when he told her that.

“The Russians were one,” Clark continued. “The Japanese and the Chinese too. And there’s a new guy involved, someone called Wilson Fisk.”

Clark decided not to say anything about the Hand. Things were already complicated enough for Karen.

“A Mafia’s joint account… Jesus Christ,” Karen whispered, covering her face with both hands. “What are we gonna do? How can we fight these people? Is Superman going to help?”

“That’s actually good news for us,” Clark said, almost chuckling at the outraged look she sent him.

“How is this good news?”

“Ever heard the saying ‘don’t put all your eggs in one basket’? Well, they apparently didn’t,” Clark grinned. “They have someone handling their money, hiding it, laundering it. If we can get one of them to cooperate, we get them all. Superman already caught all the Russian mobsters in Hell’s Kitchen. Someone is going to say something.”

Given that Natasha was the one handling this interrogation, Clark had no doubt she would make Vladimir Ranskahov talk. She tricked the God of Mischief once, didn’t she?

“Especially given how the whole thing last night was basically a gang war between them,” Clark added, almost as an afterthought. “The Russians have no reason to stay silent.”
“What do you mean?” Karen asked, puzzled.

“The bombings. They were not ‘the Masked Man finishing the job’, they were the Russian’s ex-associates severing ties with them. The Chinese are responsible for the bombs, but the rest of them approved of this, no doubt.”

She was surprised. “I knew the Masked Man was not involved in this like the media is saying, he couldn’t be,” Karen said, as if the thought never occurred to her at all; she truly did trust him. “But I never imagined… I thought the bombs were just the Russians trying to fight Superman.”

“No, Superman arrived in the middle of a fight. Or so my sources told me,” Clark added, fast.

It was slow at first, but after a few seconds Karen’s smile was back on her face.

“If this is true, if the Russians really have no reason to stay quiet, then it’s only a matter of following the thread,” Karen said. “Finding out every shell company they’re using to hide the money, like Union Allied, and take them down. I’ve been doing that, actually, following the trail left behind by the firm that hired Nelson and Murdock to represent John Healy. Confederated Global Investments. It’s… Like trying to straighten out a bowl of spaghetti, but I’m doing it. And if we can find out the name of the companies Union Allied is using to restructure itself, I can go even further. That auction selling Union Allied’s assets is today, right?”

“It started… Two hours ago, actually,” Clark answered, checking the time. “We’ll have the names of the companies buying Union Allied’s stuff soon enough.”

Oldest trick in the game. File for bankruptcy and restructure under a new name. It was just a matter of knowing who would buy Union Allied’s assets… Because sellers and buyers would actually be the same people, just under different names.

Karen was the one who suggested that in the first place. Clark warned her not to go there herself, given that she was a known entity, but the idea was very good. They could always take a look on the registers after the auction was done, but even so he thought it was safer to send someone to oversee the whole thing, someone they didn’t know.

Jessica sure didn’t like it, but she was very good at that sort of thing. And given that she was using that Nano Mask Natasha gave her, there wouldn’t be anything to tip them off that they were even being watched.

Soon enough, they would have a new trail to follow. And if Natasha managed to get something out of Vladimir, soon they would have yet another. Things were beginning to take form.

Karen stared at him, her excitement plain to see.

“My god, can we really do this?”

Clark smiled. “We are already doing it. It’s going to be alright, Karen. I promise.”

A second after he said that, his cell phone rang. He excused himself for a moment, urging Karen to go on without him.

It was a good move, because the caller was Natasha and she had good news.

“I don’t like this, Matt,” Foggy whined. “What do you think they’re doing? I thought we had a moment last night!”
Matt did his best not to roll his eyes. It was hard to try to listen to Clark and Karen when Foggy wouldn’t stop complaining.

“You know, the bombings and all?” Foggy went on. “We were looking for you, it was dangerous, the adrenalin was coursing through our veins… We almost kissed!”

“If that’s true, why you’re so worried?” Matt asked, exasperated.

“If you weren’t blind you would know how stupid that question is! Clark is gorgeous!” Foggy exclaimed. Matt fought against the urge to bash his head against the table. “Blue eyes, a handsome face, his muscles have muscles… And then there’s me! Not much of a competition, is it?”

“I don’t know, Foggy, I’m blind.” Matt deadpanned. Foggy opened his mouth again, but Matt didn’t let him talk. “Look, does Karen strikes you as the kind of woman who would stay with someone just because of their looks?”

“No… But Clark’s a great guy too.” He grumbled. “He’s funny, smart, a legit nice guy… I can’t even get mad at him for this.”

“If she likes you, Foggy, she won’t ditch you like that,” Matt said, trying to put an end to that conversation. “Karen is not that kind of person.”

“You really think I shouldn’t be worried?” Foggy asked, half hopeful, half apprehensive. “He really is handsome, Matt. I’m talking ‘Hollywood handsome’ here.”

Matt sighed.

“No, you don’t have to be worried. But I’m beginning to think she should.”

“Hey!”

Before Foggy could say anything else, the door to their office opened again and Clark and Karen entered. Matt could barely disguise the annoyed look on his face when he glanced at Clark; despite Foggy’s best efforts, he had heard everything Karen and him talked about.

And he didn’t like it one bit.

Matt had no idea Karen was involving herself in this. He saved her life, he forced Fisk’s people to stop going after her, by revealing everything Karen knew about Union Allied to the press. She was alive, free to move on with her life while he dealt with the dangerous stuff. And yet, there she was, neck deep into all this, working side by side with Clark to take those people down. It was too risky and Matt didn’t like it at all.

He would have a few words with Clark after this.

“Hey Matt, I just got a call about… That thing we were talking about,” Clark said, raising his phone. “I’m going to check it out. You want to come?”

Both Foggy and Karen looked at Matt, waiting for an explanation that most certainly wouldn’t come. Instead, he simply nodded, grabbed his cane and briefcase, and got up.

“Foggy, I have to solve some stuff with Clark today. Can you handle things here?”

“Umm, sure. Good luck.”

Saying their goodbyes, Matt left with Clark, anxious to hear what new clue about their
investigation they had. Could Vladimir have revealed something? Cracking his knuckles in anticipation, barely able to keep himself from asking questions, they left the office building.

“We got their accountant’s name,” Clark said when they were distant enough, a big smile on his face.

Would you look at that? This day certainly promised to be a busy one, not that he was complaining.

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“… according to the police, the terrorist attack perpetrated last night was committed by no other than the Masked Vigilante prowling the streets of Hell’s Kitchen. The same Masked Vigilante who allegedly murdered one of the high-ranked members of the Russian Mafia the day before. The police remained silent about the progress of the ongoing chase, but sources confirm that the whole force is mobilized to stop this threat. One thing is certain, with Superman on their side, the Masked Vigilante’s days of crime will soon be over. Now, following news about the attack with J. J. Jameson.”

“This Masked Vigilante is a menace! He–”

Matt rolled his eyes, tuning out the radio. It was frankly unbelievable how quickly he went from a simple street vigilante, to the murderer of a mobster boss, to an honest to god terrorist. What would they say next? That he was the Devil himself?

Ignoring that drivel, Matt focused on something much more interesting: the phone call Clark had answered a few minutes ago.

“Yes, Clark, I’ve written down all the companies that bought Union Allied’s stuff. How many times do you have to ask?”

“Can you follow up on that, see if you find anything suspicious?”

There was an audible sigh from the other side.

“If I must… But I thought you said you already had someone to do that?”

Karen, it had to be, Matt thought, with no small amount of annoyance.

“An extra pair of eyes on this won’t hurt,” Clark said.

“Alright, I’ll take a look. But I want something in return.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Haven’t I paid enough for that?” Clark deadpanned.

“You paid the ‘friend discount’, Clark. This is gonna cost extra.”

“There is no ‘friend discount’! I paid and even tipped you in advance because you complained you had a slow month!”

“Maybe favors are more valuable to me than money—”

“Then give me my money back!”

The person he was talking to couldn’t even be bothered to answer that.
“—maybe I want something else for this.”

Clark closed his eyes and sighed, frustrated.

“What do you want?”

“I want to meet him. Face to face.”

Matt had an inkling as to whom “him” was, and when Clark met his eyes he was certain. The woman talking to Clark wanted to meet the Masked Vigilante.

He raised a single eyebrow, waiting for Clark’s explanation.

“I, umm, that’s not going to be possible, Jessica,” Clark started, slowly, avoiding to look in Matt’s direction.

“What the fuck do you mean by that? You met him yesterday, you know who he is! I want to meet the guy who put the fear of god in those scumbags. He seems nice.”

That was, by far, the nicest thing someone had ever said about the Masked Vigilante, Matt realized. How sad was that?

“I don’t think he wants to meet anyone, Jessica,” Clark argued, still not looking in his direction. “He uses a mask for a reason.”

“I’m not going to reveal his identity to the world, Clark! Jeez!”

“I know, I know.” He lowered his voice a bit, as if he wanted to have that conversation in private, but he had to know it wasn’t possible, not with Matt’s hearing. At least the driver wouldn’t hear it, he supposed. “Listen, I know you doubted yourself yesterday when you heard he had murdered that Russian boss, but like I told you, he didn’t. You were right to put your faith in him. You believed in his potential for good even when I didn’t and you should be proud of yourself, but there’s really no need for you to meet him right n—”

“Clark, I need inspirational words in my life as much as you need a third nut,” Jessica retorted, brutally. She hesitated for a moment, then added: “Unless you do have three nuts, then I guess this comparison doesn’t really work that well.”

“I don’t have three testicles!” Clark exclaimed, probably a bit louder than he intended, because the driver turned to look at him with wide, shocked eyes.

“Well, what do I know about Kryptonian balls, anyway,” she said, clearly as embarrassed as Clark’s blushed cheeks revealed that he was. There were a few seconds of silence. “I just want to meet the guy, Clark. He’s a big player in my turf and I have the feeling we’ll end up meeting at some point, so why wait?”

Sighing, Clark finally looked at Matt. He covered the phone and whispered so low that Matt doubted someone without enhanced hearing would be able to listen.

“Look, I know Jessica well enough to realize she’s not going to let this go,” Clark said, as if apologizing. “I can give her the runaround for now, but it’s not going to last. She’s not going to hear anything from me, not if you don’t want it, but she’s not going to let this rest. And she’s smart enough to be a bother.”

It was Matt’s time to sigh. He remembered Jessica Jones from the time they all played pool
together – and ended up fighting a biker gang. To say she was a difficult person was to severely undermine her caustic personality, but there had to be a reason for her friendship with Superman.

“Do you trust her?” Matt finally asked, his lips barely moving as he whispered inaudibly, not unlike Clark.

“With my life,” he answered, immediately. “She knows who I am, for a long time now, and she herself is enhanced, as you probably noticed, so she won’t betray your secret.”

He did notice, of course, when the tiny woman knocked out a biker four times her size by beating his head against the table with a single hand. A secret for a secret? That wasn’t it. Jessica Jones probably didn’t go around announcing to the world what she could do, but she didn’t seem very concerned with hiding it, not like he was.

But Superman trusted her with his identity and Matt couldn’t think of an information more valuable than that. If she planned to sell someone out, it wouldn’t be the Masked Vigilante and Matt didn’t truly believe she would sell any of them.

And by some of the pieces of the conversation he’d just heard, Matt apparently owed Jessica Jones already; it seemed Superman’s restraint when they met last night was due to her counsel.

Jessica Jones, apparently, was the reason Matt wasn’t in jail right now. That won her a few points with him, he was fine in admitting that.

“Alright,” Matt granted. Then he looked at Clark. “But first we have to talk about Karen and why you’re putting her in danger.”

“What?” Clark asked, legitimately surprised by the turn the conversation took.

“I didn’t beat an assassin and made sure the murder charges against her were dropped just to see her sticking her nose back into this hell all over again,” Matt continued, without missing a beat. “She was out. You brought her back in.”

Clark simply stared at him, a single eyebrow raised.

“You have met Karen, didn’t you?” he asked, actually chuckling. “Does she seem like the kind of person who would close her eyes and allow something wrong to keep happening? If I shut her down, all she’s going to do is keep investigating by herself, which she was already doing before I even knew her.”

Matt was surprised by that. He didn’t realize Karen was still looking into all that.

“She asked me for help,” Clark concluded, with finality. “I’m not about to turn my back on her.”

Closing his eyes, Matt let out a long sigh. He didn’t like that, at all, but nothing Clark said was wrong. He might not know Karen for too long, but he knew her well enough to agree with Clark’s assessment.

Without saying anything, he just nodded.

“... if you hang up on me, Clark, I swear to god, I’ll fu–“

“He says it’s alright,” Clark quickly interrupted the long stream of curses coming out of his phone. “Tell me where you are, we’re investigating a new lead and we could use your help. We’ll pick you up.”
“He’s there with you? You bastard.”

Despite cursing him, Jessica gave the address and Clark quickly hung up, leaning forward to open the small window separating the cab driver from the back seats.

“Hey, sorry about that,” Clark apologized when the driver turned off the radio, smiling at him. “We’re going to have to make a detour to pick someone.”

The driver heard the address and nodded.

“It’s not too out of the way,” he answered promptly, happy to help, a thick Indian accent permeating every word. “We’ll be there right away.” He hesitated for a moment, glancing quickly at Clark and then back to the street. “So… Girl problems?” The driver lowered his voice, almost whispering: “Does it have anything to do with your condition?”

“There’s no condition!” Clark replied, so fast that the poor driver flinched, and Matt had to cover his mouth to not let a laugh out. “And there’s no ‘girl problems’ either, she’s just a friend. A very, very difficult friend.”

“Oh! That’s good, very good. Health is important.” The driver glanced at the picture by the steering wheel; Matt could tell with his enhanced senses that it was the picture of a woman. The man smiled, proud. “I don’t have girl problems either, not with Gita.”

Matt rolled his eyes, safely hidden behind the red lenses of his glasses. It didn’t take a genius to know that the cab driver simply wanted a reason to talk about his probable girlfriend.

Clark, maybe still a bit embarrassed by the questioning and his outburst, decided to humor him. “Is that so? She’s very beautiful.”

The driver, more than pleased that Clark seemed willing to talk, smiled brightly.

“Ash, Gita really is! Our families agree she’ll make me a very agreeable wife.” He looked back, shining smile still on his face. “After I drop you guys, I’m picking up my cousin Bandhu at the airport. We’re having a party tonight.” He sighed, longingly. “I do hope everything goes well.”

“I hope things go well for you too, buddy,” Clark smiled, visibly happy for him, patting the guy’s back.

Matt agreed silently, though his worries were more focused on their fight against crime than the possibility of a happy arranged marriage.

Clark watched as Matt gently tapped the brick walls of the warehouse; he paused for a moment.

“I can sense three rooms,” Matt announced in his calm voice. “One big, two smaller ones. There’s a man inside one of the smaller rooms, he’s working with some kind of chemical. The door is locked and the windows are barred. There are no other entrances, except…” He tapped the wall again. “There’s a vent I think we can fit.”

Matt turned to them, pointing up at the vent entrance. Despite knowing by now that Matt’s blindness hindered him very little, Clark was impressed; Matt had the gift, but what he could do with it was pure art. The way he used his abilities was smart and Clark made a mental note to use his own gifts in a similar way.
Jessica, however, was far less impressed.

“You cheating son of a bitch,” she muttered, for what had to be the tenth time, as if she still couldn’t believe in what she was seeing. “Give me my money back!”

Both Matt and Clark sighed at the interruption. Jessica’s attitude towards the Masked Vigilante did a complete 180 when she discovered his identity. The respect was still there – even though Clark was the only one who could probably see it, hidden behind the insults – but she was seriously pissed off at the “helpless blind scam” Matt did to win the game of pool all those days ago.

Clark suspected Jessica was actually pissed off at herself for not noticing something was weird about Matt sooner, but she would die before admitting that.

“Can we talk about this some other time?” Matt asked, exasperated.

“You stole my money!”

“I won, fair and square,” Matt countered. “You are not without abilities either, I don’t know why you’re complaining.”

“I can hit things hard, you have a sonar built inside your head,” Jessica retorted, arms crossed in front of her. “Which one of those is more useful in a game of pool?”

“Again, can we do this later?” Matt asked, frustrated, pointing at the warehouse. “We actually have something important to do now.”

That they did. Inside this warehouse, according to Natasha’s information, was a clandestine workshop that made bulletproof suits. Bulletproof suits that were so good, that Vladimir Ranskahov believed they could draw “a coward like Leland Owlsley” out of hiding so he could pick up the one he had ordered, so he had better chances to survive the metaphorical storm.

The place looked abandoned, as did every other warehouse around it; probably remnants of the exodus that Hell’s Kitchen suffered after Loki’s invasion. The perfect place to hide something and it really shouldn’t surprise anyone that the criminal organizations in New York realized that as well.

Differently from the other warehouses around it, however, this one only appeared abandoned. Behind the ugly walls and barred windows Clark could see a functioning workshop with brand new machines, lights on and even a small fridge filled with food.

And, of course, a man working inside.

“Just a guy?” Jessica asked, distracting him. As if they were one, Clark and Matt nodded. “Alarms? Cameras?”

“Nothing of the sort.”

In hindsight, Clark should’ve known better than to say this. Without waiting for permission from any of them, Jessica simply punched the front door, snapping it from its hinges alongside the big chain and padlock keeping it locked. Because of the silence around them, the noise seemed to be ten times worse than what it already was and both him and Matt flinched.

There was a long silence after the thunderous crash. And then, inevitably, desperate footsteps running towards them.
Matt took point, passing fast through Jessica as he put on his mask, just at the moment the only person inside appeared in the entrance room. And in an impressive display of agility and skill, Matt jumped over a table and clashed against the man, kicking his chest, already twisting and turning to land on two feet and continue the attack.

Clark was impressed.

“He’s really good, isn’t he?” he asked, glancing a moment at an equally impressed Jessica and then back at the fight.

He knew he had to be skilled – since there was no way an unskilled fighter could do the things the Masked Vigilante did –, but seeing it really put things in perspective. The man facing Matt was a tower of muscles, taller and broader than even Clark, and he was holding two circular saws as improvised weapons.

And it was clear as day that the man simply had no chance to win against Matt.

Matt dodged his attacks as if he could predict them, dancing in front of his adversary like a professional boxer, his punches landing heavily and with extreme precision. In less than three seconds the man was disarmed and after two strong jabs to the jaw he was already wavering like the flame of a candle about to go out.

It was quick, almost surgical, and at the same time brutal; but obviously not fast enough for Jessica.

Rolling her eyes, she grabbed the big table in front of her while Matt engaged his opponent, and swung it like a baseball bat. Matt, probably hearing and sensing the flow of air, ducked fast; just in time to avoid the heavy piece of furniture.

The man fighting him wasn’t so lucky. The table crashed right at his side, so strongly that it broke in splinters, sending the huge man straight to the floor.

“Look out!” Jessica warned – almost five seconds late and with a mocking grin –, throwing down the pieces of the table she was still holding.

Matt just sighed, tiredly. He was probably regretting inviting Jessica and Clark couldn’t exactly blame him for that.

