Acts of Vengeance

by Praxidicae

Summary

Natasha Romanov is called in to S.H.I.E.L.D after an extended absence. There she learns of two prison breaks, the first at the underwater prison known as the Raft in New York harbor and the second at the Vault deep in the Rocky Mountains. In the case of the Raft, three notable survivors were seen, including two who were taken into custody but are oddly reluctant to speak. The third is a mysterious but powerful sorcerer who seems to have a deadly agenda.
Prologue: The Raft

When I compare
What I have lost with what I have gained,
What I have missed with what attained,
Little room do I find for pride.

I am aware
How many days have been idly spent;
How like an arrow the good intent
Has fallen short or been turned aside.

But who shall dare
To measure loss and gain in this wise?
Defeat may be victory in disguise;
The lowest ebb is the turn of the tide.

--Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Loss and Gain

Prologue: The Raft

The scene before him was chaos. He couldn’t help but venture the tiniest smirk of admiration, imperceptible to most of those present as they were swept up in the mayhem before them. Through the barely open position of the massive doors, he and his guards could now plainly observe what they had been able to hear as soon as they breached the interior of the facility: there were approximately 100 unruly prisoners loose and gathered in the dining hall, the only area of the prison which allowed for enough uninterrupted space for them all to congregate. Peppered among the rampaging inmates were other creatures, both humanoid and not, presumably here by the same invitation as he was—although, perhaps their presence had been requested less...forcefully, he thought with a dismissive sneer. In all, the celebrants numbered around 400, their hoots and whooping coupled with the physical destruction of the surrounding furnishings and minor infrastructure forming a deep, slow thrum of noise which radiated through the walls like a beating heart.

At the head of the room, a makeshift stage had been erected from the few surviving dining tables, along with various other materials at hand in the sparsely decorated interior. Onto this tenuous surface stepped the supremely confident figure of their host, a sight which served only to further incite the unbridled rage and ecstasy of those closed within the walls that barely contained them. He was lithe and tall by human standards, and he was swathed in the gray, shapeless uniform that marked him as one of the recently incarcerated among their ranks. He drank in their attention like a life-giving draught, seeming to inhale their enthusiasm as he beamed at them, hands outstretched as if welcoming them to an opulent feast of his own design. The step was familiar, the observer realized, as the speaker crossed as closely to the front of the admiring throng as he could pass
while still remaining on his swiftly-cobbled elevation. The unbroken alabaster of his skin betrayed his superhuman origins, and it reflected the fluorescent lighting with a dead sheen. The sharp, metallic extensions at the tips of his fingers were new, however. It made him more intimidating than he had been when last the watcher had known him, less human than he had ever been—although he had only been barely that in the first place.

The host used his hands to indicate he wished for silence in which to address them, and, after a lingering moment, the crowd complied. He spoke a few rapid words just loud enough to be heard by all those in the room, and a handful of their number responded zealously. Most of those present did not comprehend the alien language, and so they merely waited, soundlessly. From the stage left corner of the table came the translation for the crowd: “Welcome, free beings of all origins!” These words resulted in the anticipated rapturous applause. Again, the host motioned for silence, which he grudgingly received. Outside the room, the observer felt one of his escorts tighten the feverish grip on his bicep, clearly in anticipation of their approaching entrance.

The pale figure extended his arms again in the semblance of a warm greeting; however, the penetrating and unholy red of his eyes greatly reduced the softness of the gesture. There were more words, the language guttural but elegant, followed by the translation: “I have invited you here to fulfill a promise. Our Masters have sworn that there would be a Reckoning, when the forgotten and the enslaved would rise…” The translator paused as if he were being deeply affected by the words, his voice quivering with the weight of his swelling emotions. He was an odd creature himself, to be sure: he was fundamentally humanoid in nature, but his hide was so pink that he seemed to have been skinned, and his elongated face and sharply pointed nasal ridge made him appear decidedly rat-like. His fingernails were long and curved, sharpened until they had the perfect likeness of claws. He was also clad in the gray garb of the prison.

The pale man continued, as did the echoed interpretation: “Today they have struck the first blow in this conflict, freeing their brothers who were sentenced to waste eternally in this dungeon beneath the waters of Earth…” The rat-man paused to let the host continue, his gaze never wavering from its worshipful guise. “...and they have brought us, as restitution for our unjust incarceration…a mighty gift!” The pallid figure pointed to indicate the entrance behind him of a great hulking beast of a creature in similar dress, his enormous hands cradling an object covered in a plain, white cloth, his grasp as gentle as if he held the body of a sleeping child. His height was nearly twice that of the host—even from his perch on the table he had to look up to the man-like beast—and the width of the creature was such that those assembled needed to step back several paces to accommodate his girth. Again, this being was well known to the one who was waiting at the door.

“Juggernaut…” he said wistfully, not realizing that he had spoken out loud—albeit in a whisper—until his chaperones reacted with a reverential look. For all the theatrics about the notorious inmates who had been freed from their incarceration this day, those presumed to be dangerous to the residents of this feeble planet, he was the only one among them who was of any true threat. How had they managed to contain him in this place for so long? It was almost laughable to think that S.H.I.E.L.D. could have restrained a being of that strength and enormity...surely they were working with technologies far beyond what they had dared reveal to their precious team of Avengers. He chuckled gently to himself at the thought.

“A gift...of great power!” the disparate voices continued in their own languages. “Power that we can wield to punish those who have sought to unjustly punish us!”
As if on cue, the lumbering giant removed the covering from the item in his ample palms, revealing the object to the watchful crowd. The simultaneous intake of breath from all those assembled seemed to extract all the air from the room. There were murmurs among them in many languages, both alien and terrestrial, but one phrase was predominant above all: “the Cube…”

The hand on his upper arm dug noticeably into his flesh. Despite the discomfort, the watching figure formed a leering smile.

The awed murmurings of the crowd continued for several minutes, until louder exclamations began to dominate, their tone dissenting. Finally, a voice called out clearly above the throng: “But is it not useless to us? None of us can control it!”

The pale figure looked greatly pleased by this response, his lips pulling back into a cruel but jovial smile. The action resulted in a baring of his metal, spiked teeth, an effect that was unsettling at the least. The throng had grown attentively silent, curiously awaiting his response. His mysterious words hung in the air for a weighted moment as the rat-man had become so entranced by the powerful object that he had ceased to interpret them. He shook off his stupor, and said, “This is true: there is no one now among us who can wield it!” The host’s ghostly claws hovered over the ethereal blue of the cube, as if he much desired to touch it but would never dare dream himself to be worthy of the privilege. “There is one who can!” he finished, his eyes locked on the glowing object and glazed with unfettered lust.

There was a sharp, insistent nudge just below the waiting man’s shoulder blade, an unmistakable prompt that this was his time of his entry. Two of the creatures who accompanied him stepped forward to heave open the large metal doors through which they had been observing, a third tugged him roughly forward by the chains which bound his wrists, and the fourth remained steadfastly beside him, pinching his shoulder callously between his thick fingers with more force than was plainly necessary. When he did not immediately start moving forward, the creature at his side landed a sharp blow to the center of his back, propelling him forward without argument. The fettered man would not give his guards the satisfaction of seeing him stumble, however, and he caught his step gracefully, advancing with his posture erect and seemingly composed.

All heads turned to mark his approach, a reverent hush falling over the audience once again. Each being regarded him carefully, their eyes wandering over his form and brazenly studying every detail to deduce his identity. The prisoner felt exposed before them with so many roaming gazes falling upon him in his restrained state, probing him for all of his secrets. Fortunately, the cowl of his thick cloak obscured his face and mercifully restricted him from having to meet any of their looks directly. Let them be tormented for a while longer, he thought with a clandestine sneer. Perhaps it’s better if they don’t know what they’re actually in for.

When the ‘guest’ and his escort reached the foot of the stage, the pale man knelt to greet him. The host’s smile was predatory, and he brought one slender digit to rest upon the chained man’s face, the pointed metal scraping just lightly enough to keep from drawing blood. “Welcome, Kaal,” he whispered intimately in his native tongue. “It has been too long. Still, your fortunes haven’t changed much…” He eyed the shackles that bound the prisoner’s hands with a wicked gleam, his lips parting into a depraved grin which revealed how much he was enjoying the other man’s current position. The expression bared nearly every one of his glinting, unnatural teeth. The
hooded figure understood every word that the had been purred directly into his face, but he did not shift a single muscle of his countenance in response.

“This is Kaal!” the pale man announced, spreading his arms wide, one pointing to the indicated personage and the other to the frenzied crowd at his feet. When he spoke this time, it was in the English language of Earth, which most among them could comprehend. The translation changed to the tongue of the pallid one’s birth, the rat man struggling only minimally with the alien tongue. “A...friend...” Their host choked on the word like the foul lie that it was. “We knew each other from a previous incarceration. Far from here…” His words trailed off, and he paused, lost in a trance-like state, his eyes hardening like dull steel at the memories.

Beneath the cowl, Kaal let a genuine smile play upon his lips. His mind also teased out a few images of the mutual time they had shared in that place, but the awful gravity of the thoughts allowed them to only play briefly in his consciousness. Yet their time there together had been limited, as the speaker had been released after a minimal sentence. The true nature of that place had barely revealed itself to the pale man, and still the memories brought his bravado to a grinding halt. Kaal chuckled, his shoulders swaying gently. If he only knew...truly knew. This being was not really from that place--not shaped by it. The hooded figure had tasted that place, felt it in the ache of his bones and the bile in his throat. He had let it own him, encircle him with its anguish and let it press him to his very core. He knew it as surely as he knew himself, every muscle and sinew sewn into his very soul. Its torment had caressed every inch of his skin like a scorned lover and had claimed him over and over in that endless blackness until his soul was laid cruelly bare. The horrific sights and smells--the exquisite suffering--of that place would be folded into the pleats his burial shroud.

This was going to be too, too satisfying.

“Kaal is a sorcerer...a mage of much repute in certain corners of the universe.” The pale man had shrugged off the dark remembrances and had found his rhythm again, crossing the precarious surface with endless grace. “He has intimate knowledge of the Tesseract, and he can wield it --not just as a power source, but as a weapon!” The elated shrieks of the crowd were more forceful now, the walls nearly shuddering with their electric chorus. “He will be the bearer of our retribution!” finished the host, his vile mien turning again upon the bound man. His outstretched arm reached towards him tauntingly, the fingers curling in the guise of a mocking caress. “And all because I asked him soooo nicely,” he finished, the smile on his lips widening with derision. The throng responded with pervasive laughter.

Kaal gave a barely perceptible nod of acknowledgement, his countenance straining to contain the resentment he longed to convey. The manacles on his wrists rubbed rudely at his skin, the itch just enough to remind him of their galling presence. Just minutes more...soon, so soon...

“Kaal, my friend,” the pale man requested. “Would you do us the honor…?”

“It would be my pleasure,” the sorcerer answered flawlessly in the alien tongue. He paused, considering his bound hands. “If you would be so kind…” He held them up to the creature who towered above him, his eyes fraudulent in their imploring.
The host clicked his tongue reproachfully. “Now, now,” he scolded softly. “You don’t expect me to free you, do you?” He chortled to himself. “You take me for a fool, my friend.” He knelt again, taking the line of the prisoner’s jaw gently but teasingly in his grasp. “I like you just like this...” he hissed tauntingly into the shell of his ear. “Restrained,” he finished gloatingly.

The captive twisted his face until his skin slipped from between the pale man’s fingers; it was his final show of defiance. “As you wish,” he whispered in surrender. He took two steps toward the Cube, his hands slightly aloft and unfolding as much as his manacles would allow. He reached out to it, bowing his head and crossing in front of the spectral figure who still knelt on the stage. Kaal kept his stride long and confident to show his audience that he was not daunted by their presence but rather a threat to even a gathering of their number and composition. Let them wonder at what the true measure of his abilities might be, he thought as he neared the object of his attention. Let them be amazed . . .

At least at first.

From the edge of his vision, he caught the presence of one of his erstwhile guardians, a thick, sharp-edged sword gripped steadily in his hands. It was finely honed and hefty enough to suit his purpose, he was certain. The creature who held it was somewhat reptilian with a bipedal frame, its biceps broad with strength but his eyes dull for want of a great intellect. This was good, Kaal agreed to himself; he measured the distance between himself and the blade with dizzying speed as he continued to approach his luminous goal with a proud gait. As he drew close to the Cube, the surface began to darken and become disturbed, swirling with an ominous energy. A few crackling bands of light danced along the outer verge of the Tesseract, and the static pulses it produced released a noticeable scent of electricity which raced like adrenaline through the onlookers.

As he continued to extend his reach towards the turbulent face of the Cube, he studied the etched surface of his bonds, confirming the words of the spell that were written there. It was a powerful charm, intended to restrain his ability to channel his magic for purposes other than the minor manipulation of physical objects of power. Its sophistication made him briefly consider who had conjured it for them, as the intricacy of it betrayed a vast capacity for the craft. However, it possessed a fatal flaw that was overtly present to a master of the art such as himself: the runes were imprinted across the links of the chain between his fetters, and the spell must remain entirely intact to retain its sway over him. He was intended only to give them a show, a dazzling but impotent demonstration of the cosmic havoc that was to come. If it was a show they wanted, then it was a show he could provide, and gladly so. He did love to be accommodating.

The anticipation made his lips curl in fiendish glee.

It took mere seconds for him to survey his surroundings for what he required, and he did so with furtive glances, undetected by those who sought to control him. It was all coming together so perfectly, just exquisitely so. He focused his strength on the heart of the object, the inner point from where it drew the most catastrophic of its faculties, and it harkened to his extended grasp but could not yet answer its call, the magic at his wrists maddeningly subduing it. Its insides roiled with the potential it longed to unleash, covering its surface with an even more restless force, the sparks roping along its face intensifying. A pregnant hush fell over the gathering, with all eyes bent toward the surging energy source.
Now…

It would all need to happen in a seamless instant, he knew, before the muscle in the room could move against him in an organized fashion. His advantage would not be in strength of force, but rather in his swiftness coupled with the element of surprise, an asset which lasted only seconds. With the attention of his wardens trained so heavily on the Cube, they did not notice when Kaal drew his right knee forward enough to gather some momentum. It then propelled backwards, his foot landing a blow squarely at the waist of the guard at his back, and the force caused it to keel clumsily to the floor. The robust staff that the creature had held in its grasp landed consummately across the crook created by the sorcerer’s ankle in its still backwards position. He then propelled the rod swiftly in the air with a powerful upward stroke of his foot, and it landed splendidly in his waiting hands.

His bindings allowed just enough movement for him to maneuver the staff effectively as a weapon, and he immediately put it to use on the beasts who attended him, the blunt end finding the face of the one to his left and the side abruptly side-swiping the skull of the one on his right. As its body fell to the floor with a graceless thump, it unhanded the massive blade that Kaal required. He flung the staff at the pale man who was still gaping in disbelief at the bodies of the fallen guardsmen, and the blow caused him to stumble rearwards into the hulking form of the Juggernaut. Kaal quickly snatched up the sword, wedging the handle between his feet and bringing his wrists heavily down on either side of it, breaking the chain neatly in two. The entire ploy had been accomplished in just a few heartbeats, and yet the sorcerer knew that he must continue to be swift before the only true threat in the room began to stir.

With the saber now in his grip, he easily whirled on the remaining guard, severing his head from his shoulders before he could draw his holstered firearm. The first three attendants were now rising to their feet, shaking off the initial stupor of the sudden attack and replacing it with a palpable rage. *Quickly…Kaal urged himself…no time to think.* He spun on each of them in quick succession, his motions with the blade so nimble that they appeared as a blurred onslaught with no corporeal force behind them. The trio of reptilians fell in a heap of dismembered limbs and cleaved torsos. He then instantly extended his free hand again towards the Tesseract, and this time it answered his beckoning with full strength. A low rumble began in its depths, quickly escalating to a deafening tremor that shook the ground below them. The crowd fell hard to the surface beneath them, starting with those closest to the object and then rapidly billowing outwards from its source. As the wave subsided, there were only two beings still on their feet: the mage and the Juggernaut.

Keenly aware that he could not defeat this force with physical strength, the mage knew he had precious seconds to devise a plan. He had overcome scores of enemies--dozens at once, at times--with his agility alone, but he knew that this was a moment for both speed and cunning. No sooner had they locked eyes from across the room than the Juggernaut burst forth, his monstrous arms moving like pistons at his sides. The mage had a split second to react, and he used it to his fullest advantage, driving the point of the solid blade he still carried into the concrete floor, planting a foot atop its firmly ensconced handle, and launching himself nimbly toward the oncoming foe. His foot caught the beast sideways across the temple, causing him to pause more in shock than pain. Kaal then dropped smoothly to the ground and slid across the floor between the giant’s broadly spread legs. Rising instantly to his feet, he extended a hand to grasp the Cube which was now tantalizingly within reach, and his grip closed upon the top face of the object...just as an ashen, spectral hand fell upon his own.
The pale man’s visage drew to within an inch of his. “I’m disappointed, Kaal,” he hissed into the sorcerer’s face. “I thought we understood one another.” As the last of these words crossed his lips, his malicious smile widened further. The lights in the room flickered for only an instant...and then total darkness. He should have anticipated this move, thought the sorcerer. After all, this power was how he had earned his name among the nameless. Blackout...

The Tesseract still hummed with a faint glow, throwing an unearthly incandescence upon their profiles. From his peripheral vision, Kaal could only see a few precious lengths into the blackness, but his other senses were still sharp, and thankfully so. The approaching vibrations on the floor behind him betrayed the approach of his mammoth opponent, although it was apparent that the creature was trying to be stealthy. With his vast size, this was blatantly absurd, of course. Kaal called upon all of his discipline to remain motionless, continuing to maintain the gaze of the demon before him with confident disdain.

Just a few more steps...be patient...be precise. “Oh, but we do,” Kaal purred seductively. “I understand you all too well...”

The mage could feel the brush of wind on his nape, the result of a huge hand being drawn back to strike at him. He had a split second to react, calling the power of the Tesseract to himself instantaneously. The Juggernaut saw his swing pass through the empty air and fall instead against the cheek of the pale man, sending him airborne. He landed against the far wall with an inelegant thump and then slid downwards into a motionless heap at its base. The lighting in the room immediately flickered back to life.

In that moment Kaal could have used the potential energy of the object to send himself anywhere in the universe. Yet he chose to materialize near the entranceway through which he had recently entered (shackled and heavily guarded, he reminded himself) with the Cube still poised gracefully in his open palm. It would not do to leave the throng like this. Not with so much left undone. . .

Juggernaut spun to face him, quickly recovering from the astonishment of his quarry’s sudden evaporation. The sorcerer gave him a perilous glare, a visual warning that to charge at this juncture would be decidedly fatal. The leviathan responded with a move which was unprecedented in his destructive history: hesitation. The corners of Kaal’s lips curled into the most ominous grin, and he elevated the Cube until it was more prominent in the giant’s sight. ‘Follow me, and this is your fate’, the mage challenged him, his eyes crackling with an accusatory fire. ‘Let me go, and you may yet survive’.

Two more beats passed before the hulking man had made up his mind, and he lunged forward with renewed conviction, a threatening snarl escaping his lips with the sudden effort. There were few forces in the known universe which could halt his charge and hence Kaal had been trying to curtail this attack from the beginning. His options had suddenly been whittled down to one.

And, oh, he so desperately needed this to work.
Summoning the whole of his power from within, he instantly fed it into the Cube which responded with a blinding flare of light and energy. A second tremor, more violent than the first, shuddered through the floor, keeping the terrified onlookers in a state of stunned inaction. This convulsion paled, however, to the one which followed when the Juggernaut met the perimeter of an invisible barrier of force, and he slammed against it with a power that rippled through the exterior walls until their very foundations groaned with the weight of it. The giant then took three stumbling steps backwards before he crashed heavily to the ground, motionless. He was merely dazed, the sorcerer knew, and he was unsure if he was prepared to withstand another onslaught. The power he had used to awaken the Cube had drained his reserves to a worrisome level. Furthermore, the repeated shaking and pounding on the building structure was bound to have damaged it irreparably—not exactly a pleasant idea when there was thousands of gallons of seawater pressing in on all sides. It was time to take his bow and leave the crowd wanting more.

With a portion of what little magic that remained him, he teleported the Tesseract to a place of safety with a graceful flourish of his hands. From behind the impenetrable wall of energy, he could see the form of the pale man, seemingly recovered from the earlier blows he had taken. The only evidence was the lavender stain of a bruise blooming along his left temple and the blood seeping from his cracked lower lip. He strode confidently to the invisible barrier, baring his metal teeth in a silent challenge to his rival. His palm flattened against the wall, and he leaned towards the barrier with a look of consummate hatred adorning his cruel features. “Shouldn’t you be running?” he murmured, relying on the sorcerer to perceive the words by reading his lips.

Kaal nodded, wordlessly. He spun on his heel, mustering all of his composure to contain his absolute exhaustion. As he breached the expansive doors at the exit, he turned again to the creature he had known as ‘Blackout’. Knowing that his lips would not be very visible from this distance, the sorcerer projected the words into the head of the demon with ominous gravity. “I can run . . .” he gloated, then paused to let one final, percipient grin cross his mouth. “How well can you swim?”

The pale man’s glare melted quickly from arrogance to fear as the words settled upon him. As if on cue, the first creak of complaint became audible from the distressed walls around them, and a baleful crack began to open in the concrete behind him. Blackout’s eyes widened in a flicker of panic, which was promptly replaced with a growl of pure rage. His fist met the unseen barrier with a force that was sure to have fractured even his superhuman bones. Kaal did not linger to see the water breach the interior, but he could hear the subsequent rush of the waves at his back as he threw the doors closed in his wake.
Part I: Denial Chapter 1

Truly it is evil to be full of faults, but it is a still greater evil to be full of them, and to be unwilling to recognize them. -- Blaise Pascal

“Ma’am?” the barista asked again. “Are you ready to order?”

She was ready… of course she was. She had spent the last 15 minutes hovering inconspicuously in the back of the cafe, casting stealthy glances at the menu board from behind the opaque lenses of her oversized sunglasses in order to decipher the inscrutable lexicon it displayed. She had committed a lengthy string of adjectives to memory by mimicking the seemingly endless line of middle-class customers before she stepped up to the register. She could speak seven languages and infiltrate a world-class security system with just a laptop, a few lines of code, and a precious few minutes in which to type them. Therefore, she could order a simple cup of coffee in a hipster beverage franchise. She could do this.

“Tall…” she began, hesitating longer than she would ever admit. “No, grande…the bigger one… latte,” she paused, only having reproduced less than half the adjectives she had intended to regurgitate. She was actually breaking a mild sweat; this had to be unprecedented. Then her pocket began to buzz with the unmistakable flurry of an incoming call. And not the personal phone--the ‘International Intrigue and Dire Diplomatic Emergency’ phone.

Oddly, she was mildly relieved.

“Do you want any syrup in that?” the perky twenty-something girl behind the counter chirped.

“Sure,” she replied flippantly, reaching for the phone in the inner pocket of her brown suede jacket.

“What kind?”
What kinds of syrup were there? Surely she wasn’t talking about...maple? The phone was continuing its incessant vibrations in her hand, and the screen displayed the urgency of the matter with the name of the caller: ‘Mom,’ which was code not for the being that bore her, but the entity that owned her. She had to take this, no question.

“Whatever kind you think would be great,” she barked while trying to sound accommodating. The barista shot back a look which clearly conveyed annoyance so she quickly ran back through the list of words she had meant to spout out from the beginning. “Hazelnut,” she concluded, and this seemed to please her inquisitor so she backed it with a confident smile. “I have to take this,” she whispered apologetically while indicating the wildly resonating device in her hand. "It's my mom." The clear-skinned girl behind the counter nodded sympathetically.

She touched ‘answer’ and then cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder while digging into the depths of her purse for her wallet. She had been out of the “real” world for so long, it seemed, that even mundane tasks like this felt awkward to her. “Hey….what’s up?” she asked casually, as if she wasn’t one-hundred percent certain that she was going to hear those six little words in response.

“We need you to come in.”

“Of course. I’m just getting some coffee.” She handed the barista a five dollar bill.

“We know where you are. There is a car en route to your location.”

She smiled to herself as she recognized the owner of the matter-of-fact voice in her ear. The gesture turned to a definite frown as the woman behind the counter handed her back just a few coins. “Seriously?” she mumbled as she moved to the other end of the counter.

“You sound disappointed.”

“It’s not that...it's just…” she was now wrestling with putting her change back into the wallet and then the wallet back into her bag with the phone still perched on her shoulder. “…when did coffee get so damned expensive? It’s practically just bitter water.”

“Did you get a latte?” the voice continued in a monotone, all business.

“Yes, which is just bitter water with foamed milk.”

“Have you tasted it yet?”

“Well, no,” she admitted, slinging her purse towards her back and out of the way. How do women deal with carrying these cumbersome things all the time, anyway?

“It’s heaven in a cardboard sleeve.”