“Now, big guy,” Jessica started, grabbing the hulking man by the shirt with two hands and slamming him against the wall, “talk.”

“S-Strong lady,” the man stuttered, dizzy.

“You’ve seen nothing yet,” Jessica threatened, lifting the guy from the ground a few inches. “Don’t give me a reason to show you.”

Matt shared a look with Clark, eyebrows raised. He already knew she was strong – especially since the “table incident” a few seconds ago – but seeing a tiny woman lifting a huge man from the ground was really weird, Clark agreed.

While he was being held, Clark took a few seconds to really look at the man. The first thing anyone would notice was his sheer size. The man was a giant, not only tall, but strong, muscled, as if he was a bodybuilder. His head was completely shaved, as was his face, which gave him the appearance of a very dangerous thug.
His eyes, however, the entire expression on his face, disagreed with his dangerous look.

There was no menace, no anger, no cruelty in his eyes. On the contrary, there was fear and confusion and despite the fact that he had just fought Matt, Clark was inclined to believe he was not a threat, to anyone.

Curious.

“W-What do you want?” the man asked, clearly terrified.

“Start with your name,” Matt asked, his voice no more than a dangerous hiss.

“And don’t even try to say it’s Johnny Sins,” Jessica interrupted. “Not even he can hold that many jobs.”

Jessica’s statement was received by three sets of blank stares. She sighed.

“A blind guy and a boy scout… I’m wasted on you,” Jessica muttered, inaudibly to someone with normal hearing. She pressed the man against the wall harder. “Name!”

“I’m Melvin, Melvin Potter!” the guy answered, fast.

Ignoring Jessica’s rant, Clark approached him, showing the photo Natasha sent.

“Melvin, we are looking for this man. His name is Leland Owlsley.”

Still being held by Jessica against the wall, Melvin squinted his eyes to look at the photo.

“He was here earlier,” Melvin confirmed. Then his expression grew scared. “He was angry.”

The way he said that made all three of them share looks; for the first time, Clark suspected Melvin of being mentally handicapped. Even Jessica seemed to notice, because he saw her hands losing a bit of her strength, almost as if she didn’t want to hurt the guy.

“Why?” Matt asked.

The big man turned to Matt. “They picked him during the night, I think. Woke him up and took him somewhere else. He didn’t want to.” He shook his head. “He said they didn’t want to bring him here either, but he made them, but then why was he so angry? He kept calling everyone names.”

As Natasha suspected, it seemed Leland Owlsley had been dragged unwillingly to a safehouse during the night, perhaps while the Russian warehouses still burned. And just like she also suspected, he apparently forced his guards to take him there after that. To pick up a bulletproof suit, maybe?

“Why did he come here?” Clark asked.

“He wanted his suit,” Melvin confirmed, immediately. “It wasn’t ready, I told him, but he really wanted it had to be rushed.”

“Suit?” Jessica asked, confused. She didn’t know that part, Clark realized.

“I’ll show you, Strong Lady,” Melvin said, promptly.

Jessica didn’t release him immediately.
“Run, do anything you shouldn’t, and I’ll beat you again,” Jessica warned him.

Like a scared puppy, Melvin nodded fast. It was a really weird thing to see.

Walking quickly, Melvin Potter showed them to the other room, which seemed to be the heart of the workshop, a hybrid of a factory and a tailor shop. It was full of machines and pieces of fabric, half-finished suits, a shelf full of chemicals and a wall covered in tools.

Melvin went straight to one of the suits and grabbed it.

“Here,” he said, giving it to Clark, the closest person there.

“Holy shit, is this really a tailor shop?” Jessica muttered, sounding puzzled.

Clark was barely listening, because at the same time he grabbed the suit, Kelex whispered in his ear: “This is Chitauri alloy, sir.”

“Chitauri?” Matt exclaimed, obviously listening to Kelex, also touching the suit Clark was holding.

Melvin assumed the question was directed at him.

“They took that from the aliens after the Incident,” Melvin told them. “It’s really tough, look.”

He grabbed one of the other suits around and put it over a nearby table. And then he turned on the electric drill by its side and forced it against the piece of cloth, stretching as much as he could. The drill couldn’t pierce it. The fabric of the suit was disintegrated under the drill, but the Chitauri alloy vest sewed under it remained untouched. At a certain point, the drill started to let out smoke and a truly horrible stench, which was when Melvin turned it off.

There wasn’t even a mark on the Chitauri vest.

“Amazing,” Clark whispered.

It was no wonder these bulletproof suits were famous. They had Chitauri alloy vests sewed between the fabric and the lining and whatever material that thing was made of, it was tough. More than enough to stop any normal weapon, no doubt.

Also, highly illegal. It suddenly wasn’t so shocking that this warehouse was so isolated from any of the mob’s places. Being caught in possession of alien tech was worse than being caught with a mountain of guns and ammunition.

Clark suddenly feared they wouldn’t find any clue leading to Leland, because a smart man like that probably wouldn’t leave any evidence behind that could tie him to illegal alien tech.

“How the fuck do you even work with this shit?” Jessica suddenly asked. “It’s indestructible.”

The question was pertinent, even if crude. Advanced alien tech wasn’t simply dangerous, it was hard to work with. The material they were made of, the inner workings of the devices… They were hard to understand and even harder to use.

And yet, the mob not only had access to it, but someone who knew how to work it.

“You have to soak the fabric in a very specific acid bath and then hit it with an electricity current,” Melvin, matter-of-factly, surprising them. “The alloy turns soft with that, at which point you have a few seconds to cut it and mold it, until it hardens again.” He sighed. “I broke all my tools until I found that out.”
There was a long silence as the three of them stared back at Melvin, shocked. If they were to be honest, none of them expected him to be anything other than the custodian there, an assistant at best.

“You came up with this?” Jessica asked, sceptic. “You?”

Melvin, not even noticing the disbelief in Jessica’s voice, nodded.

“The people where I used to work were trying to craft a special blade to cut it, but no material they tried worked,” he explained. “Then I thought ‘why don’t we try to weaken the alien alloy, instead of finding something stronger’.” He shrugged. “It was a matter of finding the right acids and the right electric current.”

Clark had to correct himself: Melvin Potter might have had some mental impairment, but whatever it was, it didn’t influence his intelligence. In that field of work, the man was clearly a genius.

“Where did you use to work?” Matt asked, probably trying to find out where the alien material was coming from.

“Hammer Industries.”

Tony’s old rivals from the weapon’s business, Clark remembered.

“You’re a scientist?” Clark asked.

“Oh, no, I’m not smart enough for that.” Melvin answered, fast. “I carried stuff.”

“Weren’t you the one who discovered how to do this?” Jessica asked.

“Yes, but the scientists didn’t like it,” Melvin said, guiltily. “I used the lab’s stuff during the night, cost them a lot of money. They fired me.”

Of course they did. After he discovered how to manipulate Chitauri alloy, something Hammer Industries’ best scientists couldn’t do. Not only they cost Melvin his job, they probably took credit for his discovery.

Clark would remember that when he went knocking on their door to ask about the illegal alien tech.

“Melvin, who do you work for now?” Matt asked, getting closer.

Melvin shook his head, fast, clearly afraid. “I’m not supposed to say it.”


The shocked look on Melvin’s expression and the way he turned pale was enough to answer that.

“You know he’s a bad man, Melvin. We know that too. Did he threaten you to work for him?”

Melvin opened and closed his mouth three times before answering.

“He gave me a job,” he said. “I needed one. And this workshop too.”

“But you found out what Fisk really does for a living, didn’t you?” Matt pressed on. “You found out that you were working for a very bad man.” The big man just looked down. “You wanted out. But he didn’t let you go, did he?”
“He threatened Betsy,” Melvin muttered, still not meeting anyone’s eyes.

“Who is Betsy?” Clark asked, gently.

“My girl. She was my parole officer. She was always kind.” He looked up, terrified. “I can’t let him hurt her, I can’t!”

For the first time since Matt and Melvin fought, Clark saw fury in Melvin’s eyes. They all tensed up, waiting for the outburst.

“Melvin, Melvin,” Matt called, approaching him slowly. Jessica and Clark were both ready to hold him again. “We don’t want Betsy to get hurt either. Nor you. That’s why we’re here, to make sure Fisk and his people won’t hurt anyone else, ever again. But we need your help.”

Taking this opportunity, Clark grabbed Leland’s photo again.

“Do you know where Leland went after he left your workshop?” Clark asked. “Did he say anything? Try to remember, please.”

Melvin frowned as he tried to think, his muscles still incredibly tense.

“He complained they would go back to that ‘tiny place’, but didn’t say anything about where it was,” he finally said. “He just called me names, took the suit and left.”

Matt cursed silently, as Clark sighed disappointed. Jessica also cursed, but not nearly as noiselessly.

“Let’s look for clues,” Clark said, finally. “There has to be something here that gives us an idea where the safehouse is located.”

And look for it they did. There were no cameras to hack, either inside the workshop or out in the streets. They didn’t know what kind of vehicle Leland arrived in, nor did they know who were the people guarding him. Melvin didn’t remember anything of use and Clark couldn’t very well fly above the city looking for him; he could try if all else failed, but it wasn’t an efficient way to find anyone. The only thing they all knew was that the safehouse was in New York, probably in Hell’s Kitchen, or at least somewhere not too far from the workshop.

He needed something to reduce his searching area, a clue to point him in the right direction, anything, so he relaxed as best as he could and focused all his enhanced senses.

That’s when he finally noticed it, something faint, but very familiar.

“Yes!” Clark exclaimed, crouching to grab his prize.

A single strand of white hair, matching the exact tone of Leland’s.

His happy cry made Matt and Jessica go to him, almost running; even Melvin appeared, curious.

“What do you have?” Jessica asked, fast.

With a proud smile, Clark showed her.

He didn’t think anyone could look that disappointed.

“A strand of hair? Of fucking hair?! Just let me grab my DNA kit from my invisible utility belt and then I can release my DNA-hunter drones to find him!” Jessica took her hand to her ear, as if
straining to hear something. “What did you say? There’s no such thing? Well, color me surprised!”

Clark’s smile turned smug.

“We don’t need your fictional tech for this.” He turned to Matt. “Hey, tell me what you smell on this hair.”

Puzzled, Matt approached, delicately taking the strand of hair from Clark and taking it close to his nose; he could almost see Matt’s face frowning in focus behind the black mask.

“White pepper, soy sauce, ginger, sugar, garlic, vinegar…”

“And 26 other spices, plus chicken,” Clark finished for him. “Combining all that we have—”

“Mr. Zhang’s famous ’32-Spices Szechuan Chicken’ from the Royal Dragon!” both of them finished at the same time.

Jessica was staring at them, jaw agape. Melvin just looked very, very confused.

“How far do you think the smell travels? Strong enough to stick to someone, I mean.” Matt asked, following his line of thought. “Two, three blocks?”

“At the very least,” Clark agreed, glad that Matt seemed to have grasped his idea. “It’s a very aromatic dish. Clothes and hair seem to absorb all those aromas quite easily if you stay there for too long. The whole neighborhood smells like Szechuan Chicken. Mr. Zhang and his staff are permanently covered in it.”

“We know Leland Owlsley stayed in the safehouse since a little after the bombings until early in the morning. Three, four hours, and then he annoyed his guards enough to drag them here, picked up his new suit, and went right back. So the safehouse is probably in a three block perimeter from the restaurant,” Matt concluded, grinning. “And we both know where the Royal Dragon is.”

“We have him,” Clark nodded, smiling back.

Both of them turned to look at Jessica, their happiness reflected on their faces.

“Go fuck yourselves,” Jessica said, turning her back at them, annoyed.

“I’m going to make a call,” Clark announced, still grinning, already dialing Natasha’s number.

“You want to know if there’s a mob safehouse in a three-block perimeter from the address… 495 West 47th Street, Hell's Kitchen, New York City, New York?” Natasha repeated, not letting her voice reveal how weird she found that request. She typed the address, finding the place; there was a second of hesitation. “Royal Dragon. It’s a… Chinese restaurant.”

“That’s right. Well, three-block is more an estimate, really, but it could be a little more or a little less.”

There was a moment of silence.

“How exactly did you come by this information?”

“I found a strand of hair that belonged to Leland Owlsley in that workshop you sent me. It smelled like the Royal Dragon’s Szechuan Chicken, I’d recognize that smell anywhere, it’s very famous in Hell’s Kitchen. Matt agrees with me.”
“Of course he does,” Natasha sighed. “You know, one of these days I’ll introduce you two to an old friend of mine. He also has the nose of a bloodhound, you could form a little pack of your own.” Before Clark could say anything about her suggestion, Natasha went on. “I suppose he couldn’t smell like that by simply ordering a bit of Szechuan Chicken, could he?”

“Unlikely. By the timeline we built, the place was already closed by the time Leland went to the safehouse. And it hadn’t opened yet when he came to the workshop. Also, the smell is too… heavy. It came from the restaurant, I have no doubt.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” And she would, because by what he showed her that night in the restaurant, when he tasted the wine, his senses might be able to do just that. ”Just give me a second.”

Typing the address once again on her computer, Natasha brought up the map of the place and traced a five-block perimeter with her finger. Then, she entered the locked room where Vladimir was still cuffed to the table.

The Russian mobster opened his mouth to say anything, but before he could waste her time Natasha put the computer in front of him.

“Tell me if there is a safehouse located inside that circle,” she ordered.

“Wha—”

“Just do it, it’s time sensitive.”

Vladimir glared at her, but did as he was told. He looked almost a minute at the map, probably forcing himself to remember the information.

And then, to her pleasure, he tapped a building inside the perimeter. Bingo.

“This one,” he muttered.

Natasha didn’t smile, but she really wanted to. Instead, she grabbed the computer and left the room without saying another word.

“I have the place,” she said on the phone, already guessing that Clark had heard. “We can go there right now.”

In fact, Natasha was already going to her armory inside the Avengers Tower.

“Actually, we might want to wait a little bit,” Clark said, hesitant, surprising her. “We may have a situation to deal with tonight, directly related to the Hand. It’s probably wise if we don’t spook them before we can get to Leland.”

Natasha didn’t like the sound of that.

“What situation?” she demanded.

“Well, it seems the Hand is bringing a pretty powerful weapon to New York tonight, through the docks. We’re going to have to intercept them.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. Why couldn’t things be simple?

“Let’s talk in person. Can you go to Matt’s apartment in an hour? The address is—”
“I know where it is,” Natasha answered. “I’ll be there.”

She hung up and grabbed the syringe full of sleeping drug, gently flicking it. It seemed Vladimir was about to sleep again.

“What’re you gonna do now, big guy?” Jessica asked Melvin as Matt approached them. “I’m assuming you can’t stay here anymore, right?”

She glanced at the door when she said that and Matt sensed a bit of guilt there. It was nice to know she wasn’t a complete asshole, but in that case her guilt was misplaced; Melvin couldn’t have continued working for Fisk after this. One way or the other, Fisk would find out his involvement with them and it wouldn’t end well for him or his girlfriend.

“I… Don’t know,” Melvin admitted. He scratched his head, deep in thought.

“I meant what I said, Melvin,” Matt said, walking to them. They turned to look at him. “I’ll make sure to keep you and Betsy safe. Fisk will rot behind bars.”

Melvin simply stared back, unmoved. Jessica raised a single eyebrow.

“Yeah?” she asked. “And how exactly are you going to do that, ‘Masked Crusader’? You’re going to let the big guy here sleep on your couch? His girlfriend too?”

Matt’s face, mostly hidden by the mask, showed nothing. But Jessica’s question was a good one. What exactly could Matt do other than try to arrest Fisk as fast as he could?

“Didn’t think about that, did you?” Jessica taunted. He was beginning to really dislike her commentaries.

“Do you have something in mind?” Matt retorted.

“Yeah, actually I do.” She turned to Melvin. “How about a new job?”

“A job?” Melvin repeated, surprised. Matt waited for the explanation.

“Well, you worked for Hammer Industries, right? What about trying to work for the competition?” Melvin simply stared blankly, waiting for her to finish; Jessica sighed. “Stark Industries, I mean Stark Industries.”

“I don’t think they’ll hire me,” Melvin said, slowly. Matt would agree with that assessment, if he didn’t know who Clark really was.

“I’ll give Tony a call,” Clark said, just getting there, obviously done with his phone call. He smiled at Melvin. “I’m sure he’ll be delighted to have someone with your experience there.”

Matt had to admit, Clark knew how to put people at ease. Melvin was still very distrustful of them – and he had every reason to be, as far as he knew –, but he immediately relaxed when Clark said this.

“What about Betsy?” Melvin finally asked.

“She’s a parole officer, right? I’m sure she could work as a security guard for Stark Industries. The pay would be a lot better, knowing Tony.” He looked at Melvin. “I’ll give him a call right now. Talk to Betsy, tell her what happened. You’ll be safe working for Tony, I guarantee.”
Melvin stared at them for a long minute, his gigantic size forcing him to look down. Eventually, he nodded.

“Thank you, Strong Lady,” he said, looking at Jessica. The woman scoffed, but Matt could sense she was quite pleased with herself. “Thank you, Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.”

Matt raised his eyebrows when he heard the name. Was that how people were referring to him nowadays?

Then he looked at Clark.

“Thank you, Superman.”

The silence that followed was deafening. All three of them flinched, tense; Matt could hear Clark’s Kryptonian muscles twitch, almost like fibers of steel scraping at each other. No one but Melvin was even breathing.

Melvin, however, seemed to be completely oblivious to their unease.

“I didn’t know you wore glasses,” he mentioned, as if that was the most surprising thing happening there.

They didn’t know what to say.

“It’s, umm, a secret,” Clark stammered, finally. “Please, don’t tell anyone.”

Melvin nodded in agreement — seemingly unaware of how significant the fact that he’d just saw through Clark’s disguise was —, and left, saying he was going to talk to Betsy. Matt, Jessica and a still shocked Clark followed soon after, on their way to Matt’s apartment, where they would meet Stick to know more about the Hand’s weapon. And the Black Widow, too, who already knew where he lived. That bothered Matt a little bit.

“I told you it was a shitty disguise, didn’t I?” Matt heard Jessica say as he hailed a cab.

Matt was already tired and he suspected his day was just starting.

First impressions, Pa Kent was fond to say, were important. Even if proven wrong later on, there would always be shreds of that first meeting present, little bits of memory that would color your understanding of that person for years to come. They could be good, they could be bad, but one thing was certain: they held influence, sometimes over the entire extent of a relationship.

So far, Clark’s first impression of Stick was the he was a huge douchebag.

Night was about to fall upon New York and they were all gathered at Matt’s apartment to prepare for what was coming, both the arrival of the Hand’s weapon – Black Sky – and the mission to capture Leland Owlsley. It was a meeting to decide what to do, to share what they knew and to gather their available resources to help the coming battle. A meeting between allies, if not friends.

Stick, apparently, didn’t get the memo, because pretty much everything he said was either laced with insults or an insult in itself.