“You want me to bring you one, don’t you?” she smirked.

“Grande, vanilla, skinny with an extra shot,” he rattled off with an ease that she envied.

“Sure, anything for you. I missed you,” she replied, grabbing her beverage and heading back to the far side of the counter. “I’ll see you in a few.” She ended the call and shrugged at the barista. “My mom wants a cup,” she explained, then spouted off the order with more confidence this time.

“Okay. What’s your mom’s name?” the lady asked good-naturedly, a Sharpie poised to scribble the moniker on the surface of the cup.
“Phil,” she stated, choosing to ignore the raised eyebrow she received in return.

“You don’t look happy to see me, Agent Coulson,” she deadpanned, handing him the promised latte.

“Not unhappy, Agent Romanov,” he answered. “After all, you brought me heaven.” He removed the lid in order to inhale the heady aroma. “I just figured you would be more … shocked to hear from me.” He took a tentative sip, swishing the contents with reverence as if tasting a well-aged wine.

“Are you kidding, Coulson? No one has the decency to stay dead around this place.” She gave him a knowing glance from under her shades. “I had a suspicion you were too committed to the agency to let a little thing like death get in the way of your work.” She took a seat at one of the nearby workspaces— it was all smooth, clean edges and cutting-edge technology. Despite the recent upheaval, it was all still so... so S.H.I.E.L.D. She could not have felt more at home. “Does this mean I’m active again?” she offered hopefully.

“Yes, Agent Romanov—” (he paused for another obscenely satisfying drink) -- “I’m afraid it does.”

“Good.” Natasha began to pull items from her oversized purse: extra shades, her remaining paper money, some reloadable toll cards for the subway. “Then throw this thing in the nearest river, would you?” She pitched the bag and its remaining contents at one of the agents who had escorted her in. She turned back to Phil. “I’m having a little trouble blending in with the regulars,” she explained unashamedly.

“You will find that your non-civilian skillset is still valued here,” Agent Coulson assured her. “In fact, we could use your powers of interrogation right now, if you would oblige us.” He motioned towards the closed metal door at his back. “We’ve had these two on ice for about seventy-two hours now, and we can’t get a word out of one....” He crossed over to the computer on the desk in front of her. “May I?”

“Sure,” she replied. She pulled up the chair from a neighboring workstation to use as a footrest, and Coulson didn’t even twitch when she propped her high-heeled boots noisily onto it.

He typed furiously for about twenty seconds and then turned the monitor to fully face her. “The other one is... well, he’s just... pitiful, frankly,” he finished. His tone did not portray any of the pity of which he spoke.

The screen showed two separate holding cells, each containing what was obviously a detainee with a lengthy backstory. One was so pale he was barely visible against the industrial white backdrop of the walls, and the other was off-pink and completely hairless with murine features. Romanov was instantly intrigued, and she stood and leaned over to study the subjects more carefully. This was not going to be a run-of-the-mill spy mission.

“Where did you find these two?” she inquired brusquely, crossing her arms as if to ward off the strangeness of what she was seeing. The last time she had to deal with such alien-looking creatures she had been helping to fend off a full-scale extraterrestrial invasion, and that was not ground she wanted to cover again anytime soon.

“New York Harbor, off Rikers Island,” Coulson explained. “I should probably tell you, though, that there had been quite a bit of excitement in the area just prior to us fishing them out of the water.” He turned and sat on the edge of the desktop, mirroring her cross-armed stance. “There was a prison riot... but not at Rikers.” He paused and searched her features for some bit of recognition.
So he wanted to know how much she knew. “The Raft,” she answered without pause. There was no reason to play ignorant with a fellow agent at this level. Only agents with the highest security clearance knew of the existence of this underwater prison for the most uncontrollable of inmates—or those who were savvy enough to have snooped around in the S.H.I.E.L.D. databases without detection. Coulson was assuming (quite correctly) that she was one of the latter. This detention center was one of the agency’s dirtier little secrets, as the methods of containment for such powerful beings often straddled the boundaries of both ethical and humane. “I’m going to need whatever details you have, you know that,” she finished, hoping that he would glaze over her apparent knowledge of the unknowable.

“Then we should start with the prison riot,” he continued without missing a beat. He executed a few more urgent keystrokes during which the two strange captives disappeared and were replaced by some grainy security footage that had been recorded from such a distance as to be nearly useless. “There was a riot that lasted nearly 18 hours. It began at about 0300 when the cell doors all opened simultaneously of their own accord. Even the solitary cells.” His face became even more grave.

Natasha nodded, knowing that whomever—or whatever—was kept in solitary confinement in a place like the Raft must be unbelievably monstrous.

“The security cameras went offline at the same exact moment. We have had 48 hours to process the breach, and our best techs cannot even begin to determine how it was pulled off.” He pressed a crooked finger to his upper lip in lingering disbelief. Meanwhile, the muddy footage continued to play on the screen behind him. Natasha raised her eyebrows in an obvious challenge. “Yeah, I know...the footage. Well, there was one camera hidden high up in a pillar of the dining room. It wasn’t integrated into the main system because it wasn’t one of ours: it had been placed there by Tony Stark several years ago in order to spy on us. The Raft was one of his little discoveries when he hacked our Helicarrier during the Avengers Initiative: Manhattan edition, and he was trying to prove that we were up to Abu Ghrain-style antics down there. We haven’t determined how he managed to get it in, but he wasn’t able to penetrate further than the cafeteria. Needless to say, he has never been able to prove a more grievous infraction than ‘Meatless Mondays’ so Amnesty International hasn’t been very interested,” he smirked.

“But Stark came clean after he found out what happened down there,” she guessed.

“The power supply was nearly exhausted—and the position was terrible since the placement was done very much on-the-fly—but we were able to recover some equally terrible footage.”

“Can we clean it up?” she queried, hopefully.

“We already have,” he admitted.

“So, why even show it to me?” It was not a spiteful question, she was just trying to expedite the big reveal that she assumed was coming.

He suddenly faced the monitor and keyboard again, and she could not see exactly what he was up to. “You can vaguely see the figures of many persons gathered in the dining hall. They used it as a base for their riot. The strange thing is, you can see more inmates than there actually were in the facility.” He stepped away to allow her to see the recording. He had forwarded it slightly until, sure enough, one could determine that there were a sea of bodies collected in the modest room. No details still, but there was a definite number of free-moving shadows which presumably each denoted a separate entity. “There were 87 inmates registered at the Raft. Last count was somewhere around 140 people in that room. The fire department would have had a conniption.”
“What happened to the guards?” she asked, afraid of what the answer was likely to be.

“Most of them were not alive to begin with so the loss of actual life was not that great, thankfully. They were mostly robots--super high-tech androids, some of which were controlled remotely. It was too great a risk to have real guards in most cases. The Raft was designed as basically a metal tube descending straight into the depths of the water; there is essentially one way in and one way out of every level. In the case of a jailbreak, escape, or prison riot such as this, the inmates would be easy to contain...but it would be a deathtrap for any of the workers due to this same principle.”

Natasha leaned back in her wheeled chair and crossed her arms crisply in front of her. “So where did all the others come from?”

Agent Coulson brought up another screen, this time with a surveillance film which was obviously taken outside the complex. The image showed the top of the Raft from a great distance above, probably taken from a hovering vehicle--likely a helicopter. “We couldn’t risk sending any personnel into that environment so we kept watch on the exit in the hope that we could pick them up one-by-one as they tried to leave. But there were others who came in from outside…” He zoomed in on the darkened image so that she could discern several approaching vehicles, including several speedboats and similar craft which looked to be perhaps extraterrestrial. The time lapse displayed a range of several hours over which dozens of beings arrived via these various craft and disappeared into the depths of the institution beneath.

“We think they were invited. The prisoners and their, uh . . . guests assembled in the dining hall for several hours. But the party didn’t really start until…” the senior agent brought up a close-up of a small craft arriving at the entrance “. . . these guys showed up.”

There were three large, reptilian creatures and one tall, hooded figure whose face remained hidden throughout their approach. It was apparent even from this distance that the hooded one was shackled and restrained by the other three. “They took over a prison just to bring in a prisoner?” She could not begin to conclude where this could possibly be heading, but her patience was beginning to noticeably thin. She looked at him from under pursed eyebrows that clearly stated, ‘wherever this is going, please get there faster.’

Actually, the ‘please’ was tenuous.

He switched back to the original footage. “You can see them enter the dining hall here,” he indicated with his index finger. There were indeed four figures approaching what was presumably the front of the room, but they were just as smudged as the others had been.

“I’ll take your word for that,” she huffed impatiently.

A few moments passed during which nothing at all could be perceived from the indistinct image, and then a flurry of movement filled the screen followed by the pulsing of an eerie blue glow from near the center of the picture. Everything went black for several seconds (except for the blue glow which remained constant), and then the lighting came back just as suddenly as it had departed. After the passage of a few more moments, the lens cracked, and the picture ended.

“Someone discovered the hidden camera,” she ventured. Romanov was not certain of what she had seen, but there didn’t seem to be much that could be derived from that poor quality video.

“Actually, the camera lens was shattered by what is being referred to as a ‘seismic event.’ ”

“An earthquake?”
“It measured slightly on the Richter scale. However, the origin was traced to be inside the Raft.”

At that, Natasha actually sat up and began to take interest. “Inside the Raft?” What could possibly have the force to cause a disturbance that significant?

“What’s more, it destabilized the structure of the building,” Coulson continued. “The weight of the surrounding water collapsed the walls, and it filled the interior within just a few minutes.”

“Survivors?”

“Your two new friends next door.”

“Any others?”

“Two more that we know of, actually.” The screen then displayed the mugshot of the largest (presumably) human male Natasha had ever laid eyes upon. “Cain Marko--a.k.a. ‘Juggernaut,’” Coulson explained. “The most physically powerful inmate in the Raft. Virtually unstoppable, as his name implies. Fortunately for our unexpected guests, he was able to overcome the pressure of the incoming water after the walls gave way. As he swam out, he was carrying his two fellow prisoners, one in each arm. When we surprised him at the surface, however, he abandoned them and made a hasty exit, damaging two of our watercraft in the process. His current whereabouts are unknown.”

“What about the other one?” Agent Romanov settled back into her chair and tried to relax her posture as much as possible.

“His identity is unknown,” Agent Coulson admitted, his tone almost apologetic. “We know he exists, but not his name or race or . . . even his species, really. The face is never visible.”

Now the screen displayed more footage of the Raft taken from the camera hovering above. However, instead of showing more arrivals, this time there was someone coming out of the porthole on the surface of the structure. He flipped up the covering of the entrance and leapt out onto the deck with a feline grace. The camera zoomed in to focus on the individual just as floodlights lit up the scene from above. There was a steady wind blowing the garments of the departing figure, belying that the vehicle above was almost undoubtedly a helicopter; however, the subject did not acknowledge the light, noise, or breeze from the lingering chopper. What was immediately apparent to Natasha was that this was the hooded man from the earlier video: his face was still cloaked behind the cowl of fabric, and his wrists bore the fetters from before, only now the chains between them now hung limply from the manacles--severed. A voice, which she immediately recognized as Coulson’s, began to address the person below.

“Attention, who--whoever you are,” the voice declared. “You are attempting to escape a high-security correctional facility owned and operate by the United States Government.” The words mingled with occasional static from the device which amplified the sound.

The hooded personage paused only briefly at the sound of the words and then began to approach the outer edge of the framework. The being was tall--an inch or two over six foot--with broad shoulders and no discernible hips. Almost certainly a male, Natasha confirmed. He moved forward until he stood on the very rim of the flat surface, the toes of his boots protruding out over the sea below but still facing away from the man that addressed him.

“Please put your hands in the air and turn slowly towards me. If you refuse, deadly force may be used against you,” the non-visible Coulson continued through the bullhorn. Natasha could not have been more shocked when the man below actually began to pivot back towards the voice addressing him, although his hands remained at his sides. He took great care to
ensure that his visage remained obstructed by the cloth that surrounded it, moving torpidly with his chin tilted slightly downwards. He remained poised on the very lip of the surface, his heels now extending out over empty air in a stance that she recognized but could not instantly place. It was at least a 20 foot drop to the water below.
“Put your hands in the air immediately,” the voice repeated with more force, “or you will be fired upon.”

After this command, the figure swung his arms slightly backwards. Suddenly, Natasha recalled where she had seen such physical bearing before--Olympic coverage of platform diving. He bounced quickly up on his toes, vaulting himself up and outwards in the blink of an eye. His body folded until his hands touched his toes in an admirably solid pike position and then extended his legs up until his body was pointed downward, arms extended and hands first, forming a perfectly straight line from head-to-toe. He dropped into the water with almost no added disturbance to the surface whatsoever.

Natasha sat motionless, the pad of her thumb balanced tensely between her teeth.

“I would give him a solid eight, eight-point-five for execution, but he lacked somewhat in difficulty,” Coulson chuckled. Natasha continued to stare vacantly at the computer monitor even though the video had cut out. “Obviously the Russian judge is harder to impress,” he shrugged.

“He escaped,” she stated coldly.

“Yes,” was all that Agent Coulson could say in his defense.

“And we have no idea who he is?” she asked, trying not to sound accusing. She strongly suspected that she failed in her attempt.

“We have the video which provides us a vague description. More importantly, we have the two witnesses next door, one of which seems to have been closely acquainted with him.” Coulson had again adopted his usual businesslike demeanor. “At least the other one--the rodent-looking guy--tells us that the really white guy knows him and that we should direct all our questioning to him.”


“Decidedly not,” he admitted, “which is where you come in, of course.”

She nodded gravely. “What aren’t you telling me?” she fired back, hoping to catch Coulson off-guard and get him to reveal something in a moment of weakness. To her undisclosed delight, the corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly. She lowered her gaze to peer at him sternly through pinched eyebrows.

The senior agent raised his hands in mock surrender. “Alright,” he said, “I am holding back, but only a little.” Her silent stare urged him on. “There was a second prison break, this one in Colorado. It was also a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility.”

“The Vault,” she snapped, biting into the flesh of her thumb until it was pale at the edges. “That’s more than a little bit of intel, Coulson.” The Vault was also a maximum security facility for superhuman inmates, except instead of extending down into a body of water it was burrowed deep into the heart of the Rocky Mountains. It was even more clandestine than the Raft.

“I know,” he shrugged, “but I have my orders. I wasn’t supposed to tell you more than you could guess. I’m thinking you can guess a bit more than they thought you could.” He took another generous drink of his latte to center himself; it was mostly lukewarm by now, but his face still
revealed it to be more than satisfying.

“Is there footage from the Vault?” she asked, her posture tensing up as she awaited his answer.

“There is,” he revealed. As she opened her mouth to request that he show it to her immediately, he raised a hand to stop her. “But I’m not allowed to show it to you, Agent Romanov. It’s not directly related to your mission.”

“Orders?” she challenged.

“Orders,” he stated with finality.

“Can you at least fill me in on the basics?” she inquired with business-like sincerity. It was best to show them you were willing to play ball if you wanted any crumbs whatsoever. “I mean, these incidents have to be related, right?”

“I can tell you as much as I know, which is just the bare bones. I know that there was a security breach which mirrored the one at the Raft where the cameras and cell doors went offline allowing the inmates to leave their cells. There were several high-level enemies who managed to exit the facility prior to the arrival of the containment team . . .”

Natasha’s eyebrows shot up in a clear demand for details.

“. . . which contained a couple of your fellow Avengers.”

The eyebrows tightened.

“Clint and Tony did a bang-up job of containing the rest of them,” he stated. “The video really is spectacular, and I am sorry that I am unable to show it to you,” he reminded her.

“Who bailed?”

“Venom, most notably. The others were important, but not nearly as worrisome.”

Natasha continued to sink teeth marks into her abused thumb. “Any other attempts?” she pried.

“Not that I have been made aware of.” There was no deception in his eyes.

“So you want me to see if I can get the really white guy to talk?” she prodded.

“We’ve told him a little about you, including your background, in the hopes that he will relate to you. Greasing the skids, so to speak. The rest is up to you.”

“Let’s do this, then,” she agreed. As she stood and moved toward the door which led to her assignment, she gave Agent Coulson one last deliberate glance. “And when I’m finished... then we’ll talk about how the Hell you’re still alive.”
The detainee surveyed her with a patronizing crack of a grin. She was obviously no threat, this human woman--unarmed, average stature, slight of build with some muscular definition, he surmised. He was intrigued by the lack of formal dress or a uniform which was unique to her among his other visitors. She was all confidence, too--her icy demeanor inferred that she fully meant to extract information from him. Yet she was also enticing in an odd way, with her form-fitting clothing that emphasized her curves and porcelain features accented with two full (scowling) lips. If she wasn’t so severe, he might actually be in love.

“We might even be able to make a deal, you and I,” she continued with no change of expression. “You have something I need to know . . .” She then leaned forward with her arms still folded, propping her elbows on the pristine surface of the table. This new position caused the smooth, black fabric of her blouse to bunch and dip just enough to reveal a hint of cleavage, the flesh gathered and rounded with the upwards motion. “Maybe I have something that you need, as well.”

The words should have been dripping with innuendo considering her change of pose, but the sight and sound of her was still as emotionless and severe as before. Perhaps she was unaware of what she had revealed, he considered; she did seem too aloof to use her body as a tool for interrogation. He had also been given some background on her prior to her arrival: a senior agent with a mottled past and very little patience when it came to adversaries. And she had done some questionable things before she came to work for S.H.I.E.L.D., things she no longer chose to discuss . . . some very bad things. No, she wouldn’t use the subtle power of seduction. Rather, she was the type of woman who would plunge a knife in your gut and then twist it until the agonizing pain made you tell her what she wanted to know. Although first she would apparently try to strike a bargain with you so she didn’t have to get her hands dirty unnecessarily.
Maybe he was in love, after all.

He did see the frivolity in drawing out this situation, however. She was right about the tedious back-and-forth routine that accompanies interrogation, followed by an even more tedious interim incarceration. On this world, he would also most likely be subjected to a trial or a military tribunal at the very least. Sentencing would most likely lead him back essentially to where he came from: a secret, ultimate security prison. So, if she was willing to strike a bargain of some sort then perhaps he could gain a little something out of this whole laborious cycle. It might also make things less dull, which was infinitely more rewarding to him. He lifted the rim of the water glass to his parched mouth.

“What do you have that I could possibly want?” he challenged her with his typical wolfish grin. He swallowed the liquid down in a measured fashion, not wanting to reveal how desperately thirsty he truly was.

“Information,” she replied coldly. “I need to know what happened inside that prison before the walls imploded. You need to know what happened outside afterwards.”

Okay, so now she had him a little intrigued. He stopped ingesting the liquid and ran his tongue slowly over the surface of his lips in consideration. None of his other interrogators had mentioned that there had been significant happenings outside of the Raft. He could play this game, perhaps, in exchange for this little tidbit; however, he was not going to make it painless. Oh, no. Of course not.

The redhead began to leaf through the file that was left on the table from before--his file from the Raft. “I can’t help but notice that there aren’t many details in this document,” she chided. “The word ‘unknown’ does appear a lot, though. ‘Birth Name: unknown. Planet of origin: unknown. Native language: unknown.’ You seem to be a man of few words, Mister . . . ” She paused for him to fill in the appropriate response.

“I am known as ‘Blackout,’” he responded, his voice rough and almost breathy. “I’m not from around here.”

“I noticed,” the woman smirked, turning her attention back to the folder in her hands. “You claim your species to be ‘Lilin,’ according to these papers. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that.”

“Like I said . . . not from around here.”

“Enlighten me,” she dared. She leaned slightly more forward, allowing another modest glimpse of the upper curves of her chest. He would like to say that he didn’t look, but, hey, he’s only human. Okay, only partially human, actually, but he may have still stolen a glance anyway.

“Lilins are descended from the sorceress known as Lilith.” He paused to see if the woman registered any recognition of this name. “Your masters have told you nothing about my origins at all? A pity.”

“Why don’t you fill me in?” It was true that S.H.I.E.L.D. had kept her more on the earthbound side of their endeavors. Until the Chitauri, she wasn’t even aware of beings from outside their solar system and precious little about any species who did not hail from Earth.

“Lilins are what are essentially known on your planet as demons,” he hissed. “We descend from one demon-goddess who allows us autonomy over our lives, for the most part, but can call us to do her bidding at any time. This being is my grandmother.”

“Lilith,” she replied. Perhaps he was of terrestrial origin, after all. It was difficult to say what
superbeings the agency might be holding back from her based on what little she had been able to glean from their confidential databases. Tales of a demonic being named Lilith did run through the mythology of several cultures, including early Christianity. “So why hasn’t your dear grandmother called you back out of this place? You’ve been here for nearly two years.”

“I guess she hasn’t needed me,” he replied. “Autonomy, remember, my dear Natasha?”

She flinched briefly at the intimate use of her first name but recovered quickly. She was pleased that he was at least speaking, and perhaps if she continued to banter about things that did not seem important he would drift into more relevant conversation without even realizing it. “Fair enough,” she said, not giving him the slightest clue that she had been shaken. If he wanted to bring up names then she was game. “So, why ‘Blackout’?”

He didn’t answer immediately as he was finishing off the last of the proffered drink. The last gulp was a little too coarse, a trickle of liquid finding its way down the corner of his lips which he wiped crudely away with the back of his hand. The gesture was just enough to betray that he was feeling some of the pressure that the agency had been trying to bring to bear upon him. He grimaced with the realization that he had exposed his vulnerability, but Natasha kept her expression neutral so as not to acknowledge it. He had to trust her if she was going to get anywhere with this interrogation. Making him feel weak or humiliated was not productive so she kept talking as if there had been no change.

“I mean, you don’t seem very . . . dark to me,” she laughed gently, and she let the corner of her mouth reveal what she hoped was the trace of a warm smile. Surely he had to appreciate the irony of the name when his complexion was so bloodless.

“It is not my given name, Agent Romanov.” She did not fail to miss how his demeanor had shifted to become more formal. He still felt exposed, and that meant he wouldn’t be very forthcoming until she could make him relax a little. “It was my ‘Name among the Nameless,’ bestowed upon me not for how I appear, but rather for my abilities.”

“You mean your powers?” She was aware that this cell had supernatural power-dampening capabilities, although the technology was not as sophisticated as that at the Raft. Coulson had warned her that he would likely not be completely without powers—which, therefore, he presumably had—but that they would be severely weakened behind the barrier contained within the walls of the room.

Suddenly there was darkness—the room went utterly black, all light extinguished for the space of several very puzzling seconds. She could still hear the buzzing of the overhead lighting and the humming of the central air conditioning so the electricity was still in working order, and yet there was not a trace of any discernible images, only an all-consuming blackness. Then, as quickly as it began, the makeshift eclipse ended. There was only the demon, staring back at her knowingly with those strange red eyes, followed by the sound of Coulson in her earpiece: ‘Don’t worry, he can only do that for a few seconds at a time thanks to the suppression field. And not very often.’

“Thank you for the . . . demonstration,” she said blankly, hoping that the waver in her voice was not apparent. She handled the file absently while she tried to regain composure. She used the lull to think back over his last few statements so she could further her questioning. “Your’”Name among the Nameless,’ you said. That sounds significant. Can I ask you what you meant by that, exactly?”

“Well, suffice it to say that there are places in this universe where you do not want anyone to know who you are or where you come from.” The demon seemed to smile again, but the gesture was half-hearted. “What others do not know, they cannot use against you.”
“Where was this place—the place where they gave you your name?” Natasha searched the document in her hand again for any clues, but his past (as known to S.H.I.E.L.D., anyway) boiled down to just a few sentences which dealt exclusively with the planet Earth. Yet he had said ‘this Universe,’ which immediately set her cognitive wheels to turning. Perhaps she was not as qualified to run this interrogation as her employers had believed.

“A prison,” he chuckled weakly.

“A prison, you say? Like the Raft?”

“Oh no,” he retorted, his eyes darkening and his tone seeping with wicked knowledge. “It is not like the Raft, at all.” She had not heard a voice dripping with such a malicious timbre since her encounter with Loki on the Helicarrier. She could endure it, of course, but it made her want to shiver with revulsion. ‘Oh, no . . . you brought the Monster.’

“Excuse me for just a moment, would you?”

She could only hope that her retreat was not perceived as hasty.

****

Coulson was waiting for her just outside the door. “That didn’t feel like a stopping point, Agent Romanov,” he remarked.

“Forgive me, sir, but I’m having some second thoughts about this assignment.”

Natasha looked unnerved, even a little fidgety—and did she just call him ‘sir’? He needed to run some immediate interference. “How do you mean? You are just interrogating a subject in custody after the takeover of a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility by a hostile force.”

“Believe me, Coulson, I wish it were that simple.” She shook her head emphatically. “I am not qualified to be conducting the interrogation of this particular subject.” Her intonation brooked no argument.

“I don’t follow,” he replied.

“He’s talking about an extraterrestrial prison facility, and my training is strictly terrestrial.”