“Seriously? The Hand is about to bring an apocalyptic weapon inside the city and you were all wasting your time sniffing the hair of a mob accountant?” The blind old man exclaimed. He pointed at Matt. “Kid, I already knew you had a skewed vision of duty, so I really can’t say
anything here.” He turned to Clark. “You really should find something better to do with your time, Superman.” He stopped in front of Jessica and paused. “I don’t even know who the hell you are.”

“Well, I don’t know who the fuck you are either, old man!” she retorted, turning to Matt. “Where did you find this crazy blind dude? Do you guys have conventions or something like that?”

But Stick was already looking at Natasha, ready to continue his tirade.

“And you… Good to see that SHIELD finally caught up with real world threats. I was wondering how much longer it would take for you people to realize that someone has been killing and decimating entire nations. Took you what, a few centuries, give or take?”

Natasha showed absolutely no reaction to the provocation; working with Tony for so long probably left her immune to that kind of thing.

“And how do you know so much about the Hand?” she asked, leaning back on her chair. “Who exactly are you, Stick? Because I don’t believe SHIELD has that information.”

Stick scoffed. “If you compiled everything SHIELD doesn’t know, the files would be as tall as mountains.”

Saying this, Stick walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer, opening with a flick of his thumb; the bottle cap bounced three times, against the wall, ceiling and floor, before it fell inside the trash can. Matt had mentioned Stick could do something similar to his own abilities, using chi to enhance his other senses and compensate for his lack of sight, but it was still impressive to see it happening.

Apparently, Clark was the only one who thought so, because everyone else was still waiting for an answer.

“That’s a good question, Stick,” Matt said, his voice dangerous. “Who are you? How are you involved in all this?”

“Who am I... Well, I’ll tell you who I am, kid. I’m one of the few standing between this world and total annihilati—”

“No, no more of your bullshit, Stick!” Matt threatened, getting up and walking to him. “I want the truth, not one more of your fairytales.”

They both stared at each other, two sets of blind, unmoving eyes.

“Funny you should mention fairytales, Matty, because I got a good one,” Stick finally said, breaking the stare contest and taking a long sip of his beer. “Once upon a time, dragons arrived in this world and they used their incredible power to craft an empire for them, an empire locked inside a pocket dimension, and they called that empire Seven Capital Cities of Heaven.”

Matt was seething with anger, certain that Stick was mocking him, but so far what he was saying matched with what Thor said. Without saying anything, he put a hand on Matt’s shoulder, so he wouldn’t interrupt.

“Now, this happened thousands upon thousands of years ago. Mankind still struggled with complex problems back then, like how to craft wheels or light a proper fire,” Stick continued, ignoring the fury he certainly felt emanating from Matt, “but here and there the dragons appeared from the heavens, performing miracles, teaching and protecting them from threats. As the years passed, people started coming from far and wide to visit the closed gates of the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven, pilgrimages hailing from all parts of the world.” Stick turned to look at them. “And
eventually, the dragons allowed some of them to enter.”

Natasha, like Clark, was completely enraptured. They knew that while Stick might be mocking them, his words weren’t untrue. Matt would know it as well, if he controlled his anger long enough to pay attention. Jessica just looked very, very confused.

“This was the beginning of K’un-Lun as we know today,” Stick said. “The strongest of the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven, the first line of defense, home of the leader of the dragons, Shou-Lao. And the first place where dragons and humans coexisted, peacefully. The dragons opened their home to the humans they considered worthy, they taught them old secrets of how to harness chi. They shared their knowledge and the humans of K’un-Lun learned how to heal, how to defend themselves, how to achieve inner peace. And for millennia, K’un-Lun prospered.”

He finished his beer.

“But, of course, humans are a bunch of greedy pricks. They learned how to use chi to defend themselves and their loved ones, but their power still wasn’t anywhere near close of a dragon. They drank from the pool of the dragon’s knowledge, but were never allowed to use it as their own. They learned to heal and extend their lifespans, but the immortality that all dragons had was beyond them.” Stick put the empty beer down. “Despite living in an almost literal heaven, some of them grew envious. Envy became resentment, resentment became hate. And soon, one dragon took that as an opportunity.”

Stick was talking about the start of the Civil War in K’un-Lun, the same one Thor fought in, Clark realized.

“This dragon wanted to rule the Seven Capital Cities of Heaven. He wanted Shou-Lao’s place. And to do so, he whispered in the ears of these humans. He promised them to share the true knowledge of the dragons, to give them power beyond anything they could imagine. He promised immortality.” Stick raised his hand, wiggling each one of his fingers. “And so, these humans, these five humans, betrayed K’un-Lun and started a Civil War.”

He glanced at Matt.

“Dragons fought against dragons, humans fought against humans and K’un-Lun burned. Eventually, the war spiraled into our world and we had dragons, men and even gods across the globe. Fire rained down from the skies, oceans froze, the winds felled mountains, yadda yadda yadda...” Stick told them, dramatically. “And in the end, K’un-Lun defeated the betrayers, casting them out forever.”

Stick shook his head.

“Typical. Our world is like a dumpster to higher beings. Anyway, the dragons that betrayed K’un-Lun were slain and then sealed into special tombs, so they could not come back to life ever again. Their armies succumbed to the war. But the men, the five men and women who kickstarted all that shit, were banished by the Elders of K’un-Lun.” He shrugged. “What else they could do, except live in a place they didn’t know, far from their home, until they finally died? The perfect punishment, right?” Stick stared at Matt. “Half-measures, Matty, half-measures... They are a bitch.”

He looked at all of them.

“Turns out these five sons of bitches could do a lot. Instead of growing old and dying like they were supposed to, they clung to life like cancerous tumors, using every bit of forbidden knowledge
they had. Chi, dark magic, alchemy… And like a cancer, they spread throughout our world, infecting everything. If you knew all the shit they did during the centuries… Wars, genocides, entire empires burned to ashes. They were the ones who created, directly or indirectly, the biggest criminal organizations in history. The Yakuza, the Triads, the Bratva, the Italian Families, the Mungiki… Hell, there are rumors that even HYDRA began as one of their little projects, but that one got out of control pretty fast, with that skull faced maniac.”

Jesus… Clark could barely believe those people were capable of all that.

“Everywhere they went, people died. Some, the lucky ones, stayed dead. They grew famous and every sick degenerate flocked under their banners; some of them even lived and were rewarded with power and longevity. It was during their campaign in Feudal Japan that they became known as ‘Yami no Te’, the Hand. And it was during that campaign that someone started to fight back.”

Natasha leaned forward a bit, trying to understand as much as he could about his enemy.

“She says it was just a kid. Hand comes into his village, kills everyone, almost. Kid pulls the knife from the breast of his dead mother and goes to work. He cuts down some of the Hand’s finest warriors. They’re lying dead, kid’s standing. So they give him a name: The Chaste.” Stick paused. “Kid grows up, rounds up every warrior he can. Men, women, young, old, doesn’t matter. As long as they kick ass. And they do. Without mercy.”

Stick turned to Matt.

“This is who I am, Matty. A warrior of The Chaste. The only protection this world has against the Hand. And this is what I believe you could be, if you truly wanted to make a difference.”

There was a long, a very long silence. Then Matt chuckled, slowly. There wasn’t any mirth in his laugh, however; it was like hearing poison dripping from a wound.

He looked at Stick.

“I can’t believe this…” Matt finally said. “After all this time you came back, just to spin some nonsense, some crazy story. Is that what you think you are in this fantasy, Stick? A holy warrior? This why you trained me in orphanage? To become a soldier in some madman army? The Chaste?”

He opened his arms. “Dragons, immortal bad guys, an apocalyptic weapon… What else do you have, Stick? Devils crawling out of Hell?”

Clark could feel the frustration coming from Matt, the pain. He didn’t know what exactly was the relationship he had with Stick, what exactly happened with them, but it was pretty easy to see that Matt felt betrayed.

“Kid, you have an alien in your living room,” Stick started, exasperated. He pointed at Natasha. “A master assassin, trained in a school of master assassins, who works alongside the literal Norse God of Thunder, a defrosted super-soldier, a guy who turns into a green monster and another one who builds technological suits that simply ignore the laws of physics. But ‘dragons’ is where you draw the line?”

“Stick, I—”

“Matt, he’s not lying.” Clark said, before things could turn ugly. Matt turned to gaze at him, shock etched on his face. “We, Natasha and I, been to one of the dragon tombs. We spoke to Thor, he was there during the Civil War. It’s all true.”

Matt, apparently, didn’t know what to say.
“What do they want, Stick?” Natasha finally asked, her expression serious. “What’s their goal?”

“What they always wanted: immortality. They want to live forever, to be able to die and come back as easily as we wake up from a nap. And they want power to take their home back.”

“And how do they plan to get it?” Natasha insisted. “The dragons were defeated, they can’t come back to life. K’un-Lun banished them for good.”

“Yes,” Stick agreed, “and the clock is ticking. The founders of the Hand were supposed to be long dead, if you remember. Chi can only extend the life for so long. They’re doing everything they can to prolong their lives, to stay above the ground, but they’re reaching their limit. They need to find a way to bring their old masters back. And I believe they found one.”


“Hmm,” Stick nodded. “Lacking their old masters, the Hand turned to something else, something that can give them what they need: power, eternal life and the ability to revive the dragons, so they can take K’un-Lun and then the rest of the Heavenly Cities.”

“What exactly is Black Sky?” Matt asked, still shocked, but apparently recovered enough to talk.

Stick thought for a moment.

“Think of it as a magical bomb that, if set off, can crack this planet like an egg.” He tilted his head slightly. “Only it’s far worse than that. Something better off far away from the likes of the Hand.” Clark could agree with that.

“And it’s arriving at the docks, tonight?” Natasha asked. Stick nodded again. “Why are they bringing it to New York? What do they plan to do with it?”

Stick shrugged. “If we do things right, hopefully, we don’t get to find out.”

“Why would they take a chance like that?” Clark asked. “There has to be a better way to transport something that important. Why, if they know magic, there are even portals.”

“A magical portal in the middle of New York?” Stick chuckled. “That would be like lighting fireworks right by the Sorcerer Supreme’s window.” Matt had a blank face, but he chose not to ask anything. “No, they want discretion. They own the cops in this city, better to rely on that.”

“What’s the plan, then?” Matt asked. “We go there, beat them up, and steal the weapon?”

“Fine by me,” Stick agreed.

“If we’re doing that,” Natasha started, “then we need to do the same with Leland.” Everybody turned to her, confused. “If we steal Black Sky from them, it’s very likely they’ll get spooked. They’ll either move Leland somewhere else or simply kill him and deal with whatever problems might happen later.” She looked at them. “If we want to deal a really powerful blow against their entire organization, we need to hit both places at once.” Natasha paused. “I’ll get Leland, you deal with Black Sky.”

“By yourself?” Clark asked, surprised.

“Don’t worry, I have backup.” Natasha gave him a tiny smile. “But we’ll have to coordinate our attacks. If either part moves too soon, or too late, then someone will fail. Either we lose Black Sky
or we lose Leland.”

Saying this, Natasha got up and walked to the door.

“Be ready to move in one hour. I’ll be in contact.” And then she left.

There was a brief silence.

“I did not sign up for this shit,” Jessica muttered, as she got up from the couch. She looked dazed. “I really didn’t sign up for this shit.”

On some level, all of them except Stick could understand her frustration.

“So how do we get to the docks?” Jessica asked, looking at the three of them. “Do you have like a ‘Blindmobile’ or should I get a cab?”

Natasha hummed to herself as she assembled her custom-made sniper rifle. Stark might not mass produce weapons for the military anymore, but the talent to create deadly tools was still all there, even when they weren’t suit-shaped; the SW-Avenger – that stood for Stark Widow-Class Avenger or, as she liked to call it, the Super-Widow – was proof of that. Perfect for when you needed to shoot someone wearing a bulletproof vest from a few miles away, and they happened to be inside an armored vehicle parked behind a reinforced steel wall.

Or if you wanted to tickle a Kryptonian, perhaps. Natasha would have to test that sometime.

With practiced ease, Natasha put the pieces together, her hands working fast. In no time, the Super-Widow was assembled over a bipod and aimed at the building on the other side of the street; happy with her work, Natasha laid down on her stomach and glanced through the scope, enjoying the cool breeze blowing against her hair all the way up on the rooftop.

Night had already fallen since she’d left Matt Murdock’s apartment about 45 minutes ago. Ideally, they should already be at the docks, almost ready to move, just as she was about to. Still humming, Natasha put on her goggles when the tiny beep announced her spider-drones had finished mapping the place.

Another Stark invention or, more accurately, another Stark improvement on SHIELD’s technology. Spider-drones were tiny little drones disguised as arachnids that could infiltrate most places, either crawling or flying, to give agents a pretty good idea of what to expect inside. They moved on their own, using their sensors to translate sound and electromagnetic waves – and God only knew what else – to map a virtual blueprint of whatever place they deployed into.

And just like that, Natasha could use her goggles to see through walls, not unlike Clark could. Virtual representations of what was inside, sure, but it was more than enough.

If she didn’t already know, it would be hard indeed to see a safehouse there. The building had nothing that stood out. It was a bit old, rundown, and dirty, located over a tiny little bar. Luckily for her, however, Natasha did know that place was a mob safehouse, so her eyes picked up the details well enough.

The place looked rundown, but that was just for show. The windows were dirty, but bulletproof, the walls were reinforced and the entrances could be easily guarded. Not to mention the amount of people inside. With her goggles, Natasha could see them, glowing red in the blueish virtual blueprint the spider-drones mapped. Dozens of armed men guarding all five floors, focusing mostly at the fourth, around a room with no windows.
And inside that room, pacing back and forth, was her quarry: Leland Owlsley. Grinning a bit, Natasha marked him on her HUD, to avoid any accidents when the shooting started.

Despite the importance of the mission, Natasha was completely cool. *This* she knew. It was natural to her, something she’d been doing since she could remember. And sometimes she missed it. Not the gunfire and the killings, but the simplicity of the thing. There was a target, either needing to be rescued or executed, and it was her job to do it. No fuss, no muss, just a simple job.

Nowadays her life just kept getting weirder and weirder with gods, aliens, sorcerers and now dragons. Far more important things to deal with, sure, and she wouldn’t trust them to no one else, but after a while it did get a bit tiring.

Well, she would enjoy it while it lasted.

Sighing, Natasha grabbed another gun strapped to her back. She aimed and then pulled the trigger; silently, the Sticky Bomb Gun fired four times, the gelatinous substance carrying the explosives flying across the street to finally glue themselves to the wall of the third floor of the safehouse building. Sadly, the buildings around the safehouse were smaller, which meant Natasha would have to enter one floor below it and work her way up to where Leland was.

Gently, she put the detonator on the floor and laid back down, looking through the scope of the Super-Widow. She grabbed her phone and made the call.

“Clark? I’m in position.”

“*Hey, Natasha, we’re here too,*” Clark answered.

“Ready to begin?”

There was a moment.

“We’re ready.”

“Good luck, then,” Natasha wished.

“You too. And be careful.”

Natasha hung up and waited five heartbeats, breathing deeply, focusing. Then she took aim.

By all accounts, the Super-Widow was pointed at the wall of the safehouse building, but Natasha could see exactly what she was aiming at because of the virtual map displayed on her goggles: the three men having a smoke in front of Leland’s room.

For a split second, she lamented the fact she couldn’t use non-lethal rounds, simply because they couldn’t do what she needed done; then she was surprised that the thought even occurred her at all. Clark was really rubbing off on her, it seemed.

She took one last deep breath and stopped breathing altogether. Then she fired.

The noise that the Super-Widow made never failed to impress her. It was like firing an anti-aircraft cannon and her whole body trembled from the recoil. All that, however, paled in comparison to what the bullet did in its path.

The bullet pierced the outer wall as if it weren’t there. Then it continued its way, going through several other walls and part of a ceiling, until it finally hit the three men lined in front of Leland’s
And it went through them as well, leaving behind the scattered pieces of the mobsters.

Not missing a beat, Natasha aimed again and fired, this time hitting one man on the third floor, clearing the path she would take. The men, seeing their companion blow up, hid behind the walls of the corridor, but that provided no protection whatsoever as Natasha fired two more times.

Everyone was seeking cover, desperately, incapable of knowing who was shooting at them and from where; Natasha took that chance and activated the detonator.

The bombs she planted on the wall of the third floor went off, opening a passage for her. Moving fast, she put the Super-Widow on her back and fired her grappling hook, jumping as soon as it was stuck. She swung over the street and finally got inside the safehouse building, drawing two pistols immediately.

Time to make her way up.

Leland Owlsley had no idea what was going on, but he could imagine it wasn’t good.

There was yelling, someone was firing what seemed to be a massive cannon, and he was pretty sure that the pool of goo flowing under the door of his room used to be his guards at one point; he threw up when he finally arrived to that conclusion.

Who would be crazy enough to attack him? The cops? The Russians? Had Fisk decided he was too much of a liability and wanted to remove his head with a car door? Leland had absolutely no idea and for someone used to knowing more than everyone else around him, that wasn’t a good feeling.

The gunshots and the screaming continued. Leland could hear footsteps, orders being yelled, explosions… Until, inevitably, the door leading to his room was shot down.

“Please don’t shoot, I surrender!” Leland screamed immediately, hands in the air.

He couldn’t remember ever being this afraid, so much that he simply couldn’t stop shaking. Was this the end? Killed by some unknown person, for an unknown reason?

But the bullet that would end it all never came. Instead, Leland was slapped across the face.

“A woman’s voice.

Surprise triumphed over his fear for a moment and Leland looked up; and what he saw made him twice as afraid as he was before.

Black Widow was standing in front of him, looking down with unmerciful eyes, a huge weapon strapped to her back and a pistol in her hand. His thoughts were all over the place now. Why was she there? Who wanted him? SHIELD? The Avengers? What the fuck did he do to draw their attention?!

This was bad, this was really bad, Leland thought. Cops, judges, hell, even the FBI he could deal with. A mix of money, blackmail and intimidation seemed to work just fine. But how was he supposed to deal with the Avengers? Worst yet, how was he supposed to deal with the most bloodthirst of the Avengers?
Black Widow had a fearsome reputation, both before she joined SHIELD and the Avengers, and after. The Russians, especially, were scared shitless of her and for very good reason. People just didn’t survive crossing paths with her. The ones who did, well, it was because she wanted them to.

Leland couldn’t help but wonder which group he was about to be a part of.

“Get up,” Black Widow ordered, but Leland was still paralyzed by fear.

Weirdly enough, his legs seemed to respond just fine when Black Widow grabbed him and pulled him up; and stopped to work at the next moment, when she pushed him towards the wall by the door, unintentionally – or was it? – smacking him face first.

Ignoring him, she peeked out of the room, stepping back quickly when several gunshots echoed in the corridor.

“Six,” he heard Black Widow mutter to herself. And faster than Leland could blink, she stepped forward and responded fire. “Two,” she added, half a second later, safely inside the room again.

Leland was about to throw up again when Black Widow threw a grenade out of the room; there were screams, an explosion and then a sudden silence. He was grabbed and pushed again, this time to the corridor.

There was blood on the floor, smoke everywhere, body parts stuck to the ceiling… Leland could barely breathe, he felt like a spectator in his own body, as if everything happening was happening to somebody else.

“No, we’re not going down, we’re going up,” Black Widow said to a hardly coherent Leland, pulling him away from the set of stairs going down.

Up? Why, how, what… Before any of his internal questioning could be answered, however, Black Widow stopped him with a hand against his chest.

“Just a second,” she said, grabbing that huge and impractical gun strapped to her back. Leland watched, dizzy, as she aimed — to the ceiling of all places — and pulled the trigger.

He was sure he passed out for a few seconds, it was the only explanation, because when Black Widow fired her stupidly big gun, Leland barely reacted. Not because he didn’t want to – in fact, his first instinct would be to run away – but because he completely froze. His heart almost gave out, his stomach twisted on itself, and his blood turned to ice.

Despite all that, Leland stayed just where he was, staring at Black Widow with far away eyes, almost as if he wasn’t even there.

Which was a good thing, because Leland had the feeling that if he was indeed focused on what was happening, he probably wouldn’t be able to function. Not after that loud gunshot, not after the brief — but powerful — scream, not after the weird reddish goo that splattered down from the crater created by the bullet.

Instead, Leland simply followed Black Widow like a lap dog, very likely heading to his own grave.

She led him upstairs, firing her pistols constantly, tossing him left and right to shield him from the bullets fired by his own guards. If he was thinking clearly – and was much, much braver than he was –, Leland would’ve questioned Black Widow’s escape route. It simply made no sense to go up, instead of down. Simply put, there was nowhere to go once they reached the roof.
But Leland wasn’t that brave, nor he was thinking clearly, so he just followed like a robot, passing through the remains of his guards and the warzone that his safehouse became. Until he finally felt the cold wind of the night.

He wobbled in place for a moment, dumbly staring at New York’s horizon, his mind barely functioning at all.

Leland had no warning whatsoever when Black Widow tossed him down and strapped a weird vest to his chest, quickly pulling a little cord.

“Don’t clench,” he heard her saying, an imperceptible smile on her lips.

“What?” Leland asked, stupidly.

Instead of an answer to his question, what Leland got was a freaking balloon appearing suddenly from his new vest, inflating fast and floating, blinking like Christmas’ lights in the night sky. Panic filled Leland when he left the ground, pulled by the balloon, his arms and legs swinging madly.

This was how he would die, Leland realized, panicking. This would be his end, he decided, when the vast city appeared under him and he still wouldn’t stop going up.

Leland was yelling incoherently, so damn frightened that he didn’t even notice the deafening sound of the helicopter flying a few meters away. Not until the balloon dragging him up was suddenly yanked and hooked, pretty much tossing him inside the helicopter.

Face first, directly against the floor.

“Ouch! That had to hurt,” a man said, helping him up.

And immediately cuffing him to a nearby seat.

“W-What?” Leland whined, more tired than he ever remembered being, finally realizing he was wearing handcuffs.

“Don’t look at me, buddy, I don’t know what’s going on either,” the man answered, shrugging.

For the first time, Leland tried to focus on him, forcing his tired eyes to work. He felt like he should know that man.

Black Widow, arriving a second later aboard the helicopter – also tied to a floating balloon, he noticed – was the one who gave him the answer.

“Nice night for a walk, right, Clint?” Black Widow bantered, as if she hadn’t just killed dozens of people a few minutes ago.

Clint… Clint Barton. Hawkeye. Jesus Christ, what was going on?!

“It really is, Nat, it really is. Especially if you’re planning a Fulton Extraction on said walk. The wind is calm tonight, less chance of either of you being dragged to another city.” Hawkeye remarked, almost distractedly, helping her in and closing the door. “So, what’s the occasion? And who’s our guest?”

Black Widow stared at him; Leland froze in fear.

“Just a new friend,” she finally said, getting closer. “That’s right, isn’t it, Mr. Owlsley? Are we going to be friends?”
Leland couldn’t nod in agreement any quicker.

She smiled, sitting by his side.

“That’s good, Mr. Owlsley. We can never have too many friends.” Black Widow glanced at Hawkeye, back on the pilot seat. “Let’s go home, shall we?”

Hawkeye nodded, starting to guide the helicopter over the city. Then he turned to look at her.

“By the way, Nat,” he started, “sending a text saying ‘need backup’, followed by an address and two words of instruction, is not the proper way to ask for backup.”

“And yet, here you are,” Black Widow retorted. She glanced at Leland. “And we’re both very grateful for the help. Aren’t we, Mr. Owlsley?”

“Y-Yes!”

“Grateful” wasn’t exactly the word Leland would use to describe any of this, but he was just an accountant flying hundreds of meters above New York with two master assassins.

They say rats were the first ones to abandon a sinking ship; despite his fear and the life trauma Leland would probably acquire after this, he couldn’t help but to look at this helicopter and see a lifeboat.

And he would do what he could to not be forcibly removed from it.

“Clark? I’m in position,” Natasha said immediately after Kelex transferred the call.

He looked around for a moment, his eyes scanning the lines of shipping containers to confirm that no one was really around to hear his answer.

“Hey, Natasha, we’re here too.”

“Ready to begin?”

He glanced at Jessica, Matt and Stick, raising his eyebrows; they all nodded.

“We’re ready.”

“Good luck, then.”

“You too. And be careful.”

As soon as he hung up, they peeked from behind their cover and moved, getting closer, moving fast and quietly.

Right up until they had a direct line of sight to their goal.

“What the fuck are those?!” Jessica whispered, eyes wide.

Surprisingly enough, Jessica’s words were the first thing Clark thought when he’d seen that too, scanning the area before.

Getting into the docks had been easy enough. The guards probably had been ordered to take the night off and any member of the police force was giving the place a wide berth; Clark could hear
police cars only several blocks away. Instead, the docks were crawling with mobsters, highly armed and vigilant.

But, for very obvious reasons, those guys were barely a nuisance to them.

It was simple for them to walk between the shipping containers, knocking out any mobster in their way without raising the alarm. Stick, Matt and Clark knew exactly where they were positioned, if they were talking on their radios or not, in which direction they were looking... Add to that their skill – and strength – and the mobsters never had a chance to begin with. It seemed the whole thing would be nice and easy, after all.

Until they finally reached the place where the Hand was unloading their cargo.

The place was open, right by the sea, full of armed guards and well-lighted. There were cars parked around and a big truck, where a shipping container was being loaded upon. But it wasn’t the armed guards or the lights that gave them pause.

It was the menacing metal dragons standing guard.

Clark had never seen anything quite like that. The dragons were big, as big as cars, with long tails, four deadly-looking clawed paws and fiery red eyes. They were built using some kind of golden metal and every piece of them seemed to be a spinning gear, which made every single part of the dragons move separately when they walked around, swinging their metallic tails. There was smoke blowing out from their backs, right between the folded metallic wings, and the sound they made reminded Clark of a working factory.

All very steampunk looking, in his opinion. And clearly, dangerous. Hidden behind a container, they all turned to Stick.

“Your buddy Stark has his Iron Legion, doesn’t he?” Stick mentioned, head tilted as he no doubt focused on the metal dragons. “Well, meet K’un-Lun’s Dragon Legion, or at least what the Hand managed to steal before being banished. Very dangerous, very tough to destroy. Be careful with the claws and don’t stay for too long in front of it, they spit fire.”

“How do we put them down?” Matt asked, clearly ignoring his unease about the whole thing and going straight to the point.

Silently, Stick picked something from his waist: a pair of metallic billy clubs. He tossed them to Matt.

“They’re pretty invulnerable to external attacks, but there’s a master gear right between the wings. Break it or at least make it stop spinning and they fall down.” He tilted his head in Clark and Jessica’s Thanagarian mace direction. “You two can probably just hit them.”

Nodding, Clark turned to look at the mobsters, focusing on the one who seemed to be in charge, a Japanese man wearing an expensive suit. He was overseeing the shipping containers being loaded on the truck, observing everything with an icy expression.

“Now, that’s the asshole I’ve been looking for,” Stick muttered. “Nobu. One of the Hand’s most high-ranked lieutenants. Vicious son of a bitch.”

“And what about Black Sky?” Matt asked. “Inside the shipping container?”

Clark focused on the container, trying to see what was inside, but just like it happened in the dragon tomb under Pyramiden, he couldn’t see through it.
“Maybe,” Stick answered, oblivious to Clark’s frustration. “It’s sealed with chi, that much I can tell.”

That explained it, he thought.

“So how do we do this?” Clark asked. “I could probably blitz most of them before they even know what’s happening.”

“True,” Stick said. “You could also trigger some kind of magic fuckery they have around and accidentally activate Black Sky. That would be fun to watch, at least during the two seconds we’ll live before that thing blows up.”

“Just tell us the plan, then,” Matt said, exasperated.

Stick opened his mouth to answer, but instead of a plan, he cursed.

“Oh, shit. That thing is back already?”

Confused, they all looked up. The crane had already loaded the shipping container on the truck and it was bringing something else down, right by Nobu’s side; Clark was a little bit stunned when he realized what it was.

“A coffin?” he muttered.

It really looked like one, except it was bigger than any other coffin he had ever seen; big enough to fit the Hulk, as grim as that thought was. And for some reason, it had a really thick chain all around it, almost as if to prevent something from getting out.

He had a bad feeling about that.

Stick grabbed his arm, more agitated than ever.

“Don’t let that thing get out!” he said, confirming Clark’s fears. “Forget everything I said and just attack!”

Still surprised by the sudden change in attitude, Clark looked at the coffin; and dashed in its direction.

Forgetting everything about remaining undetected, Clark flew fast, a few inches above the ground, making a straight line to the coffin. The mobsters in front of him didn’t even had the chance to realize what was happening before Clark sent them flying and the metal dragon unlucky enough to be in his way was ripped apart, leaving behind only broken gears and fire.

He arrived in front of Nobu right at the moment the coffin touched the ground, and grabbed the Hand’s lieutenant before he could do anything. By that point, everyone realized they were being attacked and all guns were pointed at him, but Clark barely noticed that.

What he did notice was the deep grunt coming from inside the coffin.

And the huge grey hand that broke its lid as if it were nothing and closed around his throat.

Reacting on instinct, Clark tossed Nobu to the side before the hand clashed against him, preventing the Hand’s lieutenant from being crushed; that, however, cost him the split second he had to defend himself.

The gigantic hand pressed Clark’s neck, with incredible strength, and Clark noticed a pair of eyes
full of hate, gazing at him from the inside. There was a rotten smell coming from it, putrid, like a
carcass being left to rot inside a sewer.

Then the thing roared, breaking the entire coffin, alongside the chain, into pieces.

That was the last thing Clark saw before being launched away and clashing against the enormous
metal crane, his Kryptonian body making short work of the steel.

The whole thing bent in a weird angle and began to fall over the dock when Clark hit the sea.

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**Hey guys, long time no see ^^**

Sorry for taking so long to update and for being away for so long, unbale to answer
messages/reviews and such. Some of you even messaged me a while back, asking when I
would update the story, and I told you it wouldn’t take long because I had a good portion of
the chapter already written.

That wasn’t lie, it shouldn’t have taken that long, but unfortunately I actually had a reason
for being away for so long other than just my inability to manage my own free time. I injured
my cervical spine a few months back, crushed some of those little cartilage discs between the
vertebrae that absorb impact on the spine.

As a result, some vertebrae moved a bit and started to pinch nerves. And I’m not gonna lie, it
hurts like a bitch. I had to do several weeks of physiotherapy, sessions of acupuncture, take
medicine... And to restrict my “sitting down” time, which was one of the main reasons this
chapter took so long to come out.

Anyway, I’m doing a lot better now. Not healed, but with a lot less pain and able to write
more. The next chapter shouldn’t take long, most of it is already written, and then I’ll work
on Avenger Goddess update.

Hope you at least like the chapter, because it wasn’t easy to write most of while taking meds
that make me sleepy and feeling my back killing me ^^

And ladies and gentleman, just an advice, watch you posture when sitting down and sleeping.
It might seem like a stupid thing to care about, but I’m living proof that it’s not and you’ll
only know you have a problem when everything is already screwed up.

Hope you’re all doing great!
Chapter 36 – Black Sky

“Holy fucking shit!” Jessica exclaimed when Clark was tossed like a ragdoll and the immense crane began to fall down.

Matt could agree with that assessment.

The noise, by itself, was gut-wrenching. The steel that supported the crane folded in on itself and practically screamed when everything started to collapse. The Hand’s men were yelling in panic, trying to run, and whatever that thing that came out of the coffin was, it wouldn’t stop roaring.

Then, it all came down.

The earth shook, shipping containers were folded like soda cans, the ground broke. Several cars parked there were completely destroyed and at least five men were crushed to death, immediately. The dragons were also caught under the steel, some getting stuck, others blowing up like overturned vehicles, adding fire to an already horrible scene.

And the monster who caused all that was buried under tons of metal, disappearing.

The three of them – safe from the crane’s destruction path – watched from behind their cover, shocked at what just happened. Shocked at how fast all that happened. One second Superman advanced towards a carefully managed mob operation and the other steel was raining from the sky, crushing everything on its path.

Except for them, a few mobsters, metal dragons and vehicles, Nobu himself… And the shipping container probably keeping Black Sky, loaded on the back of a truck.

“Attack now! Go after Nobu!” Before Matt could even think about advancing, however, Stick grabbed his arm. “Don’t approach that thing. It took half an army of The Chaste best warriors and an enchanted sword to kill it last time, and if it could toss Superman like that now, it means that its last incarnation wasn’t half as strong as this one. Leave it to the alien.”

Matt didn’t even pretend to understand what Stick said, but the main idea was clear enough: don’t antagonize the monster who could fight Superman.

That was pretty good advice, actually, even if a bit unnecessary, especially given that the monster was stuck under tons of steel.

Leaving the cover of the shipping container in front of them, Matt ran towards the chaos, jumping over the pieces of the fallen crane and the flames. One of the lucky mobsters that escaped death was trying to get up and without even turning in his direction, Matt tossed one of his billy clubs against him. The metal baton hit the mobster in the face, putting him down again, and bounced back to Matt’s hand.

By his side, Jessica was also making her way through the fiery battlefield, yelling when she hit a metal dragon with her mace; annoying she might be, but that woman was strong, Matt realized, when her blunt weapon ripped off the dragon’s head in a single blow.
Stick, like him and differently from Jessica, was far more graceful and agile, taking the distraction to knock out the few mobsters still standing with the blunt part of his katana; at least he was keeping his promise not to kill anyone, even if the men he hit had several broken bones now.

Matt rolled on the ground to avoid a few gunshots in his direction, kicking the legs of the nearby mobster as he did it; he finished with a single blow of his billy club, putting the man to sleep and already getting up to try and catch up to Nobu.

At the same time his legs tensed to propel him forward, however, Matt heard a weird cacophony of metal, gears and pistons; a second later, he felt the temperature rise quickly when a stream of fire was spat in his direction.

Reacting fast, he jumped out of the way, behind a bent mass of steel nearby. The hot air hit his face almost like a punch and the metal cover between him and a fiery, terrible death, was beginning to melt fast. Crawling, Matt tried to distance himself from the heat, making sure he was still under cover. Little sparks began to pierce the molten metal and he doubled his efforts, realizing his time was running out.

Matt jumped out of the way a second before the steel cover was blown up, hiding behind a destroyed vehicle when the fire made its way to where he’d been a moment ago.

Taking his opportunity, Matt ran, not away from the metal dragon, but towards it. He used the fact that the automaton hadn’t seen him yet and made beeline for it, while the dragon burned down the spot it thought he was.

And when he was close, Matt jumped on its back.

The metal dragon stopped the stream of fire immediately, trampling down all over with its big sharp claws, the long tail whipping everything around, as it tried to shake Matt from its back. The big wings opened, composed by tiny individual parts and gears that seemed to move by itself, and what looked like small aircraft thrusters were fired up.

The thing was about to take off and take him with it.

Holding as best as he could on the many moving parts, Matt tossed himself forward, looking for the weak point Stick warned him about; and when the dragon was already a few feet away from the ground, he tossed himself forward and impaled the gear with his billy club, jamming the whole mechanism.

The dragon machine fell like a rock, not even its legs able to support it anymore, as if Matt had just hit its off switch. Which, in a way, he did.

Rolling from the dragon’s back, falling on his feet, Matt focused back on the battlefield. The Hand’s men were panicked, shooting everywhere. Stick was picking them one by one, moving in and out of cover with such speed that no one could hit him, his sword moving like a silver blur, breaking bones and weapons with extreme precision and technique.

Jessica was the opposite.

Matt actually stopped what he was doing for a second when he saw Jessica using an entire shipping container as both a shield and a huge thing to bash people with. The mobsters were actually running away from her, shooting desperately and uselessly at the shipping container while she dragged and swung it to all sides, tossing people away as if they were toys; it was kinda of impressive, Matt admitted, when he noticed not one of them had been crushed to death. Most of
their bones were broken, certainly, but that was some incredible control on her part.

Shaking his head, Matt willed himself back into focus and looked for Nobu; his breath hitched when he realized that the Yakuza boss was entering the truck loaded with Black Sky, about to run away.

He couldn’t allow that to happen.

As he stepped towards the truck, however, the whole place started to shake. And like a nightmare taking form, the huge monstrosity that had tossed Clark away like a fly emerged from under the debris, crawling its way out of the pile of steel beams like it was rising from a grave.

It screamed, so loud that made Matt dizzy, his bones shuddering. And the smell that assaulted his nose was the most disgusting thing he ever encountered in his life, as if a thousand bodies decomposed at the same time inside a swamp. It hit him almost like a physical barrier and he stepped back without even noticing, arms crossed in front of his face.

What the hell was that thing? Could that actually be Black Sky? It certainly qualified as a weapon, if it could bat away Superman like that.

Matt could hear the muscles of the monster tensing. The nails scraped the metal as the thing pulled itself from under it, groaning as it stood. It towered over him, much taller, much broader; he raised his billy clubs, ready to fight for his life.

Before any of them could do anything, however, there was a sonic boom and Superman clashed against the monster, both of them going through a line of shipping containers, leaving a path of utter destruction behind.

He sighed with barely concealed relief, listening his heart beating fast; then he remembered his goal. Nobu was already driving the truck away. Focusing for a moment, Matt found one of the few cars that hadn’t been crushed by the crane.

It would have to do.

Running in the opposite direction of Nobu’s, Matt jumped over the car and got in, his hand already moving to the keys in the ignition. He accelerated just as the car started, turning left and right to avoid the metal beams of the fallen crane, ignoring the bullets fired against him.

Suddenly, he stopped, but not before hitting away one of the mobsters Jessica was about to attack.

“Get in!” he yelled, opening the door to a very confused Jessica. Stick, unfortunately, was at the other side of the battlefield, still fighting, and Matt couldn’t waste the time to get there.

As soon as Jessica entered, Matt floored the gas pedal and went after Nobu and the shipping container.

He hoped Clark could deal with that monster.

Clark broke the sound barrier, his arms locked in a steel grasp around the creature’s chest, and crashed against the line of shipping containers. The metal folded like paper when the creature’s back was slammed against it and everything inside was obliterated as they went through it, hitting one after the other in quick succession.