“You did a pretty commendable job with Loki, and he wasn’t terrestrial.” He placed a hand awkwardly on her shoulder. Touchy-feely wasn’t really his forte, but he was sensing that he should at least make an attempt. It was not like Natasha Romanov to doubt herself.

“Loki may have gotten under my skin more than I’ve ever let on.” Coulson led her over to the nearby water cooler and deftly poured her a cup one-handed. She downed it in one brash gulp. “It wasn’t because he threatened to kill me,” she tried to explain, “but he threatened Clint—Agent Barton, and his words were just pure venom . . . pure hatred.” He handed her another drink which she downed just as quickly. “Pure evil,” she finished. She kept her gaze down, shuffling her feet back and forth on the over-waxed tile. Coulson wasn’t sure whether or not she noticed that she had crushed the paper water cup flat against her palm. She then raked her fingers back through her hair in a manner which bordered on anxious. Natasha was certainly not herself, he noted.
She took a slow, deliberate breath in before she continued. “I’ve seen my share of evil in this line of work, Phil.” He did not draw attention to the use of his first name as he thought it might deter her from her therapeutic torrent of brutal honesty. “Hell, I’ve been my share of evil.” He nodded in mild agreement. “But I have never been that close to it. He was so mad with it you could smell it on him. He was hell-bent on vengeance.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Coulson said. “Except that he wasn’t.”

“Exactly,” she answered and then paused as she allowed the meaning of this confession to resonate. “He wasn’t crazy, and he wasn’t out for revenge.” She nudged the baseboard behind her with the heel of her boot and then stood for a number of minutes in frustrated silence. “Well, he wasn’t completely crazy,” she whispered finally.

“That’s what I thought, too,” Coulson admitted. “He was too measured and too driven to be totally insane. Even his mistakes were measured. He didn’t kill his brother when he had the chance . . . so no clear vengeance plot, either. I also got the possible impression that he did not really care about ruling the human race.”

“So did I.” Natasha probed, leaning forward and raising one eyebrow. “You had the same suspicions I did, but you never said anything to the higher-ups. Why?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he smirked. “Although, I did say it to his face. He lacked conviction, and I told him so.”

“So, how did you figure him out?” she probed.

“Through his own words. ‘A warm light for all mankind’ wasn’t the only breadcrumb he dropped, by my estimation.”

Her look implored him to continue.

“‘Freedom is life’s great lie.’ It’s too draconian for someone who has spent his whole life cowed beneath the weight of trying to live up to a more successful sibling. I think he was sending us a message.”

“That he was far from free?” she pondered, rubbing her index finger thoughtfully against her lower lip. “It’s an intriguing thought,” Natasha admitted.

“So, what does any of that have to do with this assignment?” Coulson segued tactfully.

“I just don’t know if I can go through it again,” she sighed. It was as close to defeated as Coulson surmised she would ever sound. “When I confronted Loki in that cell, it didn’t go as I imagined that it would. I thought he would be like the others, the arrogant megalomaniacs who justify their actions by reciting some manifesto that comes spilling out of their crazy heads. You can see it in their eyes . . . they’re lost. Beyond all reason.”

“But . . .?”

“Loki wasn’t like that. He was brilliant: calculating, eloquent, and controlled. And he knew exactly what to say to break down my defenses. I was hopelessly outmatched in there.” She turned away from him as if she couldn’t bear letting him hear the naked honesty of her assertion. “For the first time in my life, I felt truly small--insignificant--like a gnat buzzing around the head of a giant. I realized then that the universe must be millennia ahead of us and that whatever is out there is likely to play with us like a shiny toy.”
“And crush us when they tire of us,” Coulson finished.

She nodded thoughtfully.

“I can’t say I didn’t feel the same when I felt the blade of that scepter come through my ribcage,” he confessed quietly. “I had never anticipated the possibility of him being able to duplicate his image or to seem to be somewhere he was not because it’s just not what we deal with in our world. We don’t have magic here. We don’t do telekinesis or mind-reading or doorways to other dimensions.” This seemed like the appropriate moment to try again to place a comforting hand on her shoulder so he did, and the gesture was easier this time, not as stiff. He paused briefly to be pleased with himself before he went on. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Agent Romanov, but we don’t really have anyone who is qualified to do these types of interrogations. It comes up very infrequently. And you more than handled yourself last time. I trust that you can do it again.”

“But I need something more,” she countered. “Something I can go in there and wave in front of him to make him squirm. I’m going to need your help with that.”

“I’ll send Agent May in next door with the little guy. He’s been close more than once to giving us the name of the one who escaped . . . the one who Blackout knew from before. Natasha, believe me, he’ll talk. Just give her a few minutes. I’ll have her lean on him a bit.” He suddenly realized that his touch had been lingering on her arm longer than was probably necessary. He removed it awkwardly. So much for progress in the touchy-feely experiment. “Can I count on you?” he asked, still hopeful.

She was looking at him with a contemplative stare, an indication that she was at least considering his words. “I’ll do what I can,” she said after a painful pause. “Just get me that name.”

****

“I’m back,” Natasha announced as she re-entered the room, seating herself in her previous chair. She was perfectly composed again, the professional guise slipping comfortably back into place. “I trust that you missed me?”

“Every second was sheer agony,” the prisoner teased, red eyes shining.

“Have you been considering our offer?” she asked and propped her chin confidently on her tented fingers. The cold exterior had also returned effortlessly, he admired.

“You tell me what happened outside the Raft, and I tell you what happened inside?” he clarified. She nodded. “But who goes first?” he leered in response.

“Well, you are enjoying our hospitality so I guess you do.”

“Of course,” he laughed as he tapped his fingers gleefully on the tabletop. He had every intention of drawing this round of questioning out as long as he could, and at the end, this agency would know little more than they knew right now. He, however, would be well hydrated and fed before he returned to his holding cell, as long as he played by their rules. It would all be so simple. . .

Suddenly, she was holding her finger to her head and listening intently to a voice in her earpiece. Then she grinned with overt satisfaction. “Okay, you go first, then,” she purred. “I ask the questions and you answer.”

Her abrupt shift in mood made him hesitate, but he grudgingly indicated his agreement. He
narrowed his eyes at her with suspicion as he nodded.

“So . . . “ she started, drawing out the words with excruciating intent, “ . . . who is ‘Kaal’?”

His response was multifaceted: first, he was gripped with shock, his jaw hanging open in an undignified show of surprise, and then he was sneering and making a sound which was nearly a low-throated growl. He slammed an angry fist against the table and sat back, crossing his arms with what resembled a childish pout despite his unearthly appearance. Oh, he was definitely affected, and this was a positive development . . . just not for him, it seemed. It was going to be much more difficult to feed them worthless intel now. They obviously had a second source, and now they knew about that wretched traitor, which stripped him of a great deal of leverage. The last thing he wanted to do was have to speak about Kaal; it would undoubtedly lead to a discussion of a less-than-pleasant aspect of his past that was better off buried forever--just like Kaal, ironically.

Still, there was no way he had survived that collapse, Blackout had determined. It had happened more abruptly than anyone could have suspected, and, although the sorcerer was obviously revelling in his rival’s misfortune at the last, his own end could not have been far behind. Besides, there had been no Juggernaut waiting to drag him to salvation. Yet that fact did deprive him of the opportunity to crush in his smug countenance with his own bare hands, and he mourned that loss, at least.

“He’s no one,” Blackout fumed. “An old acquaintance from a different incarceration.”

“From the prison you spoke of before?” Natasha mimed a drinking motion towards the two-way mirror behind her, and in just a few seconds an agent was bringing in two bottles of chilled water. He sat one in front of each of them and quickly retreated back through the door.

The captive reached dismally for the drink. “Yes, it was the same prison” he answered in a rushed mumble.

“Then let’s start there.” The red-headed woman looked at him knowingly from under her half-lidded eyes. “Who is Kaal, and how do you know him?”

Fine, he thought petulantly, he could still tell the tale without getting into the specifics of the confrontation within the Raft. If he drew it out long enough, he could still milk them of a few meals before they tired of his stalling and banished him back to his modest chamber. “Where should I begin?” he grumbled.

“At the beginning,” she said. She twisted the cap off of the water bottle and placed it in his grip. “Where did you meet him?”

So, it was to be headfirst into the unpleasantness, then? Fair enough. “It was in the darkest part of our Universe,” he began. “Well, at least, so far as anyone knows. In a prison, known affectionately as the ‘Pit.’” He stopped in the ludicrous hope that she would somehow be satisfied by so concise an answer.

“Tell me,” she urged, her eyes focused on his in an unwavering glare.

She was going to make him tell her everything, he surmised. He took a preliminary swallow of the cool drink in preparation for the long night ahead of them both. “Are you certain?” he pleaded weakly in a last effort for mercy.

“Tell me, “ she repeated. The words were more emphatic this time.
So he began to tell her everything. From the beginning.
The journey from Hala to the prison planet had taken six days by starship. Those who had been chosen from the jail on the Kree homeworld were carried in the hold of the ship, shackled to one another like livestock, and hassled incessantly by the reptilian Badoon guards that accompanied them. To be ‘chosen’ by the Badoon scouts was to be damned, or so the legends had told--it was to be taken from one prison facility to another, but the destination was beyond the horrors known to any civilization. The scouts were agents of Thanos who dredged the galaxy for the irretrievably lost and broken, those who had lost all will to exist in the cultures which had bore them and might be made to fight in the hordes of the Mad Titan. It was the ultimate honor and the most exquisite torment twisted into one horrifying adulation. It had been within the confines of Hala that he had been ‘blessed’ by the strange outriders from among all the piteous ranks with which he was imprisoned.

When he had departed Hala, his fellow inmates had bade him a tearful farewell, and the mere presence of such emotion had sobered him. These hardened felons were not the kind to shed tears with abandon. “Forget your name,” they had counseled. “Do not speak of your past or your origins. All knowledge will be used to your detriment.” Then they had each embraced him in turn, as if they believed that this was the last warmth, the last sentiment he was likely to ever receive. “Pray for the end,” he had been told by several of his compatriots. “Your end is the only mercy.” It would have been easy to lose control from the fear while he was being ferried to the place which was certainly the terminus of his existence. Still, there were none among their numbers who wept or cried out, either in terror or in sorrow. The horrible burden of the dread was too exhausting, and it left strength for nothing else.

Upon arrival, they had been shepherded through the Last Gates: an imposing entrance whose height was three times his own, its spiked cornices gaping like the maw of some hideous, looming beast over their shuffling forms as they crossed the threshold. The line of the newly-condemned moved as one indolent mass which had been weighed down by its tragic circumstance, the sound of chain against chain accompanying their leaden approach like the bells of a fiendish lullaby. The ‘chink, chink, chink,’ of the dragging metal was the serenade to their final approach. Once you enter the gates, he had been told, your fate was sealed eternally. No light. No escape. No hope.

This was the prison planet of Algorant, its entire surface barren save for the prison yards cut deep within the face of the rock. The tilt of its axis left this face of the world in utter darkness for most of its revolution. Not that it mattered, it seemed--few of the souls who were sentenced to serve in the Pit survived longer than an Earth year, and those who did were doomed to a brutal and decidedly brief life in the Master’s army of the fearless and insane. It was a contingent of ill-fated combatants with a single, dual-edged purpose: to serve and to die.

Despite the peril of his predicament, he had managed to be quite stoic. The intake process at this notorious institution mirrored nearly all of the others he had known, and he suffered the familiar indignities with quiet acceptance. First, he was stripped of the garments he wore, searched and cleaned before being clothed in new garb which labeled him as one of the Nameless. It was not unlike the uniforms of other prisons throughout the galaxies, which were also shapeless and neutral.
in shade. The new arrivals were then herded to chambers filled with those who would shear them to baldness to prevent the spread of parasites and powder them with chemicals which would hamper disease. All of this was ludicrous ritual, of course, since within the walls of Hell there were no rules to protect them. Pestilence was the mildest of hardships to be faced here.

After they had been shaved and clothed, the new arrivals were divided into smaller groups and escorted to the wards to which they had been assigned. During this period of its orbit the planet was in a state of eternal dusk, with just enough phosphorescence to discern the details of most objects and persons within one’s immediate vicinity, and this left the surroundings bathed in a predominantly gray temper. The landscape was devoid of almost all vegetation save a sparse bit of harsh scrub, and the wind was incessant and foul. Thus far, it had lived up to his expectations quite readily, the Lilin supposed. The prison yard itself was not spacious enough to allow for the presence of many inmates so it was presumably not there for their recreation; perhaps it merely served as a buffer area for the guards to move in and out of the main holding room.