Until finally, Clark ended with a punch, creating a huge crater in the ground when the monster
collided.

Flying up, the cloud of dust opening a path for him, Clark looked down and studied his adversary for the first time; an adversary that was, shockingly, strong enough to face him, not something easily found on Earth. More importantly, an adversary possessing all that power that was, by all accounts, serving the Hand.

Could that be the Black Sky Stick mentioned? Some kind of biological weapon?

His opponent resembled a man, arguably taller and broader than usual, but a man nonetheless; not as big as the Hulk, but almost there, Clark estimated. And the first thing anyone with working eyes would notice about him was the color of his hair and skin. They were grey, pale, not unlike a corpse in an advanced stage of decomposition.

Which brought forth the other main thing anyone would notice: the smell.

It was, simply put, rotten. Dead flesh, smelling so bad that it burned Clark’s nose, even at a distance. He couldn’t understand how anything moving could have such a smell, but his adversary did. The man – or whatever that was – was wearing what seemed to be the remains of a black suit, only it looked so old and tattered that it might as well have been buried all this time.

Despite the rotten smell that might’ve belonged to a corpse, the creature was strong. Tall, muscled and absolutely furious. Once again, Clark couldn’t help but to draw comparisons to the Hulk; a grey, foul-smelling and slightly smaller Hulk.

But this one, apparently, didn’t have Bruce as conscience.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Clark spoke, loud enough for even a human hear him from that distance. “Stand down!”

The creature’s response was a loud roar; and a shipping container being launched against him, so fast that it blurred.

Clark blasted the shipping container with his heat vision, cutting it in half, staying in place as the two halves passed by his sides. Almost immediately, however, he was forced to fly up when the grey man launched another container, then another and another, tossing up everything he could get his hands on. Shipping containers, pieces of the broken ground, lamp posts…

That portion of the sky was entirely taken by flying debris and Clark zigzagged between them, spinning as he dropped fast, completely ignoring any and all objects when he accelerated; the sonic boom blasted everything around him away and his Kryptonian body cut a path, piercing the debris cloud with ease.

And then he crashed against the grey man.

The hit was incredibly powerful, generating a shockwave that obliterated the remaining shipping containers and cracked the ground, the thunderous noise echoing far and wide.

It felt like Clark had collided against a wall made of Uru.

The grey man’s legs sunk into the ground and he was pushed a few meters, but with sheer strength he held the attack, his powerful muscles a match for Clark’s. And with Clark now within reach, he counter-attacked.

It was a feral, wrathful and utterly powerful attack. The grey man simply unleashed a rain of
punches, screaming and roaring as he hit with everything he had, no semblance of technique or strategy, just raw fury; not pretty, perhaps, but deadly.

Clark defended himself as best as he could, dodging and punching back, his feet floating a few inches away from the ground. The pale gorilla-like arms never stopped attacking and the grey man’s punches clashed against Clark’s arms like blows from Mjölnir itself. Clark’s fists seemed to cause little damage, if any, as he was unable to really unleash any power while trying to protect himself.

With his guard up, once again, Clark imagined what exactly he was fighting. How something that powerful could exist without anyone’s knowledge? Why was it serving the Hand? Was it even a person or some kind of biological weapon, some kind of magical weapon?

He had no idea, but he knew he had to do something fast. And against a powerful, but feral, adversary, Torquasm-Rao would serve him well.

Twisting his body, Clark kicked the grey man’s chest with both legs, tossing him back at the same time he flew in the opposite direction, getting some distance between them. His feet slid on the ground before he stopped, his arms and legs adopting the practiced martial stance; he breathed deeply, preparing.

The grey man didn’t even slow down. Screaming, he lunged towards Clark, his big feet breaking the ground as he cut the distance between them, more leaping than running, faster than anything that size had any right to be. There was no hesitation, no caution, not one bit of fear, just anger and bloodlust.

Nothing could make a practitioner of Torquasm-Rao happier.

Holding his ground, Clark waited until the grey man arrived, jumping against him like a furious, super-powered rhino; then he moved. It was fast, precise and unbelievably brutal. He danced in front of the grey man, dodging and hitting, quick and accurate; stomach, throat, liver. Stepping to the side, Clark glided around, hitting the grey man’s kidneys and then his face when he turned, screaming, his long arms swinging madly.

Clark allowed one of the arms – the left one – to make contact, hardening his body to block the blow and hold it; and then, applying a good deal of his Kryptonian strength, Clark hit the grey man’s extended elbow with his open palm.

CRACK!

The thunderous sound of the bone breaking echoed throughout the night. The blow was firm and merciless, and the extended grey man’s arm simply couldn’t withstand the Kryptonian strength, not when the blow hit the exact weak spot of the elbow. The limb bent in the wrong direction, a sharp piece of bone piercing the grey skin like a knife, and Clark instinctively lowered his guard, knowing that there was no reason to further injure a beaten adversary.

That was a big mistake.

A wound like that would give anyone pause. The sharp pain, the sudden loss of movement, and in this case the bone sticking out of the arm, should be enough to make even the most hardened warrior fall back; most wouldn’t be able to continue to fight at all. The grey man, however, didn’t flinch. He didn’t even blink, scream or even unconsciously pulled back.

There was simply no reaction.
Instead, he took the opening and lunged like a feral animal. And before Clark could do anything, the grey man bit his left hand.

The shock was what kept Clark in place at first; and then, it was too late to escape. The grey man’s jaw closed over his hand, the teeth like a bear trap, and the *extreme* pressure made Clark groan in pain.

“ARGHH!” he yelled, feeling his nerves burn.

And then the grey man unleashed a barrage of attacks, hitting Clark wherever he could like a mad animal, swinging both of his long and muscled arms with all his power – even the broken one, with no concern whatsoever about his injury, using the limp limb like a flail to hit the trapped Kryptonian.

At the same time, the grey man was shaking his head from one side to the other, trying to bite Clark’s hand off, pulling and lifting him like a shark, slamming Clark against the ground over and over again; no different than what predatory beasts did to tear apart their prey.

Suddenly, there was blood.

He saw it happening as if time had slowed down. It flowed from his hand, a single, thin red stream that traced his wrist, staining his suit. For a moment, Clark didn’t even feel the pain of the bite or the crushing blows against his face and torso, he could only feel the heat of his own blood against his skin. It was such a *rare* occurrence, something so unexpected, that everything else faded from notice.

Until it all came rushing back, the sounds, the pain and the instinct to fight back.

Ignoring the fact that his hand was hurting really bad, Clark steeled his entire body and *pulled*, dragging the grey man’s head down with it, his teeth still pressing down with all his power. Clark ignored the punches, letting the fists hit him as if he couldn’t even feel them.

Then, so fast that the grey man couldn’t even think about reacting, he floated and unleashed the most powerful blow he could with his right knee, directly against the grey man’s face.

For the second time, the resulting *CRACK* echoed throughout the night and Clark’s hand was suddenly free. Not because the grey man felt the blow, not because the pain somehow made him open his mouth, but because Clark had literally shattered his jaw and most of his teeth, making it impossible for him to keep biting Clark’s hand.

And as soon as Clark’s hand was free, he closed it into a fist and punched the grey man’s face with all his might. The blow was so powerful that the grey man flew back against the ground, breaking everything in his path, until the ground itself opened to swallow him whole; and everything else around, from shipping containers to larges pieces of the very ground, all of that piling up over him, filling the sinkhole.

The grey man was literally buried several dozen feet under the earth.

Jessica hadn’t signed up for this shit, she mentally repeated for the thousandth time, holding on for dear life as Matt pursued the truck, stepping on the gas pedal with the same violence he would if it were the face of a Russian mobster.

Matt, the *blind* vigilante. She really hadn’t signed up for this shit.
"TURN LEFT!" Jessica yelled, seeing the shipping container in front of them getting closer and closer.

"There’s no need to yell," Matt retorted, skillfully dodging the shipping container at the last second, still in pursuit. "I’m blind, not deaf!"

"The fact that you’re blind is enough reason for me to yell!" Jessica barked back. "HOLY SHIT, FIRE BALL!"

Matt turned right at the moment a fire ball exploded in front of them, spat by one of those fucking metal dragons chasing them, like big jets in lizard form. And what the hell was Clark doing while she was riding the blindmobile to an early death? Could that grey monster truly be that much of a challenge for him?

"I’m sure he’s fine," Matt said, not even looking at her.

Of course, even if he did look at her, it wouldn’t mean shit. He probably picked up some “worried smell” from her, the nosy asshole.

"I know he’s fine, I’m worried about me!" she said, almost hitting her head after Matt did yet another reckless turn, taking a path between the shipping containers to try to lose the dragons. "Could you drive any worse?!"

"Sorry, not a lot of practice," he said, and Jessica didn’t need enhanced senses to know he was being sarcastic.

He truly was an asshole, Jessica decided. But, liking it or not, he was a skilled asshole. His enhanced senses thing was the only reason those metal dragons hadn’t blown them up yet. If they didn’t end up crashing, she would even consider letting it slide the money he stole from her during that pool game, with his “blind act”.

She almost changed her mind when a fire ball exploded a nearby shipping container, sending pieces of burnt metal everywhere, cracking the windshield.

"Son of a bitch!" Jessica exclaimed.

"We have to do something, otherwise we’ll not even get to the truck," Matt said, not looking nearly as alarmed as he should be.

The truck wasn’t far off, driving in parallel from them, but on the proper road instead of inside the shipping container’s narrow corridor. But to get to it, they would need to leave their cover and if they left their cover, the dragons would probably blow them up before they could reach the truck.

Twisting herself on the seat, Jessica looked back, seeing the three metal dragons flying behind them, their wings spread. The one taking point, closest to them, was the main issue. Thinking fast, Jessica turned to Matt.

"Think you can drive straight for a minute?" she asked and before he could answer, she grabbed her door and pushed it.

With a terrible noise, the door came off and Jessica put half of her body out of the car, looking straight up to the dragon. She breathed, taking aim.

And then she launched the car door, not unlike Captain America liked to do with his shield.
It was, and Jessica could say that without bragging, a perfect throw. The door cut the air, spinning like a frisbee, moving with incredible speed and strength; and it hit the metal dragon straight against its wing.

*BANG!* Even from inside the noisy car Jessica could hear the crash and she cheered when the flying dragon started to fall, one of its wings too damaged to fly. It spun out of control for a moment and collided against a shipping container, blowing up.

“Nice hit,” Matt congratulated, grinning. And then his face became serious. “I have an idea and you’re not gonna like it.”

Saying this, he turned the car and left the cover provided by the shipping containers, going in the direction of the truck’s right side, moving straight against it. Jessica froze for a moment, not sure how exactly this would work.

“When we get close enough, throw your alien mace against the front wheel,” Matt said, going even faster. “And be prepared to jump.”

Holding her Thanagarian mace, tense as hell, Jessica held herself half-out of the car once again, almost closing her eyes because of the strong wind. The truck was getting closer and closer, growing even bigger than it looked, the shipping container possibly carrying Black Sky loaded on the back.

“Now!” Matt yelled and Jessica threw her mace as strongly as she could.

The alien weapon obliterated the truck’s wheel and part of its cabin on the passenger side and at that moment Matt yelled again.

“JUMP!”

They both did it, abandoning the highly accelerated car in route against the truck. Jessica clashed heavily against the ground, her arms held close to her body so she could roll and minimize any injure, glad that her leather jacket could provide her with some protection.

And while they tried to finally stop after jumping out, the car continued, hitting the truck at the exact spot her mace had already damaged.

The car pretty much disappeared under the truck, turning into an immense and moving speed bump, forcing the already damaged truck to turn violently to the other side. And as it did, the driver lost any control he had over it.

With thunderous noise, the truck overturned, sending broken pieces everywhere, sparks glowing in the night as it dragged itself against the ground; the shipping container toppled on its side, gliding alongside the destroyed truck.

Jessica could only watch, astonished, seeing Matt’s plan work without a flaw. Suddenly remembering him, she looked for Matt, actually relieved when she found him already up. A bit skinned here and there, his shirt in complete tatters, but alive.

She got up as well, going to him.

“And that is why blind people can’t drive,” Jessica said, gesturing towards the overturned truck.

Matt chuckled, trying to clean the blood flowing from his wounds.
“Yeah, you may be right about that,” he said. Then he suddenly looked up. “We’ve got incoming.”

The two metal dragons, Jessica cursed, quickly looking at the overturned truck when she heard glass being broken; two dragons and an asshole driver. Well, the odds were fair.

“I’ll deal with them,” Jessica said, pointing up, “you deal with that Nobu guy.”

Before Matt could even say anything, Jessica tapped the “S” insignia in her pocket and shuddered when she felt the cold Liquid Geo spreading over her body, hand first, assembling the Kryptonian skinsuit under her own clothes. Suddenly, the skull-like helmet closed over her head.

“I hope you’re ready, because I’m going to fuck you up!” Jessica yelled, using all her strength to jump and meet them head on in the sky.

Clark took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving his opponent, even when he was buried so deep underground, stuck under tons of collapsed earth and shipping containers. When it was clear that he finally had a moment of peace, he turned his eyes to his left hand.

His still bleeding hand, with the marks of the grey man’s teeth still torn open.

It hurt, badly, but not because of the cut or because of the pressure of the grey man’s jaw. It was a different kind of pain, deep and pulsating, burning; he used his enhanced vision, scanning his hand, trying to find what was wrong with it.

Clark’s breath hitched when he finally saw it.

There were tiny black tendrils inside his wound, impossible to see without a pair of enhanced eyes, growing, twisting and multiplying, taking more and more of the injury by the second. But it wasn’t their mere presence that it was causing him pain, it was what they were doing. They were secreting some substance as they grew, something clearly harmful. It took him a second to understand.

They were eating his hand, from the inside out. His skin, flesh and blood were being digested in front of his eyes.

Without thinking twice, Clark unleashed his heat vision against his own hand, ignoring the sharp pain and the smell of burnt flesh as he destroyed every single black tendril inside his wound, obliterating them without leaving any trace.

When he finally got rid of the last one, he stopped, breathing fast. The wound looked worse than ever, red and inflamed, but the pain was actually much better now that his tissues weren’t being digested. One, two, three seconds passed; then he began to heal, his skin going back to its usual color and the wound stitching itself back together until there was no trace of the injury.

What the hell was that?! Some kind of parasite? Some kind of animal present in the grey man’s saliva? No, Clark knew that wasn’t the case as soon as the thought crossed his mind. The black tendrils eating away his hand were not animals or plants.

It looked a lot more like some kind of fungus.

Sensing the earth tremble, Clark turned his eyes back to where the grey man had been buried, looking through the ground to find him digging his way out. Surprisingly, he was digging with both arms, the left one he had just broken already back together; curious, he used his x-ray vision to see it better.
The broken bone was surrounded by the same black tendrils he had just found in the wound in his hand, except they were growing much quicker there; instead of digesting the grey man’s body, however, the black tendrils were repairing the broken bone, filling the cracks and reinforcing the whole thing, as if his body and the fungus were one and the same.

The same thing was happening in the bones of the grey man’s jaw, also cracked by Clark. It was happening so fast, that if not for the different color and composition, it would seem that there wasn’t anything broken at all. The black fungus had, somehow, fixed the grey man’s wounds and made the broken parts even denser.

Shocked, still not understanding what he was seeing, Clark boosted his x-ray vision and really studied his opponent for the first time, trying to see what made him tick.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Matt stared for a moment, dumbfounded, shocked not only to discover Jessica was wearing what seemed to be a Superman suit, but also with her incredible jump; it was almost like she could fly.

His wonder was quickly forgotten when Nobu finally managed to get out the truck, looking as bloody as Matt was.

He took a moment to look at the toppled shipping container, the one supposedly carrying Black Sky, though Matt wasn’t even sure if it was. Perhaps the real Black Sky was being fought at the moment by Clark and the container was carrying something else.

But that didn’t matter. Nobu, the leader of the Yakuza in Hell’s Kitchen, was standing right in front of him. And he wouldn’t miss that opportunity for anything in the world.

“You!” Nobu snarled, spitting blood. His face was covered in cuts, some with pieces of glass still stuck to the wounds; one of his eyes was a bloody mess, completely blind. “You are the Masked Vigilante causing all these problems.”

Matt, forcing himself to ignore the pain of his own injuries, raised his billy clubs.

“You bet I am,” he answered.

“You have no idea what you are dealing with,” Nobu threatened. “You would be wise to beg for a quick death, now, while you still have the chance.”

“I’m dealing with petty criminals,” Matt retorted. “You were petty criminals in K’un-Lun and you’re petty criminals here.”

The surprise on Nobu’s face – followed by blinding rage – was worth it. Furious, Nobu removed his blood-stained jacket and tossed it away, grabbing a weapon hidden on his waist. A kyoketsushoge, Matt immediately recognized; a double-edged short blade, with another curved blade near the hilt, attached to a chain. Pretty much the mix of a knife with a sickle that could be used at a distance by swinging the long chain, or on close combat, as a fast and deadly blade.

A dangerous weapon, but so was Matt.

For a long minute, they assessed one another. Matt focused all his senses, absorbing every single detail of the battlefield. The toppled shipping container Nobu was trying to protect, every single broken piece of glass, plastic and metal littering the ground, the overturned truck dripping a bit of fuel… Not far, he could hear Jessica punching the dragons in the sky and at a distance he could
hear the terrible sounds of the battle between Clark and that rotten creature.

He also focused on Nobu. The man was injured, Matt could taste the copper in the air of his many open cuts, and his entire body was bruised. There was glass piercing his skin in several different points and his left eye was gone, completely destroyed by a particularly long glass shard.

And yet, the man was breathing as if there was nothing wrong. A warrior, without a doubt.

As if both of them were given a signal, Matt and Nobu started to move, slowly at first, until finally both were running towards each other. Before they could meet in the middle, both of them threw their weapons; Matt rolled to avoid the blade passing above his head and Nobu used his chain to deflect Matt’s billy club.

And a second later, they clashed in a flurry of punches and kicks, with little regard to defense or dodging, both trusting their discipline – and rage – to allow them to ignore the pain and to push even harder to cause maximum damage.

Nobu, Matt realized right away, was not like any of the dozens of mobsters and criminals he’d faced before. If he had to compare him to anyone, it would be to Stick. Both were highly trained, incredibly experienced and completely merciless. There was the fact that Nobu was, clearly, relying on chi to fight as well; not on the same level Stick did to counter his blindness, but enough to make him stronger and faster than a regular man.

Matt groaned in agony when Nobu managed to hit him with the “sickle” part of the kyoketsu-shoge, the blade acting like a fishing-hook; he was pulled by the hook buried in his shoulder towards Nobu, but instead of trying to push him away, Matt went with the motion.

And headbutted the Yakuza boss right in the damaged eye, sinking the glass shard even deeper.

That one he didn’t learn from his father, Battlin’ Jack Murdock; that was all Stick.

Jessica didn’t have any important plans for that day. Attend Union Allied’s assets auction, something Clark paid her handsomely to do, maybe have lunch someplace nice and then go to Clark’s apartment and watch something on his humongous TV. The idea to meet the Masked Man was something that popped on her mind spontaneously and she was actually shocked that the opportunity presented itself at that very day.

It was good luck, she thought; well, Jessica should’ve fucking known better by now.

Her quiet day had somehow turned into a battle against a secret criminal organization of immortal ninjas to stop a magical bomb that could destroy the planet. She was forced to get in a car driven by a blind man, jump out from said car so she wouldn’t die when it collided against a truck.

And now she was riding a dragon.

A freaking metal dragon, made of gears and pistons, something out of a steampunk fanatic’s wet dream. A dragon that was doing its best to throw her away, twisting midair, breathing fire, trying to cut her with its claws.

Unluckily for the dragon, Jessica was wearing something sturdier under her leather jacket and no amount of trying would pierce Kryptonian gear.

To demonstrate that, Jessica punched it right in the mouth, her fist blocking its fire breathing throat.
And with nowhere to go, the fire found another way; unfortunately for the dragon, that “other way” was its metal stomach. It blew up, gushing a weird green fluid that was probably the dragon’s fuel, because the thing caught fire immediately.

Not waiting for it to blow up, Jessica prepared herself and jumped, hoping to grab the second dragon bastard before she could fall down.

“ARGHHH!” Nobu screamed when the glass shard sunk deeper and Matt took the chance to use his own billy club to unhook himself from the kyoketsu-shoge.

Nobu, despite the absurd pain he was feeling, attacked again, even faster, swinging the chain around him like a tornado of blades. Matt used every bit of his abilities to be able to predict the path of his weapon, twisting and turning his body to dodge and deflect, ignoring every cut he suffered when he wasn’t quick enough. He needed a way to stop that weapon, a way to at least slow it down so he could get closer to Nobu.

Maybe it was the blood loss, maybe it was how close Matt was from dying, maybe it was even Divine Providence, but for some reason he remembered his father.

“The guys he went up against liked to say that fighting him was like hitting oak. Nights when he was outmatched, my dad’s strategy was to let them hit him until they broke their hands.”

Suddenly, Matt knew what he had to do.

Calculating the exact moment, Matt deflected Nobu’s kyoketsu-shoge one last time: right into his abdomen. Matt was expecting the pain, but even so he winced when the blade pierced him, ripping skin and muscle as easily as a hot knife cutting butter. It was painful and incredibly dangerous; one misstep and the blade would’ve pierced an organ and that would be the end.

But Matt was prepared for it; Nobu was not.

Faster than Nobu could react, Matt grabbed the chain of the kyoketsu-shoge and pulled Nobu closer, using the Hand’s lieutenant surprise to immediately wrap that same chain around Nobu’s neck, so he couldn’t move away.

And then Matt unleashed the Devil.

His fists blurred, hitting again and again, heavy like bricks against Nobu’s face. He struggled, he tried to run, he tried to fight, to pierce his weapon even deeper in Matt’s stomach, but nothing worked.

Matt had him cornered against the ropes and nothing would save Nobu now.

Jaw, side of the head, stomach, chest, nose, neck… Matt punched and punched, feeling Nobu’s bones crack under his fists, his skin open, his blood fly. The shards of glass piercing Nobu’s body were pushed deeper and his face was already swollen, black and blue, broken. Several teeth shattered and every single one of his ribs were cracked; Nobu’s feet faltered.

And after one final uppercut, the Yakuza boss fell, defeated.

Victory for The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

“He’s… Dead,” Clark whispered, stunned, his x-ray vision fixed on the grey man.
Despite the fact that he could hear the grey man groaning and digging his way out of the ground, his heart wasn’t beating. The lungs were filled with air – that explained the roars and groans –, but there was no blood in the respiratory system; there wasn’t blood flow anywhere, Clark realized. Not the kidneys, not the liver, not the stomach, not the intestines, not the brain… Instead of it, there were black fungal tendrils growing inside his body, as if his body was part rotten flesh, part fungus.

Like a dead body left to decompose in a swamp. Except this one had, somehow, got back up.

The broken bones had been fixed and strengthened by the fungus. The cracks disappeared and the muscles forced the limbs to the right position, giving the grey man a functional arm and jaw again.

And the brain… It shouldn’t look like that in any living creature. It was a mass of scarred tissue, decomposed flesh and black tendrils and there wasn’t any chance whatsoever of that being a working organ.

“You only noticed now?” Stick said, surprising the distracted Clark, as he approached holding his sword; which probably meant he had defeated all the mobsters still standing. He turned to Clark. “What, the putrefied smell and the corpse-looking grey skin weren’t enough? That thing has been dead for centuries now.”

Clark turned to look at Stick, his expression astonished. The old man continued:

“Solomon Grundy,

Born on a Monday,

Christened on Tuesday,

Married on Wednesday,

Took ill on Thursday,

Grew worse on Friday,

Died on Saturday,

Buried on Sunday,

That was the end,

Of Solomon Grundy.”

Stick sheathed his katana.

“Except this is bullshit, of course, because the thing is clearly not ‘ended’, is it?” was the rhetorical question.

“That’s his name? Solomon Grundy?” Clark questioned. He’d heard the rhyme before, but he never thought it actually had anything to do with a real person.

Matt’s teacher simply rolled his blind eyes.

“No, that’s just what they’ve been calling it ever since it came back and started to kill people. I don’t think it has a real name.”
“The Hand did this? They revived him?”

Stick tilted his head.

“While the Hand does like to play with corpses, this wasn’t their doing. This thing was raised by some other power, some kind of magic force that decided this body served as good avatar. The Hand just picked him up and pointed him in the direction of their enemies, but this thing has been killing people for centuries now.” He paused. “And revived is a strong word. This thing is not alive, it’s just reanimated. And unfortunately will keep coming back, no matter what. Believe, I know.”

“You’ve met him before?” Clark asked, glancing at the increasingly bigger cracks forming on the ground as the grey man dug his way out, slowly but surely.

The blow to the head probably had been more damaging than he imagined, impairing the grey man’s movements, because otherwise he would’ve been attacking again immediately. It wouldn’t last, though, Clark knew; the speed, strength and aggressiveness were coming back by the second.

He looked back at Stick.

“Hmm, once. Took some of our best men to put that thing down. It doesn’t matter how, it always gets back up. Solomon Grundy has been burned to ashes, quartered, drowned, buried, hanged and even devoured by many different animals before. Somehow, its body always reconstructs itself, out of nothing if it has to. I had no idea it was already back up or that the Hand had recovered him, but here we are.”

Saying this, Stick turned and started walking away.

“I’m going to give the kid a hand. Finish him off, will you?”

“How?” Clark couldn’t help but to ask after Stick basically told him that Grundy could take anything and come back.

“You can always toss him into the sun,” Stick shrugged. “I don’t think he ever died that way. I wonder if his next incarnation will be able to remember it.”

And with that, Stick started to run in the direction Matt and Jessica headed to, quite fast for a man his age – then again, chi seemed to work wonders on that account.

Clark turned back to look at Solomon Grundy, seeing as his body got quicker and stronger, digging his way out getting easier by the second. He wondered if Grundy was still “waking up”, coming back from whatever state the Hand put him under to transport him, because that would explain why he was getting stronger.

Or Clark had managed to really piss him off and that increase in power was due to anger alone.

Regardless of the reason, Clark knew he had to end this, fast. He needed to quickly end a fight against a super-zombie strong enough to fight him, able to regenerate his rotten body from even the most terrible wounds in seconds and incapable of feeling any kind of pain.

This could mean a very, very tough battle, one that Clark honestly didn’t know if he could win fast enough or at all; or a chance to take a page out of Matt’s book.

And let his Devil out.
Grundy burst from the ground like the undead he was, roaring, running towards Clark with all his bloodlust. The ground shook as he approached, incredibly fast, his big muscles body creating craters when he touched the ground.

Without hesitation, Clark flew against him, breaking the sound barrier.

Grundy’s eyes followed the blue and red blur that Clark became, his fist closing in anticipation for the clash; Clark, however, didn’t meet him head on. Dropping fast, Clark collided against Grundy’s leg, toppling him.

Before he could fall, however, Clark grabbed his leg and tossed him up; and then he took off, breaking the ground as he did it, flying so fast that Grundy didn’t even have the chance to see what was happening before he was grabbed by Clark’s Kryptonian arms and pushed up to the sky.

Clark grabbed Grundy from the back, his arms locking around the grey man’s chest, and he flew up with all his power. Grundy tried to fight, to release himself, but the sheer pressure Clark’s flight put against his body wouldn’t let him; he could just struggle, screaming and roaring, trying to resist the wind pressure against his face and chest as Clark forced him up, not unlike a rocket ship.

Clouds opened to grant them passage, the moon grew larger by the second, the temperature dropped fast. Soon, Clark could see the Earth’s curve as they left the atmosphere.

And then, he twisted and turned back, starting his descent.

As they came down, Clark’s eyes scanned the planet, looking for an uninhabited place; when he found one, he adjusted their route and increased his speed. They reentered the atmosphere, the air glowing around them. Grundy could barely hold his head straight, his limbs flapping around as Clark pushed him down, flying faster and faster, looking through the grey man’s body to see the ground approaching by the second.

When they were about to crash, Clark released Grundy and flew away, turning his body up to narrowly avoid the desert sand; Grundy had no way to do anything of the sort.

\[BOOOOOOM!\]

Solomon Grundy collided against the ground like a meteor, his superpowered body opening a crater so big that the sand of the desert Clark tossed him into was thrown away in all directions, like several sand-tsunamis. A sandstorm was triggered immediately, the powerful winds blowing in all directions, completely out of control.

Clark managed to avoid hitting the ground, flying up just at the last second. Unbothered by the sand waves and the storm, he turned and made his way back to the immense crater, flying over it.

There wasn’t anyone around, he knew that when looked from outside the atmosphere; like he saw from all the way up, the desert was empty of life – unlike the docks at New York – the perfect place for a stunt like this.

The perfect place for him to deal a blow against Grundy from which he wouldn’t recover so soon.

Landing inside the crater, ignoring the loud winds and the sand flying everywhere, Clark used his x-ray vision to quickly find Grundy, buried once again; he couldn’t help but to wince when he finally did. Grundy was, simply put, broken. Every single bone in his body was shattered, unable to resist the impact even with all his power. The limbs were pointing at weird angles, the back was twisted, and his head was actually turned the wrong way.
And despite all that, Grundy was still trying to move and still screaming and roaring, trying to attack him.

It was unbelievable. There wasn’t any sign of pain, fear or surrender, just raw fury as he tried to drag his broken body in Clark’s direction. And soon, Clark noticed, he would, because the black fungal tendrils that inhabited Grundy’s body were already at work, repairing the broken bones, making them even denser and stronger than they were before.

Sooner, rather than later, Grundy would get up again and attack.

Clark stepped closer. For a moment, he truly considered doing what Stick told him to do and get rid of Grundy. It would be simpler, a fast way to end this battle with a decisive victory and to stop a very sizable threat.

Except that killing Grundy wouldn’t actually solve anything.

In the short term, sure, Grundy would be dead and Clark would be free to fly immediately to help Jessica and Matt. In the long term? According to Stick – and Clark could tell he was telling the truth – this wouldn’t be the first time Grundy died. Burned to ashes, quartered, drowned, buried… He died before, several times.

And then he came back, even when there wasn’t anything left of his body to regenerate.

Whatever magical force that reanimated Grundy was, it couldn’t be defeated by simply killing him. He wouldn’t be ending a threat, just postponing it. Postponing to an unknown time and unknown place when Grundy would come back to kill again and Clark couldn’t guarantee that he would be there to stop him.

No, killing Grundy wouldn’t solve anything. Clark had another idea; he looked at Grundy’s hateful eyes for a moment.

“I’m sorry for this,” Clark apologized, steeling his nerves. He sighed. “Even though I think this is going to hurt me more than it’s going to hurt you.”

His eyes glowed red.

Matt was breathing heavily, his hands quick and experienced as he treated his wounds the best he could with what he had. Nothing life-threatening, or at least it wouldn’t be if he could stop the bleeding, but damn if it didn’t hurt now that the adrenalin surge had passed.

“Holy shit, did you just lose a fight with a lawnmower?” Jessica exclaimed, arriving on the scene. She moved her eyes from Matt to Nobu; her eyes got wider. “Or won it, apparently.” Jessica looked back at him. “Seriously, though, do I need to call an ambulance?”

“I would love to hear you explain all this if you did,” Matt replied, a small smile on his lips.

“You’re blind, tell them you fell,” Jessica suggested. “Or that you have a drinking problem.”

“How would a drinking problem, or a fall, explain this?” Matt deadpanned.

“You fell in front of a lawnmower,” she shrugged.

“No, just… No. Thanks, though. What about you? Did you manage to destroy those dragons?”

“Wouldn’t be here if I didn’t, would I?” Jessica retorted.
Matt was about to say something in response, but at the moment he opened his mouth there was a sonic boom; both of them looked up, knowing already what that sound meant. And without delay, Superman appeared, landing in front of them.

For some reason, he looked a bit sick, almost as if he just witnessed something particularly revolting.

“Look who’s here! Bit late, huh?” Jessica asked, looking at Clark.

He just sighed. “I was fighting a super-zombie, Jessica. A literal undead.”

Both Jessica and Matt turned fast to stare at him when he said that. An undead? Was that what that smelly monstrosity was? Stick said something about the Hand dealing in dark arts to gain immortality, but actually encountering something like that was very weird.

Not noticing their surprise, Clark went on.

“I had to make a stop and grab one of those shipping containers to store… Something.” He sounded sick again; what exactly had happened? “Forgive me if it took me a while.”

Clark glanced at her, relief plain to see on his expression.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Then he turned to Matt. “Okay-ish.” Clark focused on him for a moment, studying his wounds. “You don’t have any internal bleeding or punctured organs, but we really should do something about that blood.”

Too tired to be impressed by the display of his x-ray vision, Matt just shook his head.

“I got it, thanks,” Matt said, showing Clark the rags he was using.

Clark nodded, then glanced at Nobu with the same expression, probably also assessing his state.

“He’s not in an immediate risk either, but he really does need a hospital.”

There was a long silence and Matt was already prepared for the outburst, his hands actually stopping for a moment.

Yet, it never came.

Superman certainly wouldn’t rejoice at the sight of an injured person, dangerous criminal or not, and Matt never expected him to. But it seemed he at least understood that Matt did what he had to do, at least in this case. Nobu was deadly, maybe even deadlier than even Matt was, and if he didn’t fight with all he had, he would be the one lying on the floor.

And he wouldn’t be breathing, of that he had no doubt.

That small moment gave Matt a lot of insight about Clark’s sense of justice, certainly a lot more than their talk earlier that day. He got the feeling that even if Nobu had been killed as a consequence of that battle, Clark wouldn’t blame him. He wouldn’t like it, Matt was sure of that, but he would not blame him for doing what he could to stop a highly skilled criminal that needed to be stopped, even if that criminal didn’t survive in the end.

Suddenly, his relationship with the Avengers – and Matt would highlight the easy friendship he had with Black Widow – made a lot more sense.

“One of those you’re doing for others. The other you’re just doing for yourself.”
Shaking his head, Matt dispelled those thoughts; it wasn’t the time or the place. Then he looked at the shipping container.

“We have to deal with that.”

As if they were one, all of them stared at the toppled shipping container and Matt could actually feel the tension grow. If Stick was right, that thing was carrying Black Sky, a magical weapon powerful enough to bring forth the Armageddon; he was prone to exaggeration, Matt knew that, but somehow he didn’t think Stick was too off the mark here.

Unless, of course, Stick was indeed exaggerating and the infamous Black Sky was that undead giant Clark had already beaten and that container was keeping something else.

“You’re sure you didn’t already deal with that?” Jessica asked, thinking along the same lines as Matt. “Cause a super-zombie capable of fist fighting you does qualify as a pretty dangerous weapon in my book.”

“I don’t… think so,” Clark answered, clearly uncertain. “Stick apparently crossed paths with Grundy before.”

“Grundy?” Jessica asked.

“Where’s Stick?” Matt questioned at the same time.

Before Clark could answer any of those questions, a laugh interrupted their conversation.

The three of them turned to the source of the eerie laughter, their eyes falling on Nobu. The Yakuza boss was looking at them with his one eye, a mess of blood, bruises and broken bones, still fallen where Matt had left him. Nobu moved, dragging himself so he could look at them properly.

“After all this… And you don’t even know what Black Sky is?” he slurred, probably concussed, though it was hard to assess injuries on people who could channel chi. He half-laughed, half-coughed, spiting blood. He muttered something in Japanese. “Such ignorance… Like blind worms stumbling in the dark.”

He coughed again, spiting more blood in front of him, his hands trembling as he tried to keep himself up.

“The power of Black Sky is immeasurable,” Nobu finally said. “It is the key to our victory.” He stared at them. “I will enlighten you.”

His announcement brought frowns of confusion, but Matt understood what Nobu intended a second later, when he felt his chi being channeled: right in the pool of blood he coughed in front of him.

Nobu’s bloody hand left an imprint and that imprint hummed with power. Suddenly, all their attention was drawn to the shipping container, where symbols started to appear, written in blood, across all its surface. Letters, Matt realized, resembling some oriental alphabet. K’un-Lun’s language, perhaps? There was surge of power, chi in its purest form, and all the bloody symbols disappeared. There was silence.

Then the shipping container exploded, its metal torn to shreds, as a black energy expanded from within, going up to the sky like a tower of pure darkness.

They all raised their arms, shielding their faces from the truly powerful wind, trying to remain standing as the ground cracked and shook; Clark immediately put himself in front of them,
shielding both Matt and Jessica from the debris. The noise was absolutely terrifying, like a piercing scream and Matt was already feeling dizzy, his entire senses completely overwhelmed by it. He groaned, falling to his knees as he tried to protect his ears.

Suddenly, the black mass of energy moved, like a living shadow, no longer a tower of darkness that reached the sky, but something else, something familiar.

A raven. Gigantic, threatening and incredibly regal.

“Do you see now?” Nobu all but yelled, as he did his best to turn and face the dark raven. “Unlimited power! This is what will guide us to our destiny, to a new Age of Dragons and to our rightful place in K’un-Lun!”

Those were the ramblings of a fanatic, but Matt actually believed him for a moment. Everything Stick said, all those myths and fairy tales, they were real. The Hand, immortal warriors, dragons… Black Sky.

It existed and Matt was witnessing its full glory.

Could they stop it? Could they do anything? Against something like that, Matt had his doubts even Superman could do something.

Was that the end?

A black aura surrounded Nobu. Matt could feel the raw power like a flame burning up his senses. What was happening? Was Nobu absorbing Black Sky’s power? Was that even possible? Could that be the Hand’s plan all along? He floated in front of them, arms opened as if he was transcending his mortal form to become something else.

And then, suddenly, before even Superman could as much as blink, the black aura around Nobu squeezed, crushing him to pulp.

Matt was stunned, they all were. Nobu didn’t even had the chance to scream, to lose the victorious expression on his face before the black aura surrounding him contracted, pretty much folding his entire body until all that was left was red goo.