As he and a handful of others approached the fence outside of what was to be their designated quarters, the demon squinted feverishly to make out the forms of his new neighbors, but the smoky half-light betrayed almost no one out on the grounds. When they came within a dozen meters of the perimeter, however, he could determine one shadow which moved with some purpose. Its steps seemed to mirror theirs languidly as they neared the gate, and they came closer to the entrance in equal measure until the dim outline stood directly opposite the guard, the fencing separating them by a thin distance. It possessed a wasted form, the bones jutting desperately through what he recognized as the ragged and filthied remnants of the uniform he now wore himself. Its head was downcast and haloed by a tangled mop of hair so dark it looked black even in this place of darkness. So the head-shaving was more for humiliation than sanitation, he realized. This is what I will become, he acknowledged with a shudder. He half-expected the face which slowly raised to greet them to bear his features.

The gesture was drawn out painfully, a leisurely rolling of the muscles until the pale, gaunt visage was finally visible; in spite of his starved appearance, the movement was nearly graceful in its control. The Lilin could not stifle a gasp. None of the others who stood with him seem to have noticed for they were also presumably transfixed by this creature who prophesied their fates: he was humanoid in form, with sinews of taut muscle stretched tightly over long bones. His eyes were sunken back into prominent hollows in his flesh, like savage thumbprints pressed into clay, and his countenance was all angles, the cheekbones fine and prominent but dusted in sickly shadows that spoke of bruises not yet fully healed. The skin itself was surprising in its unblemished pallor--it bore no visible scars or wounds, and the complexion was white as polished bone.

The prisoner's eyes rolled upwards with the same lingering monotony. “Good evening, Thirty-Seven.” The words flowed out like liquid, and the voice was so unlike the decimated thing before him, that for a moment it seemed that it must have been the guard who had spoken rather than the inmate. The voice was like warm honey, its character soothing and yet fatally seductive.

The sentry, a hulking beast of a creature who was taller by a head, ceased fumbling with his many keys to meet his gaze. “Back off, Kaal,” he warned aggressively. The Badoon stiffened his posture and twisted his lips into a sneer, but his hands became even less steady while he searched for the proper key.

“My, my . . . you seem distracted, Thirty-Seven,” came the silken voice once more, the tone sweetly taunting. “May I help you with that?” Kaal finished with the flash of a rakish grin. The delicate ashen fingers of the prisoner began to snake between the bars of the gate, and the Badoon tore his hands away from their reach as if they bore the promise of immediate death. The creature then tried to recover by quickly raising a fist to the inmate. He let it hover in the air with fiendish intent for several moments before he brought it down heavily on the metal bars, the barrier
shuddering with the heft of the blow. Kaal, however, had not flinched, and, in fact, still wore a mocking leer. “I said back off, Kaal,” the guard howled as he pressed his nose to the bars, looking down on the disheveled figure with palpable ire.

The prisoner bowed low in a gesture which was lithe but blatantly sardonic, then took several steps back and allowed the guard to finish his business with the entrance gate. The Lilin was again struck by how he was able to maintain such poise with so little meat on his frame, though what little bulk he still possessed was obviously muscular in origin. He was considering the unkempt man more carefully than he realized, but when his look fell upon the gaze of the other, he stopped short.

The man was considering him back.

Their eyes met for the briefest of instances, until the moan of the heavy door opening shifted their attentions. As the line of inductees dragged into the yard, the demon found himself passing within two hands’ breadth of the gaunt figure. He was not aware that he had ceased to breathe until he was nearly a step beyond him; however, his drawn breath came out in a sudden, violent huff when he felt the hand that firmly grasped his elbow, the clutch as strong as iron... and possibly as cold.

The Badoon escort turned back when he sensed that the line had stopped. “Is there a problem?” he demanded of Kaal, who was gripping the Lilin’s arm and studying him curiously. The eyes of the prisoner were uncomfortably near to his face, and he could finally see their color—an icy blue-green. Their focus seemed to cut a swath straight through his skull to expose his every thought, like greedy fingers seeking to palpate his consciousness.

Kaal released his hold and faced the guard. “This one does not belong here,” he hissed accusingly at the guard.

The reptilian guard sneered in satisfaction. “That’s what we said about you not so long ago,” he snorted. “And now the place practically reeks of you.” He threw an arm into Kaal’s chest, causing him to stagger back just a few steps. Then the guard gave the chain which held the demon’s fetters a brutal tug, urging him to continue into the interior.

As he retreated, the Lilin was certain that the bony prisoner’s eyes were still following him intently.

* * * *

Even the Nameless have names, it seems. Since none among the incarcerated on Algorant were called by their given monikers, it was customary for them to be given one of their fellow prisoners’ choosing. His name had been obvious, given his unique ability to reduce the halls to darkness with just a whisper of his will. His sentries quickly grew weary of this little ruse and would have him punished mercilessly... well, more mercilessly than the torments that he would typically be forced to endure, which were grisly in their own right.

When he had asked about the inspiration for Kaal’s pseudonym, the others had chuckled conspiratorially. A Baluurian captive had explained its meaning to him: “My people have a term used to describe a season on our ancient homeworld: in the darkest, most frigid days of the year, the ‘Kaal’ would blanket the planet. It was a deathly cold, consuming all save those who would retreat deep beneath the surface.” The Baluurians had seventeen different words for cold, it seemed; this particular one was associated with mortality—the “creeping death.” How the tall, gaunt prisoner had earned this name, however, was still a tempting mystery.

The newly christened ‘Blackout’ found his ability to be of immediate use when the Master had requested his assistance with a mission for which he was uniquely suited. He had helped an entire squadron of the Titan’s soldiers to escape the Shi’ar patrols by shielding them in impenetrable
shadow, and it earned him special favors among those in his cell block. The guards often asked him to accompany them on short sojourns outside his assigned ward, and he was able to observe the daily operations in the facility from an outside perspective. He took these opportunities to inquire about his fellow detainees in order to gain an advantage within the enclosure. Perhaps he did ask about Kaal more often than the others, but then he was the most infamous resident in his wing—it was only natural that he would seek to determine his weaknesses. This line of questioning had led him to the realization that even the guards in this section were heedful of Kaal, although they were not so forthcoming when it came to the extent of their mistrust. They did reveal that cellmates tended to turn up dead around the dark-haired convict, and the method of their demise (along with the exact perpetrator) remained well-hidden.

Thirty-Seven was a relatively young guard, but Nineteen . . . well, he had seen so much more. He was also a Badoon, as nearly all the wardens were, but he was more grizzled than most. He had a shorter, broader build, and his hide was more textured. He also had more scars—deep, fissures which criss-crossed his back and chest, and a particularly broad one which encircled the left side of his face from the jawline to the center of his skull. This wound had cost him the respective eye, as well, judging from the gaping concavity which remained in its stead. Perhaps his experience led to a lack of fear, as his tongue was far more loose than the others, and the demon had used this knowledge to his favor. If not for Nineteen, he would have known far less about his cellmates and how they came to be among the ranks of the Nameless. Naturally, he had asked about Kaal--Nineteen just happened to have been on duty when he was brought in and was able to recount the tale rather ordinarily.

The scouting party had just returned from the planet of Sakaar, a tumultuous world with various races in an otherwise uninhabited system. The new ‘recruits’ included some of the most hulking and barbaric which had ever been brought into the facility, or so Nineteen remembered it. Among them, however, was one who was not so burly or intimidating—a wan, almost delicate man with dead eyes. He was not hard or cruel enough to be here, the guards had wagered. He would be killed within a matter of days, and all the better for it. The reasons for why he had been culled were not readily apparent, and the scouts who had enlisted him were tormented for their lack of selectivity. The jailers on Sakaar had pleaded with them to take him, the outriders had explained. He had been in their cells for months, and no matter how hard they had tried to starve and persecute him, he somehow never seemed to wither. They didn’t trust him. In fact, they said they feared him.

The Badoons scoffed at the tale. What power could such a pitiful creature wield that he should be feared here, in this place of ultimate cruelty? ‘What crime had he committed to be imprisoned to begin with?’ one of them had asked mockingly.

‘Murder,’ the scout had retorted.

Of course—all of the inmates were killers. But what made this feeble being qualified to end his days in bondage with the most depraved in all the universe? He had killed only one man, they revealed, and over a loaf of bread. He had killed for hunger, and was that crime was enough to condemn him to the most unenviable of all fates?

‘Perhaps,’ one of the scouts had stated, defensively, ‘but he had stabbed the man repeatedly in the throat until there was no blood left to flow from him. They found him laughing in a crazed rage, the rain beating down on him full force. By the time the authorities arrived to collect him, the bread was dirty and soaked beyond use. He continued to laugh as they pried it from his hands, and he didn’t stop for hours after they had captured him.’

It was a mildly disturbing anecdote, but nothing compared to the indiscretions of the others sentenced to the Pit. He was essentially here, it was decided, because he had done too well in his
former imprisonment, and his captors had been cowed by it. The absurd nature of the circumstances was almost amusing.

Until the enigmatic deaths began.

Random casualties were certainly not uncommon among the Nameless, or even among the guards, for that matter. However, the pattern of killings surrounding this particular prisoner were decidedly not random, the victims belonging to two distinct categories--those who had threatened or mistreated Kaal, and those who had tried to take certain ‘liberties’ with him, as it were. The Lilin was no stranger to the perils of prison life, and he knew there were always those creatures willing to force others to serve their baser needs; a weaker, more appealing being (far more pleasing when he had first arrived, Nineteen assured him) would be particularly vulnerable to undesired attention. However, he had not been violated since he had been here, although his cellmates did speak of times when others had tried--physically imposing beasts, with no traces of sympathy or mercy. He had been able to deflect them at the time, through tricks or cunning, and then they would meet grisly ends when they were unobserved.

At first, the Badoons thought that one of the other prisoners must have been protecting him, for none could believe that he was capable of taking down such enormous, vicious adversaries on his own. However, as time passed, the attempts to defile him became more brazen, and so the retaliation became more readily observable. There were inmates who claimed to have seen Kaal wound and slay much larger beings than himself, seemingly with the aid of no weapons, and the witnesses gave the assassin a wide berth from then on. When asked why they feared him among all the other murderers with which they were housed, they spoke of the fire of madness in his gaze which had horrified them. The only time his eyes did not seem empty, the observers had stated, was when he killed.

Kaal’s notoriety did work to his benefit in one respect, however, because it had kept him out of the fighting arena. The Eye was so named because it was orbital in shape, and when the contests ended, the surface bore a smear of centrally spattered blood which gave the illusion of a ghastly, red iris from the elevated viewing platforms. A group of six to ten of the most promising fighters were chosen from among the captives, and the doors were locked behind them until only one remained. It was a gory ritual with a nefarious purpose: to determine who was ready to join the ranks of the Titan’s armies. There was only harrowing death or brutal servitude to be gained from a journey to the Eye, and the prison guards used it as an avenue for their own amusement in addition to the existing menace that it bore.

Wagering on outcomes was more than routine, and the workers took great pride in selecting and placing various weapons throughout the interior for combatants to use to take one another (often quite literally) apart. Sometimes, a few more vulnerable prisoners were sprinkled in just to be used as living inducements for the warriors to show their skills without the loss of potentially valuable soldiers. By rights, Kaal should have been one of these at one time or another. It was his abstruse nature that made him a source of diversion for his listless wardens, and they selfishly kept him away from the feuds in the dim hope that they might eventually be able to tease out his secrets.

In Blackout’s seventh week among the Nameless, Kaal’s fortune finally soured. There had been an influx of newly trained guards, and, on one afternoon, their cell block had a shift laden with rookies who had to select a sampling of warriors destined for the Eye. Kaal was intended to be a martyr among worthy fighters. The demon had been out on patrol with Twenty-six, who was gruff and not compelling company, when they had received the word that the famed prisoner was being taken to the arena, and the pair wasted no time making their way back to witness the results. The combatants had not yet taken the field when they arrived, and the air was thick with heady expectation. As the opponents entered, an eager gasp rippled through the observers, hands
tightening on the railings of the viewing areas located above the sparring grounds. There were four to five obvious favorites, massive creatures with arms which rivaled the widths of the trees on most inhabited worlds. Kaal was the final entrant, and he had to be both led and positioned by a disinterested Badoon.

“This won’t take long,” this guard was heard to remark to a fellow watchman. “That one is already dead,” he derided indifferently.