Just like that, Nobu Yoshioka, leader of Yakuza in Hell’s Kitchen, was gone forever.

As soon as that happened, all the incredible pressure of that black energy suddenly vanished; the aura surrounding Nobu's remains disappeared, releasing a rain of blood, crushed bones and ripped tissue.

And the immense and powerful black raven that Black Sky had molded itself into also disappeared, vanishing so abruptly that the silence shocked Matt for a moment.

In its place, was a girl.

A tired to the bone, scared and hurt teenager that could barely stand. She raised her arms, as if to say she wasn’t a threat to them.

No one knew what to say or what to do.

And while they were so surprised that they could barely react, an arrow flew out of nowhere and hit the girl right in the abdomen.
Clark was moving towards the girl a split second after the arrow hit her.

His mind was racing with thoughts as he did it; how could he have missed the arrow’s noise? How could Matt? Black Sky’s amazing display of power and Nobu’s sudden – and violent – death were certainly distracting, but there was absolutely no way for the two of them to have missed something like that.

Not only the arrow’s noise, but the proximity of the one who shot it: Stick.

Clark didn’t know what happened, what Black Sky’s power really was, what her killing Nobu meant. He couldn’t understand how cold someone had to be to try to kill a girl that clearly meant them no harm – because if she did, considering the display of sheer power, they would know it – and he still couldn’t fully accept that the so called weapon they were trying to destroy was, in fact, a person.

He was confused as hell. And now he had a terrified girl bleeding to death in his arms.

A girl that possessed a power so incredible that he could barely comprehend, a girl that had just been released from a shipping container and then killed someone – probably the same person that had put her there in the first place –, but he wouldn’t worry about any of that right now.

Right now, Clark had a life to save. Questions and decisions would come later. And someone else could deal with Stick, at least for now.

“STICK!” Matt screamed, turning to face the shipping container his old master was perched upon.

The old man stood, calmly disassembling his long bow and putting it away. Somehow, Matt started to listen Stick’s heartbeat – all his bodily functions, really – just now. How did he do that? Was this some chi trick? Could he have done the same to the arrow that both he and Clark missed?

“Matty,” he greeted, normally, as if he hadn’t just shot an arrow at a girl.

“What have you done?” Matt all but roared, approaching the shipping container in big steps.

“What we’re all here to do, kid,” Stick said, turning to him. “The mission to destroy Black Sky doesn’t stop because its packaging looks unthreatening.”

“That’s a girl, you sick bastard!”

“No, Matty, that is Black Sky. A weapon capable of destroying this entire planet and so much else with no effort whatsoever.” Stick pointed to the girl being tended by Clark. “That thing is what the Hand needs to kill us all and we need to destroy it.”

“Look at me, look at me!” Clark asked, grabbing the girl’s hand and forcing her to look into his eyes. “You’re going to be okay, I promise.”

“I-It hurts…” the girl said, her voice weak.

Clark didn’t answer for a moment, his eyes checking the wound internally. He heard Jessica approaching in fast steps.

“Holy shit… It went through her,” Jessica muttered to herself, crouching close. She looked to Clark. “Did it get anything important?”
“Nothing it can’t be fixed,” Clark answered after a few seconds. He turned to Jessica. “Hold her tight, please.”

Jessica grabbed the girl firmly and yet very gently, helping Clark to turn her a little bit so he could see the arrow coming from her back; his eyes glowed red and in one quick blast he cut off the arrowhead.

And then, without warning, he pulled the rest of the arrow out.

“AHHHHH!” the girl yelled, trying to move, but Jessica didn’t let her, even though a spurt of blood hit her straight in the face.

Clark glanced at the arrow for a moment, taking note of the K’un-Lun symbols etched on its surface; was that how it travelled without him or Matt noticing? Some kind of chi sorcery?

A thought for another time, he decided, grabbing the girl’s pale hand and looking into her eyes again.

“Now squeeze my hand… This is gonna hurt.”

His eyes started to glow once again; the girl’s scream pierced the night.

Matt skillfully climbed on the shipping container, walking towards Stick.

“You’ve seen what it can do, you felt it,” Stick went on. “Do you want to see Black Sky unleashed in this world?”

“That’s what your war’s come to? Killing girls?”

“That thing is not a girl–“

“I can hear her heartbeat! I can sense how scared she is!”

“If you could focus beyond your crybaby feelings, you would sense what that thing really is,” Stick retorted. “You’re blind as you ever were. A kid, stubborn and naïve.”

“Maybe you should’ve stuck around and finished training me yourself,” Matt snarled.

“I needed a soldier, you wanted a father.”

“Well, I guess we’re both disappointed then.”

“I guess we are,” Stick agreed, slowly.

Matt stepped in front of him, both of them assessing each other.

“I’m not gonna let you kill that girl,” Matt finally said.

“Oh, she’s already dead,” Stick piped up. “First rule of archery: if you’re not 100% sure you can kill the target on the first shot, use poison.” He glanced up, staring at Matt with his white eyes. “Something for you to remember when you decide to step up and fight the real war, Matty.”

Matt didn’t even remember making the decision to punch Stick, but as soon as his fist collided against his face all rational thought left him.
There was only rage left.

“ARRRGGHHH!” the girl yelled, feeling Clark’s heat vision cauterizing her wounds.

Ignoring the piercing scream and helping Jessica to keep her as immobilized as possible, Clark continued his job, trying to contain the internal bleeding as best as he could.

But no matter how focused on the task he was, he couldn’t help to overhear Matt’s conversation with Stick, nor the start of their fight.

“Kelex, I need you to run a blood analysis,” Clark said, still working with his heat-vision. “Compare it against every single kind of poison on your database and find the proper antidote and treatment.”

“Right away, sir,” Kelex answered, extending its previous bracelet form and acquiring a bit of the girl’s blood.

“Also, call Bruce in the Avengers Tower, tell him to prepare the emergency room. Send him the results of what you find immediately, please.”

As soon as he finished cauterizing the wound, Clark grabbed the unconscious girl carefully and got up. He looked at Jessica, opening his mouth.

“Just go,” Jessica said, before he could say anything. “I’ll help Matt take care of things here.”

Nodding in thanks, Clark glanced one last time towards Matt and Stick – controlling his anger towards the latter – and took off, flying as fast as he could without hurting the girl even more.

Matt and Stick danced around each other, attacking and dodging each other’s blows like only adversaries who knew one another very well could. The same style, the same gifts, the same violence, the same tricks.

It was like fighting a mirror-image.

Their fists clashed and they immediately followed with a knee blow and a kick; their feet clashed against the metal of the shipping container and they were forced to engage to stay away from the edges. Both could sense each other, hearing the muscles tense even before they were moving, and as a response they would change their stance to counteract that; which, in turn, forced the opponent to change his strategy.

It made it all look like a brawl instead of a battle between two of the most skilled warriors in the world. They were simply too alike.

And that was probably the first time Matt realized how much of Stick he had into him.

More than simply martial art’s styles and training, but the mentality of a warrior. Liking it or not, they were both brutal, direct and fearless. Both of them could take an extreme amount of punishment – Matt’s torn and bloody torso was more than proof enough – and they were willing to bleed if it meant the adversary would bleed even more.

But there was a big difference between them: how far they were willing to go.

Stick had no limits. To complete his mission, to win his war, he would do anything. No matter how
cruel, no matter how bloody, even if it made him eerily similar to his own sworn enemies. The fact that he had just shot and poisoned a girl without hesitation – or remorse – was enough evidence.

And yet, in his point of view, Stick considered himself one of the good guys.

That scared Matt more than he would care to admit. Was he like that? Would he turn into that? Was Stick his future? Matt couldn’t even contemplate assassinating someone, not a criminal and even less an innocent, but he freely admitted that he enjoyed making them pay for their crimes. It felt good to put the fear of the Devil on someone used to hurt and scare innocents. More than that, it felt right.

Just as he imagined it felt right for Stick to kill anyone between him and victory in his war against the Hand. Even innocent and terrified girls, only because her power could be used as a weapon.

Clark had warned him about that, about figuring it out why he was doing what he did: for himself or for others? To make himself feel better, to vent his rage? Or to save an innocent people that needed saving?

Despite all his inner confusion, there was one thing Matt knew for sure: he didn’t want to become Stick.

His fist collided against Stick’s face, one, two, three times, fast and powerful. Stick completely ignored the pain, advancing towards Matt and grabbing his arm, quickly twisting it and repositioning himself behind him.

And then he caught Matt in a chokehold.

“Can’t even tag an old man, Matty,” Stick taunted, pressing Matt’s throat. “Is this what criminals in this city fear? Is this the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, the hero of the people? Ha!”

Matt grabbed Stick’s arm, trying to push it away from his throat, trying to breathe. He unleashed a few elbow blows to his ribs, but Stick just ignored them, pulling Matt back as he walked on top of the shipping container.

“That thing you wanted to protect so much?” Stick continued. “Give her half a chance and she would blow up this entire city, even if not on purpose. Under the Hand’s control or not, that weapon is too fucking dangerous.”

“She… is… just a girl!” Matt groaned, his face red.

“And you are just a little boy, blind to the truth. And the truth is, kid, if you want peace, you gotta win the war first. And you don’t win wars with half-measures. You don’t win wars by sparing enemies and allowing them to find better weapons to kill you. And you don’t win wars without a fucking army!” Stick snarled. “We need you, kid. And you need us. You won’t accomplish shit by tying your hands with a crappy moral code and you won’t accomplish shit by yourself.”

Matt was about to fall unconscious, holding with the last shreds of his willpower. His fight against Nobu cost him a lot of stamina and his injuries were slowing him down too much. On a good day, fighting Stick would already be an unpredictable battle. Fighting him as he was?

It was suicide. And his inability to get out of Stick’s chokehold proved that.

When his mind was about to shut down, there was a thunderous sound, followed by massive blow. The entire shipping container trembled, so much that the thing almost toppled over.
And in that one second, Stick loosened his chokehold.

Acting on pure instinct, Matt used his entire body weight and just flipped, jumping from the shipping container. Stick, recovering his grasp, was dragged with him, as they twisted midair during their fall.

Only to land under Matt, back against the concrete ground, a crushing blow that knocked the air from Stick’s lungs.

Matt took his chance and got up, still dizzy and wobbling, getting away from Stick’s arms. And when the old man tried to get up to continue the fight, he landed a direct punch against him, knocking him back down.

Stick groaned, face bleeding.

“I would stay down if I were you, old man,” Jessica threatened, surprising Matt’s woozy mind. Well, that explained the sudden earthquake that almost toppled the shipping container. “I don’t give a shit if you’re 100 years old, I’ll kick your ass back to the nursing home if I have to.”

Against all odds, he chuckled, still lying down.

“Maybe I should recruit you instead of the kid,” he joked, spiting blood.

Matt was too pissed and too tired to find anything remotely funny.

“Get out of my city!” Matt ordered. “If you ever come back, Stick, I swear to God, I’ll make you wish you’d died today.”

Struggling to get up, his face bleeding, Stick pulled himself up, moaning in pain. He pulled a pair of sunglasses from his pocket.

“Maybe there’s hope for you yet, kid,” Stick said, breathing heavily. “Nice catching up, eh?” He pointed at the billy clubs Matt dropped in the beginning of their fight. “You can keep the sticks. You’re gonna need them.”

Saying this, he turned his back at them and started walking, disappearing behind the line of shipping containers without another word.

Somehow, Matt didn’t think it would be the last time he saw him.

Tiredly, he turned to Jessica.

“Did the girl…”

“Still alive,” Jessica answered. “Clark took her to the Avengers Tower.” She shrugged. “Let’s wait and see.”

It was all they could do, after all.

“Meanwhile,” Jessica added, “let’s see if anyone of those mobsters we beat up are waking up before they should.” She looked around her, seeing the scene of utter destruction at the docks. “You don’t think they have another one of those zombies, do you? ‘Cause I had enough for one night.”

Matt agreed. It had been a long day.
Wilson Fisk was having one of the worse nights of his life.

Building an empire was not an easy task. It took talent, it took dedication, it took a lifetime of work and sacrifice. Fisk had started from scratch with nothing more than his willpower, and little by little he conquered what was rightfully his.

And now he was seeing everything fall apart in a matter of hours.

“Yes, of course,” Wesley answered in the phone. “I understand.”

There was nothing in his voice or body language that gave it away, but Fisk knew Wesley was as worried as he was. And he had every reason to be, given the kind of people he was talking to. Fisk turned away, looking out of the window of his apartment, gazing at the city for which he gave so much of himself.

Vanessa grabbed his hand, looking at him. He felt himself getting calmer.

“I will relay the message, certainly,” Wesley said, extremely polite. Then he hang up.

He looked at Fisk for a long time, the silence stretching as if he couldn’t find the words.

“I just got a call from… Them,” Wesley started. He was pale. “They were informing us of how things went at the docks.”

Something Fisk already knew, of course, if not down to the last detail.

“They wanted to tell us that… You-Know-Who and the Masked Man intercepted their cargo’s arrival,” Wesley went on. “Their men were beaten, the cargo was taken and Nobu died.” He looked down, swallowing. “They were… Unhappy.”

Fisk let out a long sigh. How exactly was this his fault? Nobu had asked for one simple thing: keep the police away. So he complied, perfectly. He removed not only the police, but any personnel that could somehow interfere with their business.

And now he was being held accountable for that failure because Superman and the Masked Man decided to appear.

How could anyone predict such a thing? Not only there wasn’t any indication that Superman was moving against them – other than his appearance at the Russian warehouses during the explosions –, but his apparent partnership with the Masked Man was also unforeseen. Vladimir didn’t know about the cargo’s arrival, so the information couldn’t have come from him, and he knew for a fact that it hadn’t been leaked from his side.

What happened was not his fault or responsibility; and yet he was somehow the one being blamed.

That was not all, of course. An evil chance seldom comes alone, after all. Not only he had a furious Hand breathing down his neck, now they also had misplaced Leland. And this was, maybe, the worse thing that could have happened.

Superman appearing to stop the bombings against the Russians could be considered a coincidence. Him and the Masked Man moving against Nobu at the docks could be result of leaked information.

But Black Widow’s attack against Leland’s safehouse and his subsequently capture, at the same time Nobu was being overwhelmed at the docks, spelled of a carefully thought operation.
Somehow, Superman, the Masked Man and the Avengers were acting against them. And Fisk didn’t know why or what to do, especially now that they had not only Vladimir to extract information, but also Leland.

Leland, who was responsible for the launder, the hiding and the moving of a great deal of their money. Leland who was, probably, the most cowardly, opportunistic man Fisk had ever laid eyes on. Leland who would be interrogated by the Black Widow herself, a trained assassin that had broken far more dangerous people in her time without even trying.

Vladimir Ranskahov thrived in the cold hellhole of a Russian prison and was broken in less than a day by her. Leland wouldn’t last five minutes, if he tried to resist at all, which he wouldn’t.

“Sir, I suggest we go back to Europe for a while,” Wesley said, hesitantly, to break the long silence. “Our operations there are still going strong. It would be quite the setback,” he admitted, “but if we stay here…”

If they stayed, soon enough Superman, the Masked Man and the Avengers would come, was the unfinished thought. And they would arrive armed with the entirety of what Leland knew, backed by the full might of the law to destroy everything he had built.

“We cannot abandon the city, Wesley,” Fisk finally said, turning to look at him. He was still holding Vanessa’s hand. “We made a deal with Madame Gao and her… Associates. And we still haven’t fulfilled our obligations towards them.”

The Hand wanted to strengthen their grasp on New York and they needed his help to accomplish that fast. In return, they were the ones who gave Fisk the push he needed to kickstart his operations and build his empire. That was the deal.

And in their line of business, especially when the Hand was involved, it wasn’t possible to just back out from an arrangement like that.

They couldn’t go back, they couldn’t go forward. And staying still meant they were easy prey.

Still in silence, Fisk looked at Vanessa, gazing in her eyes. Gently, he touched her face. It wasn’t just about himself and his dream anymore. It was also about her. He promised to stay at her side, to protect her. He told her that she didn’t have anything to fear while she was with him.

It was a promise he had every intention to fulfill; he just didn’t know how yet.

“What happens if we stay?” Vanessa said, suddenly, looking at Wesley.

Wesley hesitated, but Fisk simply nodded.

“Leland will tell them everything he knows,” he explained. “And he knows a lot. He knows where we hide the money, how we launder it, how we move it, where we spend it… And how we acquired it. That’s enough for the law to do its thing. If we stay, we’ll be arrested.”

“And if we leave?” Vanessa asked.

Again, Wesley hesitated, not because he didn’t want to share knowledge, but because he didn’t want to scare her.

“If we leave,” Fisk said, answering for him, “we will be unable to fulfil our end of the deal with some very powerful people. They’ll hunt us down, wherever we go, and make an example out of us.” He looked at her, seeing no fear in Vanessa’s eyes. “I can fight and I will die to protect you…”
But I don’t know if I can win.”

Vanessa seemed deep in thought for a moment. Then she looked at him.

“Remember what you said about ruling both worlds to reach a peaceful resolution?” she asked. “The criminal underworld and the lawful world of heroes.” Fisk nodded, remembering their conversation well. “The outcomes you see will only happen if we stay in one of those worlds: the criminal underworld.”

Vanessa touched his face.

“But what if we left the shadows and stepped willingly into the light?” she continued. “What if you didn’t run or didn’t face them like a criminal, but like a hero?”

Wilson Fisk listened enraptured.

“... specialists estimate hundreds of millions in damages caused by the gang-war stopped by Superman at the docks. One thing is certain: we can already expect another battle at the courtrooms, as no one knows who exactly will pay for all this. Coming up next, how will New York cope with the avocado shortage caused by the destruction of the entire shipment...”

Clark chewed his cold dumpling, barely tasting it, his mind far away. Sitting by his side on the couch, her feet on his lap, Natasha stared at the TV with a bored expression, eating her noodles with the same enthusiasm as Clark’s. On the nearby armchair, Clint was sprawled out like a lazy cat, absentmindedly pressing the remote to find something to watch.

If not for Clark’s Superman suit, Natasha and Clint’s equally battle-oriented attires – minus the boots in Natasha’s case, for Clark’s benefit, or so she announced before putting her legs on his lap – and the huge arsenal composed of guns and arrows left on the table, it would be the very picture of the end of a tiring day in any other house in America.

The reality, of course, was entirely different. Though they were, indeed, friends having dinner together, their day had been anything but normal, even considering what was normal for them. Well, Natasha and Clint were in their element when they set out to capture Leland, that was true enough, but Clark could wholeheartedly say that he never expected to fight a zombie when he woke up that day.

The same way he didn’t expect the infamous Black Sky – a weapon of apocalyptic proportions, according to Stick – to be a teenage girl.

Frowning in discomfort, still remembering how hot the girl’s blood felt on his hands, Clark put his dumplings down. Bruce and a team of surgeons met him and the unconscious girl right at the moment he set foot in the Avengers Tower and quickly took her in for surgery, where they still were; where Clark would’ve liked to be as well, if Bruce hadn’t pointed out that he was making the doctors anxious by pacing around, and then politely – but promptly – kicked him out.

For someone who constantly reminded them that he wasn’t “that kind of doctor”, Bruce sure had the required firm hand when he needed to.

At least he was there, that was something. Clark still didn’t know exactly what Black Sky was, but he knew she had a great deal of power. She didn’t seem inclined to use it against them, but that didn’t mean she was harmless. With Bruce there, by her side, Clark felt things would be a little safer.
Of course, Hulk also wasn’t someone they could classify as harmless, but usually he had enough sense to tackle the world-ending threat and not everyone around him, which was a good thing for everyone in the tower if something were to happen.

That gave him the time to fly back to the docks and deal with the situation there. Stick wasn’t anywhere near when he arrived, already dealt with by Matt and banished from New York; not the outcome Clark would’ve chosen, not after what the old man did, but he supposed putting Stick into a normal prison would go as well as one would expect. Either Stick would get himself killed because of who he was fighting or he would kill everyone else and get away.

Jessica and Matt went back to their homes – Matt immediately refused the offer to have a doctor look at his wounds, saying he knew someone –, Clark put out the fires, rounded up the unconscious criminals, freed the ones who unfortunately passed away from under the fallen crane and called the authorities, the ones Natasha had already cleared up. Then, he finally went back to the Avengers Tower.

Bringing with him every single piece of K’un-Lunan technology left behind by the Hand. And Solomon Grundy himself.

Almost as if reading his mind, the repurposed shipping container Clark brought with him shook violently.

“Okay, that’s the third time this thing moved,” Clint said, jumping up and looking at Clark. “What the hell is that?”

He pointed at the cut, welded and folded shipping container in the corner of the room, now little more than a metal box, filled with smaller metal boxes. Natasha also turned to him.

“I, um, fought a zombie,” Clark started, not knowing exactly how to explain all that in a simple way. “A superpowered one that could regenerate very fast and could also reincarnate himself if killed, even if there was nothing left of the body. So I… I broke his bones and cut him into pieces,” Clark said, slowly, still very much bothered by what he had to do. “I stored the limbs separately because they were… Moving towards the torso and trying to reattach themselves. Simply locking them up wasn’t enough, they scratched the metal quite easily, so I melted some steel over them and encased them into a cocoon, so that they couldn’t move anymore. But they’re still trying, that’s what all that shaking is.”

Clint and Natasha simply stared back, their expressions blank; Clark supposed they didn’t yet know how exactly to react to something like that. Truth be told, neither did he. Grundy was dead, but the fact that he was moving didn’t make what he did any easier on his stomach.

“He doesn’t feel pain,” Clark felt the need to tell them. “I mean, not one bit, at all. He also doesn’t need to breathe or is capable of bleeding out, he doesn’t even have blood. And I didn’t remove his head, so he’s still alive. Well, as alive as a zombie can be.”

“Why the hell didn’t you toss that thing in the sun?!?” Clint finally exploded, looking horrified at the shaking shipping container Clark had folded into a smaller metal box.

“You know, you’re the second person to suggest this,” Clark realized. “What’s this fascination about tossing things into the sun? I don’t even know if I can do that.”

“I would toss a lot of things in the sun if I could,” Natasha mentioned, turning back to the TV. “It seems like a good way to deal with problems. Traffic? Toss the cars in the sun. Line to the coffee shop too long? Toss them in the sun. Tony think he’s being funny? Sun.”
“That’s not a very healthy way to deal with your problems, Natasha,” Clark pointed out, a tiny smile on his lips.

“Then you haven’t been subjected to Tony’s antics long enough. Trust me, you would cheer for the sun.” She thought for a second. “I thank all the gods that he’s not here today, we wouldn’t hear the end of it. Two prisoners and a zombie in the tower. I can’t say if he would be mad or overjoyed and I don’t know which one of those would make his jokes more annoying.” Natasha looked up. “Thanks for not telling him, Jarvis.”

“You are welcome, Miss Romanoff,” the AI answered, politely. “But I will have to inform him once he and Miss Pepper return from their business travel, I hope you understand that.”

“We’ll be long gone by then, so that’s not a problem.”

“Seriously, why the hell did you bring this here?” Clint insisted, interrupting them. “Do you want a zombie apocalypse? Because that’s how you get a zombie apocalypse.”

Clark sighed. “Like I said, if I had killed Grundy – that’s the zombie’s name –, he would just come back eventually. I don’t know when, I don’t know where, but one day we would have a superpowered zombie appearing somewhere without warning, attacking everyone.” He shrugged. “I rather deal with limbs moving by themselves than have that in my conscience.”

Clint seemed, if not happy, at least mollified by the answer; he still didn’t take his eyes from the metal box, though.

“And I don’t think he can infect people,” Clark went on, remembering the painful feeling of the black fungal tendrils digesting his hand. “If Grundy bites you, well, he probably won’t leave much behind to be reanimated. But don’t worry, I’ll take him somewhere else tomorrow. Somewhere better equipped to deal with things like this.”

Natasha glanced at him, understanding. He hoped the Ancient One could take Grundy from him. Clark honestly had no idea what to do with him if she refused. Bury each part of his body in a different place? Seemed like the plot of a bad movie and it wouldn’t work, because the main part – the head attached to the torso – was slowly regenerating. Soon, Grundy would be whole again. It would probably take some time, but he would.

Clark expected to find a solution before that, otherwise he would probably have to toss him into the sun for real.

“Well, you two have been busy,” Clint said, eventually, finally taking his eyes from the metal box. “What exactly is going on? How is a mob accountant, he tilted his head in Natasha’s direction, “related to a superpowered zombie?”


There was a long silence.

“Well, fuck,” Clint breathed. “Fury’s gonna love this.”

“Could you—” Natasha started.

“Not even at gun point,” Clint interrupted. Then he chuckled. “You’re not nearly charming enough to convince me to call Fury and tell him the Hand is real.”

“And about the superpowered zombie,” Natasha added, pretty much ignoring his refusal. “I’m sure
he’ll like that part too.”

“What about the dragon tombs?” Clark asked, smiling. “Or K’un-Lun, the dragon nation that has a gate right in the middle of China?”

Natasha turned to Clint. “It might be kinder if we just shoot the man, Clint.”

“Shoot me while you’re at it,” Clint retorted. “We have dragons now?”

“Yes. Apparently, Thor fought them a long time ago,” Natasha said. “Can you believe he never mentioned that?”

“Yes, yes I can,” Clint answered, immediately. He sighed. “I miss the old days.”

“Just normal spy things,” Natasha continued, wistful. “Ah, the nostalgia.” Then she looked at Clint again. “So, could you talk to—”

“No.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, be like that. I’ll remember it.”

They all turned back to the TV, starting to eat the cold food again. Until Clint looked back at them once more.

“Can you handle it?” he asked.

Slowly, both of them nodded.

“Probably,” Natasha said. “But I wouldn’t mind backup if the need arises,” she added.

Clint nodded in response. “I’ll be around, then. Hopefully Fury won’t send me in a mission for the next few days.”

Natasha smiled at him, before stretching her hand to grab a takeout box from the small table.

“Does anyone want the Szechuan Chicken?” she asked. She looked at Clark, a barely conceived mischievous expression on her face. “Clark?”

He winced at the smell, picturing in his mind a food box full of Leland’s hair instead of appetizing chicken; the drama of having enhanced senses, he was sure Matt could relate. Thor, by the amount and variety of food he ate without any issue, probably couldn’t; or he just had a very tough stomach.

Kudos to Natasha for gambling on a whim and hitting the target, all for the sake of annoying him. She had a very weird sense of humor.

They went back to eating in silence, mostly ignoring the television as the reporters went on and on about all the destruction at the docks and someone firing what “experts” imagined to be some kind of cannon in the middle of Hell’s Kitchen. Clark sighed; if he could have helped without destroying stuff, he would have, but Grundy didn’t leave him much option.

Hopefully, insurance would cover most of it. Ever since the Incident, some companies were actually selling “superhero insurance policies”, that covered damage caused by some selected individuals, like Tony, Thor, Hulk and, as a late addition, Superman.

When that didn’t help, the company “Damage Control”, jointly owned by the US government and
Tony, did what they could to cover the costs and fix everything. Good way to keep the city clean
and be the first in the scene when alien tech was involved.

SHIELD, no doubt directly involved in all this, approved. If they didn’t, Clark was pretty certain it
wouldn’t even exist.

Clark was so distracted that he only noticed the elevator approaching when it was almost there; he
gently lifted Natasha’s feet from his lap and got up, anxious. Bruce appeared when the doors
opened, briefly surprised to see Clark walking to him.

“She’s alright,” Bruce announced, quickly, raising his hands.

He breathed deeply, relieved. He knew she wasn’t dead, otherwise he would have heard it, but
listening from Bruce’s mouth made it seem real.

“It was touch and go for a while,” Bruce continued, removing his glasses to rub his eyes. “You did
a good job stopping the bleeding, but that poison made it tough for the team to operate properly. If
it weren’t for Kelex…” Bruce sighed tiredly, taking a small notepad from his pocket. “What was it
called?” He opened and closed his mouth a few times, finally giving up. “I can’t pronounce this…
Anyway, the poison was made using an old Chinese herb, one that’s been considered extinct for a
few centuries now. No one in the room had even heard of it, much less knew how to counter it. If
not for Kelex, well, safe to say the girl would’ve died.”

Clark raised his eyebrows, looking at Kelex in her bracelet form.

“Huh, I guess it pays off to have access to all the knowledge acquired by the Kryptonian Thinker
Guild,” he mentioned. “They have been studying Earth for a few thousand years. Thanks for that,
Kelex. I owe you one.”

“You are welcome, sir,” Kelex answered, polite as ever.

“Can I see her?” Clark asked.

“She’s still asleep, but sure, I’ll take you there.”

“Thanks, Bruce. Really,” Clark said, as they walked to the elevator. Natasha and Clint followed.

“Oh, I did very little, it’s the surgeons you have to thank for her pulling through this.”

“And I will, personally, just as soon as I see her.” The elevator’s doors closed and it began to
move, fast. “Say, Bruce, did you find anything… unusual about her?”

He shook his head, slowly. “We tested it, but there isn’t anything uncommon. Nothing enhanced,
no X-Gene, nothing. She’s a normal human teenage girl, as far as her body goes.”

Or as far as they could find it using science, Clark finished inside his mind. He had an inkling that
the girl’s power was related to magic somehow and it was unlikely that normal instruments could
find anything different about her.

“I, of course, disposed of all samples,” Bruce added. He sighed. “I know well what a single drop of
blood found by the wrong people can lead to.”

Bruce probably did, better than most. According to Natasha, that’s how the Army found him hiding
in Rio de Janeiro, a single misplaced drop of blood inside a soda bottle; a drop of blood full of
gamma radiation that almost killed the unlucky man who drank it, giving the Army a very big lead
to follow.

It wouldn’t be nice if something similar happened with the girl.

In no time, they arrived at the room the girl was and entered, quietly. She was lying in bed, sedated, an IV hooked to her arm, the beeping sound of the instruments the only noise in the room. Clark stopped by her side and for the first time he really took the time to look at her.

She was young, 15, maybe 16 years old, like he noticed before. Her hair was short, reaching her shoulders, so dark that it seemed to swallow the light. She was tall and her body, despite the injury, seemed fit and healthy. He looked at her face, carefully moving some strands of hair out of her eyes; she was a pretty girl, Clark concluded, especially now that her expression wasn’t twisted in pain and fear.

The one thing that bothered him was her paleness.

“Did she lose too much blood?” Clark asked Bruce. “Her skin is–“

“Pale as snow, yes,” Bruce finished. He frowned. “And yes, there are several marks on her skin. I think someone was taking her blood.“

Clark’s eyes hardened when he listened that. The very idea of that girl being literally bled by the Hand made him filled with anger.

Bruce tilted his head. “But she does seem to be naturally pale as well, that’s her skin tone,” he added. “So maybe is not as bad as it looks.”

He didn’t know if Bruce said that last bit to calm Clark or himself. Ignoring his anger for now, he turned to Natasha, studying the girl from the door.

“Did you find something about her, Natasha?”

Slowly, she nodded.

“Her name is Rachel Roth. She’s 15.”

Clark waited for her to go on, but she didn’t.

“That’s it?” he asked, surprised.

Natasha nodded again, scowling. Not at him, he knew, but at the poor amount of information she managed to find.

“I have a birth certificate and that’s it,” she said. “No other documents, school admissions, hospital records, bank account, juvenile records… It’s like she was born and disappeared, only to reappear right here. Her mother has a more colorful record, though. Angela Roth, arrested several times for petty crimes, drunkenly disorder, drug possession… Nothing serious or violent, but she had a busy life. Until she didn’t.”

Clark frowned. “What do you mean?”

“She had a daughter – father unknown – and that was the last we heard about them.” Natasha shrugged. “It’s not common, but it happens. There are some closed communities that leave little paperwork behind. Maybe they lived in one of those… But I don’t really believe that, not if the Hand is involved.”
He looked back at the girl.

“She’s powerful,” Clark finally said. “Very powerful. But I don’t think she’s a threat. Whatever the Hand wanted with her, she wasn’t enthusiastic about it.”

“Didn’t you say she crushed a guy like a fly?” Clint mentioned, though there wasn’t any bite to his words. In fact, Clint’s expression seemed almost protective when he looked at Rachel.

“She did kill Nobu, yes,” Clark agreed, remembering the horrific scene, “but I’m beginning to think he’s the one who put her inside a shipping container and bled her like cattle. I don’t approve of it, but I can understand… And she did surrender immediately after.” He looked at Clint. “Believe me, if she wanted to fight, I’m not sure I could beat her.”

That seemed to surprise all of them.

“Well, I think it’s best to ask her questions when she awakes tomorrow,” Bruce finally said. “As someone who can occasionally go too far when I’m angry,” understatement of the century, Clark thought, “I can tell that it’s best to talk when everybody is calm and relaxed. Let her rest, tomorrow we’ll see what she has to say.”

They all agreed, turning to leave the room and let Rachel rest. Clark hoped she would be better tomorrow.

“Is it okay if I crash here today?” Clark asked as they moved to the elevator. “I rather stay close if I’m needed.”

Translation: if Rachel woke up and decided to “Black Sky” the entire tower.

“Of course,” Natasha answered immediately. “I’ll show you to my room.”

Clark knocked his shoulder against the wall, when she said that, tripping over his own feet; there was a large crack where his shoulder hit.

“You room, I mean,” Natasha corrected herself, as if completely oblivious to what just happened, ignoring Clint and Bruce’s stunned looks at the broken wall. “Tony set aside an entire floor for you.”

He just kept staring, exasperated.

“Are you coming?” Natasha asked, holding the elevator door for him.

The tiny grin on her lips was enough proof – as if he needed any – that the whole thing was an elaborate prank to make a fool out of him.

And damn if she didn’t succeed.

Madame Gao slowly and carefully picked up a few different herbs, recognizing them by touch and smell alone. With practiced moves, she dropped them inside a wooden mortar and ground them into dust.

She had her eyes closed during all that, focusing only on her breathing, the aroma of the incense calming her mind.

Finally, she opened her eyes, gazing at the kneeling young man in front of her. She smiled.
“You will become a part of something greater than you,” Madame Gao said in the K’un-Lunan dialect. “Soon, you will see more than you ever could.”

The young man was shaking, she could see. She could smell his fear. But even so, he didn’t hesitate to grasp the branding iron Madame Gao gave him, the seal on the tip still blazing. He held it with both hands, breathing deeply.

Then he placed the blazing tip directly against his eye.

The scream pierced the night, but Madame Gao didn’t even flinch, holding her gaze. The young man was whimpering now, shaking more than ever, sweat dripping from his forehead, not only due to the heat, but to the pain.

And then, holding breath, he put the blazing tip against his other eye.

This time, he didn’t scream, maybe too weak to do so. He just whined like a wounded animal, his hands trembling so much that he almost dropped the branding iron. The young man pulled it slowly, the tip stuck to his burned eye for a moment.

Gao stared at the blank eyes of the young man for a moment, then she grabbed the branding iron and nodded to the two servants behind him.

“Leave me,” she ordered and in no time they dragged the young man away to be treated.

Without so much as another look in their direction, Madame Gao grabbed a small knife and scrapped the tip of the branding iron, removing the burnt bits of eye and dropping them into the mortar. When every single piece had been removed, she grabbed a vial and dropped its content inside the mortar as well.

The almost black blood mixed itself with the herbs and the burnt eyes. And then she poured all that into the fire, closing her eyes and breathing the foul smoke.

When she opened them, she wasn’t inside the ritual room anymore, but entirely surrounded by pure darkness, a place so cold that she shivered. There were shadows in every direction, no source of light or heat, and Madame Gao remained kneeled, waiting.

Two gigantic red eyes opened in the sky.

“You have failed me once again,” the thunderous voice said in K’un-Lunan. The voice was so powerful, so loud, that Gao felt her entire body tremble. She felt something grow inside her, something she didn’t feel for a very long time.

Absolute fear.

“My Lord, we–“

“You have lost Black Sky,” the voice continued, like a storm, ignoring her. “You have yet to reach my tomb and the Gates of K’un-Lun will open soon.” There was a long and deep snarl and she felt the place shake. “Your failures have put our alliance with Trigon in danger.”

The red eyes were suddenly closer and Gao could feel the air moving as he breathed.

“Perhaps I was wrong to trust humans. Perhaps you have lost sight of our destiny.”

“Never, my Lord!” Gao pleaded. “We can recover Black Sky. We will reach your tomb in time,
before K’un-Lun opens again.”

There was a long silence.

“I have lost faith in your ability to do so,” the voice announced and Gao felt her blood turn cold. “It has become clear to me that humans need to be guided.” The eyes glowed. “Revive Ao Shun. You are to follow his commands.”

“My Lord, the Pit is not stable yet. We needed more blood from Black Sky to make it so.”

“Is it not strong enough to revive him?”

Gao hesitated. “It is, but it will fade after that.”

The eyes approached even more. She could hear the scales scratching the ground all around her as he moved.

“So that is why you are hesitating? You feel Death approaching? You wanted to use the Pit first?”

Gao did not answer, lowering her head submissively.

“Take this as an incentive to move faster,” the powerful voice continued. “Linger for too long, fail again, and you will die as I did.”

The eyes went back to the sky again.

“Ao Shun will recover Black Sky and reach my tomb. And you will all obey him. Fail me again, Gao, and Death will be the least of your concerns.”

Suddenly, there was a red glow and Gao could see. A black dragon, so big that he stretched across the whole landscape, the long body twisting and turning all around her like an immense serpent. The enormous mouth was burning with fire.

And he breathed the fire everywhere.

Gao opened her eyes, jumping back, hitting the wall behind her; she was back at the ritual room, no longer in the Astral Dimension. She looked at herself, feeling her skin burning even though there were no marks. For a long moment, she breathed, regaining her calm.

The Hand could not fail again.

Hey guys, as promised, the following chapter. I hope you like it ^^

I couldn’t answer some of the reviews and messages you guys sent me yet, but I will as soon as I have some time. Thank you for the kindness, you people are awesome!

Hope you are all doing great!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!