Indeed, the shrunken figure bore no realization of where he was, his stare as hollow as it would have been if he were alone in his cell. He remained dormant among the others as the bloodshed commenced, watching one after another of his brethren fall to the slaughter. When there were only three survivors other than himself, he finally appeared to have some recognition of what was transpiring around him, his eyes raising dully to the remaining fighters. He stepped casually over to his nearest fallen comrade—who had suffered a dagger to the throat—and nimbly slid the offending weapon from the surrounding flesh. He considered the blade sterilely as the largest of his opponents began to approach. It was clear that the lumbering fiend was intent on making a demonstration of Kaal’s death for he strode toward him with a threatening grin on his lips, the anticipation of the kill causing copious spittle to ooze from the corners of his clenched jaw. He raised up the blunt but massive sword that he bore menacingly above his head and paused several meters from his target in order to let out a thunderous roar. The crowd of onlookers erupted into a corresponding howl of delight.

Kaal took two or three fluid steps towards his opponent, his black, bedraggled locks shielding the majority of his features due to the downward tilt of his head. He paused in front of an abandoned blade about one and a half times the length of his hand. He worked the tip of his filthy boot underneath the edge of the knife lazily, and the beast’s shoulders shook with unheard laughter— *it was going to be too effortless to do away with this piteous, mad specter,* his demeanor conveyed.

The larger figure loosened and tightened his grip on his weapon with delicious impatience, the pleased expression still playing upon his countenance. Meanwhile, the remaining three fighters had increased their radius and waited patiently, giving the two who now faced one another ample room for the expected massacre.

It was in this moment of hushed anticipation that Kaal flicked the toe of his boot nimbly, the blade landing deftly in his empty left hand. At the same time, his head rolled upwards in that familiar, sleepy gesture to expose the details of his face. A throb of murmurs ran through the spectators as they considered his changed visage: his lips wore a wicked smile which barely exposed his foremost teeth, and his eyes were anything but dead—in fact, they were permeated by razor-sharp focus with deadly intent. Then he began to come forward, and he seemed to gain speed and determination with each lithe footfall, a dagger balanced threateningly in each hand. His adversary looked even more gratified by this change of circumstances; *if he fights, all the better for the show.* Those gathered above leaned in eagerly to savor the unfolding events, and the tension rippled through them like a painful wound.

The smaller male halted just steps from his opponent. He was immediately met with a second boisterous roar which was directed into his very face, a move intended to intimidate him and draw his fear to the surface. Instead, Kaal matched him with a yell of his own, and although the volume did not nearly rival that of the enormous figure which loomed over him, it still left his enemy slack with astonishment. The slim man’s eyes crackled with a delirious fire as he spun agilely, his limbs a pale blur in the half-light. The barbarian fell in a limp heap before him, his throat bearing a gaping incision. He immediately threw the two blades in his hands outwards, catching the two more of his adversaries in the throat so hastily that it was nearly imperceptible. He then stepped quickly to the final warrior—picking up a pair of shortswords en route—and they began to spar vigorously, Kaal nimbly dodging blows with hisses of pleasure. With a final dizzying whirl, the
slighter man buried both blades deep into his adversary’s midsection. With a crisp movement, Kaal pulled the force of this arms in opposite directions, splitting the being in half and covering himself from head-to-toe in a spray of blood. As the cleaved flesh landed at his feet, the butcher stood motionless, his chest evening and a wicked smile still gracing his mouth. He then turned tortuously toward the Badoon who had led him into the arena, his lip cocked in a derisive sneer. He raised the weapons above his head and then allowed them to fall to the ground without ceremony, the points sticking purposefully into the soft ground, and then strode sanguinely over to the sentry who was guarding the entrance to the grounds.

“I wish to return to my cell,” he stated coldly.

The guard pivoted to open the door leading back to the prison wings, deliberately not turning his back on the blood-drenched prisoner. He placed him in manacles and escorted him back into the halls of the institution, a hand gripped loosely on his upper arm, his gait noticeably a step or two behind the victor as if in deference. When the inmates caught sight of Kaal--the lone survivor, painted in the blood of his opponents--there was at first a bewildered hush, followed by a raucous celebration. Out of the mingled cries of the incarcerated, the thrum of a chant began to emerge. After several minutes, it was loud enough to be heard by those still present in the arena.

They were chanting Kaal’s name.
“After Kaal’s first victory in the arena, he was made to fight at least five more times—at the pleasure of the guards, of course,” Blackout conveyed blandly. “Each time he was victorious, although he did not always emerge unscathed. In the cases where he was wounded, he was given some time to recuperate before they forced him to fight again; however, he was treated no better for his conquests. In fact, his ability to relate to the others seemed to diminish until he was nothing but an empty husk . . . a hollow tool for destruction.” He paused to rub his brow absenty, his eyes rimmed red with exhaustion. “He must have killed at least thirty of our fellow inmates during those weeks,” he finished drily.

Natasha nodded softly and motioned to the two-way mirror. In just a few moments, the same agent which had served them previously entered bearing a tray of fruit and finger sandwiches. Blackout smiled weakly in a gesture of gratitude before he lifted one of the undersized snacks between two fingers, studying it carefully. After only a brief instant, he popped it appreciatively into his mouth and chewed contentedly.

“So, Agent Romanov,” the demon hummed, “I’ve told you who Kaal was. Now you owe me something in return.” He rolled a plump red grape lazily between two fingers. Natasha knew he must be famished, but he was trying so dutifully to obscure his hunger and not betray any weakness.

“Yes . . .” she replied coolly, arms still crossed and studying him carefully. “You want to know what happened outside the Raft?” Blackout placed the grape on his tongue and began to chew; he was just beginning the act of swallowing when she continued. “Kaal escaped,” she gloated haughtily.

The Lilin choked raucously on the fruit, and he lost his breath for several seconds while he convulsed with the effort. The agent calmly crooked an eyebrow at his response, and followed up with: “Strawberry?” She extended a large, red specimen toward him. The look she received in return was both shock and hatred in equal parts.

‘Agent Romanov?’ came Coulson’s voice in her earpiece. ‘I need you to come out now.’

“I’m not saying anymore,” Blackout retorted angrily. “My cooperation is officially withdrawn,” he rasped. The look in his eyes was not fear—it was somewhere between humiliation and rage.

“Your further cooperation is not needed at this time,” she informed him. “But I will return when I need more of your assistance.” She scooped up a crisp red apple from the fruit tray before them and took a satisfying mouthful. “You have my word,” she vowed with a wry taunt. She threw him one last sly glance over her shoulder as she exited.

“What’s up?” she asked Coulson casually between bites of the fruit she still carried.

“We have another piece of the puzzle,” he answered soberly. “That, and I thought the subject could use a little break. According to his file, Blackout gets a little testy after about 24 hours of being on the hot seat. Then he tends to get somewhat . . . aggressive.”

The demon did look as if he had a perilous temper, she had to admit. “I’m surprised that he would let a little discomfort get him so riled up. He’s obviously survived much worse,” Natasha
commented. “It’s also interesting how he clammed up once he found out that Kaal made it out alive. I take it they’re not best bros.”

The older agent nodded his agreement. “He does seem intimidated by that fact. It almost seems to me that he has done something to Kaal for which he is owed some comeuppance.” Coulson rubbed his chin in contemplation. “Still, he could be useful to us regarding our new intelligence.”

He gestured for her to follow him into the adjoining room where several agents in oversized headphones were gathered around a terminal. They were listening intently to sounds which Coulson and Romanov could not detect, and their focus was intense enough that no one acknowledged their entrance.

“We intercepted an audio transmission during the prison break at the Raft,” the senior agent continued. “It was encrypted somewhat, but not extensively. We were able to decrypt it in just a few hours, but it has taken our best technical analysts up to now to get a clean copy. Not only was there considerable interference with the transmission, but the language is unknown to us.”

“‘Us’ as in S.H.I.E.L.D?” Natasha inquired.

“‘Us’ as in humanity,” he answered grimly. “The language is alien, and it’s not one that we have encountered before; therefore it is completely untranslatable to anyone on the planet Earth. We have linguists looking for patterns, but it doesn’t really compare to any of the tongues they’ve studied before. Unless we can hire an extraterrestrial being with an advanced linguistics degree, our chances of interpreting the message are slim to none.” Coulson turned to one of the technicians and tapped on his headset, which the young man immediately relinquished. He placed it on gingerly on Natasha’s ears, as if unsure that even this little bit of personal contact would be tolerated. She nodded in reassurance.

“Play it again from the beginning,” Coulson instructed.

Romanov listened scrupulously to the flawed audio, even though she knew the words would be gibberish to her ears—she was trying to detect any background noise or any other telling sounds which might reveal anything about the voice’s owner. The words were guttural and almost churlish in tone, and after about 30 seconds of utterances, the voice paused. A second voice then began speaking in the same indecipherable language for about 15 seconds before the first being picked up the thread of conversation again. There was a one minute exchange composed mostly of voice number one, and then silence. Unfortunately, the consistent hisses of static made the attempt to hear any movements or extraneous noises futile.

“There are two voices,” she stated.

Coulson hummed his agreement. “It’s a transmission from somewhere in outer space,” he continued as if this were commonplace business. “The second voice is a message from inside the prison back to the first location.”

“But that’s useless to us if we can’t determine what they’re saying to one another,” she thought out loud. “So there’s no one in Asgard who we might be able to ask for help? They are technically friendlies as well as aliens, right?”

“Well, we don’t exactly have a red courtesy phone that reaches Asgard. They prefer us Midgardians to speak only when spoken to.”

“Noted,” she conceded. “So, what’s the plan?”

“I was hoping you might have some suggestions,” Coulson shrugged. “Otherwise, we will just have to pry it out of the Great White Hope in there . . . provided it’s a language he comprehends.”
“Then we should have a plan B,” Natasha suggested, “in case he makes good on his promise not to cooperate.” Her smile turned teasing--almost wicked. “I think I might know just the person who might be able to help us, although he has gone off the grid recently.” She paused to focus her gaze on the other agent. “And I think you might be able to tell me his last known whereabouts,” she said knowingly.

Coulson raised a wary eyebrow at the insinuation.

* * * *

Titan was a stinky, uninteresting place, Maelstrom had determined. It was dark due to its dense atmosphere, deathly cold for any number of reasons, and odiferous due to its lakes of ethane and the gaseous products of its cryovolcanoes. Yes, this had to be just about the most metaphorically appropriate place for him to have ended up after all his years of scheming to upend the universe. He had died and been in reborn in numerous bodies, and, while his physical form always seemed to maintain the powers of his previous incarnation, he also always managed to retain the intense emotions from his early years--the desire for retribution that left his soul raw. Now, here he was in the service of perhaps (at least, he hoped) the unkindest being in the entire universe, drumming his fingers listlessly along a control panel in an outpost and praying to all the deities of the 40-plus religions he had encountered that he would be struck dead in the next 30 minutes.

Titan was a boring hellhole.

Although, if he did have to die (again), then maybe this was not the place he would chose to do it. There were better corners of the Worlds to find your end than on this horrible moon, he knew . . . and yet, this just seemed right to him. To meet oblivion on a poisoned rock that smelled like a Badoon’s backside--well, that was probably a better fate than he deserved.

It was certainly better than what They deserved. He had not gone a day in his tediously long existence where he didn’t think about Them, dream about Them suffering the fate that they had reaped for themselves. The contempt that he bore that race of devils was so complete that he could not even think their true name, although it did occasionally slither its way, unbidden, into his thoughts. Deviants. Oh, there it was again, their true name making itself known despite all his efforts to entomb it in his subconscious. It scorched his pride to know that half his blood was derived from them. Still, as long as he drew breath, there were always slim odds that they would suffer for what they had done. Even if that breath did reek of stale methane.

So Maelstrom continued the rhythmic thumping of his long fingers along the surface of the keyboard before him, moving air in and out of his chest dutifully on the off chance that something stimulating just might happen. And if that something could just include horrible, endless retaliation against his entire maternal race, then, Adrestia, please hear my prayer, he entreated his unoccupied surroundings. He unknowingly clenched his fist against the hard, cool metal of the control panel, lost in his vengeful thinking.

Suddenly, the sound of a throat clearing broke the stillness . . . and it had not been his own. Maelstrom smiled contentedly before he turned to the sound; perhaps this was the answer to his appeal and he had finally chosen the right God(des) to which to offer his adulation. If so, he would turn to find the glorious silhouette of an Avenging Angel, a shining sword of retribution grasped high above its head. He chuckled softly as he pivoted in his seat, unequivocally presuming that he would find no such thing.

As always, life was not as full of surprises as some would have one believe.
Rather than the radiant vision of an ethereal being, the Inhuman’s eyes were met with the obscured image of a male form leaning casually in the doorframe. Conveniently, his identity was masked by a shadow which fell across him from an unseen source, and Maelstrom chuckled to himself forcefully. “As if I would not know who you are,” he teased the cryptic being.

The newcomer waved his hand wistfully, and the shadow fell away.

“How did you know it was me?” asked the shade, moving to take the empty seat at his left.

“What else lurks in the gloom like some gothic diva?” Maelstrom ribbed the other man playfully. This jab received a hint of a chuckle in return. “But, more importantly, what brings you to this fetid corner of the universe?”

“I’ve come to offer you a proposition,” the visitor murmured, his voice becoming low and melodious.

Maelstrom shivered with the familiarity of it: that canorous tone had always been a favorite of his, its provocative resonance awakening some of his more salacious urges. “A proposition, you say? Oh, I do hope it’s what I think it is,” he insinuated mischievously.

The other man raised a threatening eyebrow.

“Alright, alright . . . so it’s not that kind of proposition,” the Inhuman conceded. “I would like to go on record that I am officially disappointed but still willing to listen.” He tented his fingers and pressed them to his lips in his best version of a passive listening pose. This lasted only seconds before he began to speak again. “What am I supposed to be calling you these days, anyway?”

The interloper marginally relaxed his intimidating mien. “Kaal will suffice. It is how the others will know me.”

“So there will be others? Oh, now I am hurt,” Maelstrom teased. There was that eyebrow again--perhaps it would be best to dial down the flirtation just a bit. After all, he had decided not to die on this forsaken rock. “May I ask whom I might be working alongside?”

“You shall be working alongside no one. If you accept my invitation, you will remain here and do exactly what I tell you to do precisely when I tell you to do it. It’s a simple arrangement, truthfully.” Kaal settled back in the chair and gave the other entity an engaging stare from beneath his brow.

“So you want to take charge, eh? I do look forward to it,” the Inhuman answered. Okay, that had just slipped out--and while Kaal was still unamused, he seemed as if he were adjusting to the constant stream of innuendo. He may still have a chance to survive this little exchange, he wagered. “What do I gain if I agree? I assume you are willing to offer me something in return for my assistance . . . or, rather, my blind, unquestioning obedience?” He tried to make that sound as neutral as he could, but the adolescent section of his psyche (which had never truly matured or been suppressed) could not help but quiver at the idea of being dominated by such a magnetic and powerful individual . . . plus, the sorcerer was quite a lovely creature once you scrubbed the filth off of him. But that thought was leading in other directions . . .

“You are currently working for Thanos. . . . well, perhaps working is too strong a word,” Kaal snorted, looking around at the barren room and mostly empty screens. He then produced a square object from beneath his overcoat; it was fashioned from both plastics and lightweight metals, obviously some form of data drive. He placed it on the surface next to him, and then pushed it pointedly towards Maelstrom. “I have evidence that the Deviants have been working with Thanos
for decades, providing his armies technical support and medical assistance. In exchange, he has allowed them to borrow some of his prison space, training for their guards, as well as giving them the technology and teaching them the techniques to run their prisons. I understand you spent some time in one of his subsidized torture facilities on the Deviant homeworld.”

Maelstrom nodded feebly, trying to fathom that perhaps he was now working for the monster responsible (at least in part) for his past miseries. He reached gingerly for the device but then retracted his hand as if he feared it would be hot to the touch, all of his earlier grandstanding suddenly melting away.

“Also contained with this data is proof that your current Master has long supported campaigns of genocide across the Universe, funding and sometimes even directly aiding in the elimination of . . . undesirables in certain cases. Such was the case on Lemuria, where Thanos has personally overseen some of the ‘purification rituals’ that the native species routinely performs. This includes the execution of those Deviants who choose mates outside of their own kind, as well as the enslavement of their hybrid offspring.”

The Inhuman’s expression had gone blank, the muscles of his lips and cheeks going progressively slack as if his emotions were bleeding out of his eyes and pooling on the table before him. He suddenly bore the guise of a lost child, too young to endure the wound that had just been created within him by the sorcerer’s words, and he was so still that he seemed as if he were abruptly lifeless.

Sensing that he was beyond coordinated movement, Kaal gently lifted the data drive from the countertop and placed it delicately in his yielding grip. The visitor then brushed the immobile man’s cheek in a gesture which was light and pitying, and his eyes softened with--was it compassion? Certainly not from him; this one was cold and impliable. “I do not expect you to answer now,” he said as he stood, preparing to exit. “However, I would like to leave you with a parting thought: any annihilation of the Titan’s forces will certainly lead to collateral damage, and his defeat would be very injurious for those species who are complicit with his . . . activities.”

Maelstrom remained too stunned to indicate a goodbye, but his eyes did follow the figure to the exit, his slender yet powerful form draped again in a murky shroud. Kaal did give him a rather curt but elegant bow before he rounded the corner and undoubtedly disappeared.

That crafty little minx, he sniffed. He had known precisely how to ensure the Inhuman’s inarguable loyalty to his impossible plan. And they say the Titan is mad.

This would never work. Thanos was The Power in the universe--his legions vast and unstoppable. This scheme would (with its brightest outcome) get them killed, and (with its second brightest outcome) see them all cast into the darkest corner of the known worlds to endure eternal sufferings beyond all comprehension. He was already on the winning side so why would he betray his Master on the off-chance that some cunning (and enchanting, but let’s not linger on that, right now) magician with an axe to grind might do some damage that might result in the tiniest hint of some personal revenge?

Well, because of what was in his hand, of course.

His digits came gradually back to life, and he manipulated the object with consideration for a long moment before he inserted it into the designated port. At once, the screen came to life with multiple files--images, testimonies, and documentation of atrocities against the Inhumans by the Deviants. He skipped over most of the general information, although he promised himself that he would comb it all thoroughly at a later time. He lingered only briefly on the videos labeled “Purity Time” as it was teeming with live-action footage of mass executions from the Deviant fire pits. At last, he accessed a file that bore his name, and he gasped at what lay before him: the names of his
parents (Father: Phaeder, Mother: Morga) and communiques which detailed their fates in every exquisite detail. There was even a confidential transmission to the Titan himself which made light of the incident during which Morga was killed and Maelstrom--still a child--was delivered into slavery. Sure, he had dwelled on these events for nearly the whole of his existence and ached every waking moment for retribution, but seeing it all described in such horrible nonchalance tore open the damaged pieces of his heart and left him in emotional agony.

‘...some hag who rutted with an Inhuman...’

‘...her crossbred brat was sniveling as we dragged him away...’

The words grew more cruel, more hurtful as he skimmed further along the document. At some point the words became blurred, as if through a haze of tears, but he forged on as if on a suicide mission. Finally, he came to a video file marked “Half-breed 6697.” He hesitated, drawing in a stilling breath as if he knew the contents before he even began the playback.

There she was: his mother, gripping him like he was the root of her existence, and the Deviant patrolmen ripping her away, weeping violently--anguished. The video continued as the sound of shooting occurred off camera and then the dying whimpers of a woman, followed immediately by the grieving howls of the child as he was torn away from her corpse. The youth was hog-tied and thrown over the shoulder of an oversized Deviant soldier, still reaching, clutching, tearing, wailing...

‘Mama...Mama...Mama...’

He was not entirely certain at what point his fist had breached the display screen, but he knew it would take all of his verbal finesse to explain it away to his superiors. When the sobs ceased, he fell back hard against the frame of the chair and waited for his vision to fade back into perceivable reality. He cradled his bleeding knuckles in the opposite palm for several minutes before he could reason enough to wrap them in a bit of cloth from his undershirt, and then he wiped his face clean with the back of his sleeve.

He spent the next quarter of an hour recovering from the emotional drain that the file had caused in him. However, when he finally did regain control of his faculties, he ejected the data file and held it firmly to his chest. After a few more minutes, he pressed it to his forehead and sighed as he allowed the full weight of the sentiment to wash over him from the inside out. He chuckled as he realized that it still smelled vaguely of the sorcerer who must have been carrying it in one of his pockets, close to his skin.

His avenging angel.

*Oh, Adrestia, I am forever in your debt.*
Driving could be liberating. At night, when the highways were lightly travelled and police radar guns were scarce, Natasha often allowed herself her little more speed. If she didn’t need to be immediately presentable at the other end of the journey, she would even lower a window and let her hair form an unruly aura around her head as she raced through the blackness. More often than not, she cranked up the music volume to a level which was unhealthy for her hearing, the bass pounding forcefully in her chest as if it intended to replace that of her own heart. Tonight the soundtrack to her journey was classic alternative, and Sonic Youth was currently serenading her up the East Coast toward New York City and Avengers Tower. If she drove straight through, she could make it by dawn; more likely, if she stopped for a nap break and a refreshing convenience store breakfast she could make it by late morning.

Agent Coulson had taken some persuading to give her the information she needed, but in the end he had seen her point: messages from outer space are not likely to be positive for the Earth overall, particularly when they occur during an event which manages to free enemies (for the most part) of the entire planet. The only agent with clearance enough to know about any extraterrestrial contacts and who survived the S.H.I.E.L.D./Hydra fallout was Fury, and his whereabouts were known to a precious few. As Natasha then learned, however, no individual had the entire key to his location, and those who did were sworn to only reveal that knowledge in person to someone with the other half of the code. Coulson’s piece was complementary to that held by Captain Steve Rogers who
was presently on superhero sabbatical at the former Stark Tower, and, therefore, she was off to Manhattan on a merry chase to find the First Avenger. It would have been faster to fly, she realized, but there were no obvious reasons for haste. Besides, the longer Blackout stayed on ice, the more likely he was to participate in his interrogations.

The night was clear and speckled with innumerable stars which she could glimpse through the moonroof, and she wondered if any of those faraway glints represented Algorant. Not likely any that were visible from here, she assured herself, and that was fine by her. The thought of being any closer to that place of torment was repugnant at the very least, and the demon had barely described what had actually gone on there. She hoped she wouldn’t have to make him elaborate on his experiences when next they met; however, if Kaal continued to appear in the mix…well, they were going to need Blackout’s expertise in how to handle him. How twisted—how dark did one have to be to survive in that place, anyway? And Kaal had seemed to thrive there. It was no wonder his previous captors had wanted so desperately to be rid of him. Though she was trying not to dwell on the ominous prisoner, she found her thoughts tracing back to him repeatedly throughout the course of her journey, and almost obsessively so.

Around two-thirty, her adrenaline high finally began to plateau, and by four a.m. she was actively struggling against slumber. She pulled into the back parking lot of an all-night diner and tumbled drowsily into the back seat, using her jacket as a makeshift blanket. Tucked beneath the fabric was the form of her .22 pistol which she was never without, and she nuzzled against the steel outline as she settled in for a brief respite. As she began to doze, her attention drifted to a time when she and Clint had taken a road trip to Six Flags Great Adventure not too long after she had settled in America. He had immediately insisted that they brave the tallest, fastest coaster in the park (presumably to see if she would flinch). She had never heard him scream so loudly. Of course, he insisted that it had simply been a show of enthusiasm because he was enjoying himself thoroughly and nothing more.

And she had most definitely not heard him throwing up behind that food vendor’s cart…

She was back in the interrogation room, across from a vague figure which she knew must be Blackout, but the face was unclear. His spiked fingers raked noisily along the surface of the table between them, and he laughed for an unknown purpose, his voice mutating from that of the Lilin captive to a ghoulishly taunting tone: “My my, you seem distracted . . . may I help you with that?” The movement of the fingers were spider-like as they reached out to interlace with her own, and she retracted with revulsion. When her eyes snapped up to meet the gaze of the being opposite her, the eyes were glowing with a wicked fire, and the visage was enshrouded in a veil of inky locks. The wide, faceless grin revealed a mouth of razor-sharp teeth, dried blood clinging to his macabre dentition. He grasped her wrists harshly, and the flesh surrounding hers was cold and moist, sliding against her skin with serpentine malevolence. The creature’s unseen lips drew close to her ear, and she could feel his hot breath urgent against the opening: “You don’t belong here…”

Her throat was raw and sore as if she were shrieking with terror, but she produced no sound. A clammy hand wrapped around the nape of her neck, holding her rigid as the face morphed again into one which was discernible . . . and chillingly familiar.: “I won’t touch Barton, not until I make him kill you-- slowly, intimately, in every way he knows you fear. And then he’ll wake just long enough to see his good work, and when he screams, I’ll split his skull …”

She woke with Loki’s final threat ringing in her consciousness, the words so tangible that they echoed throughout the interior of the vehicle, her chest heaving with exertion.
"My brother has not always been so unreasonable," Thor responded grudgingly. This conversation was not one that he was particularly fond of having, although he found himself having it more frequently than he had in years past. "There were times when he was very nearly tolerable," he reasoned with a faraway hint of a smile playing on his lips.

"I’m not disputing that," answered Tony matter-of-factly. He was tinkering with some parts of the Mach Whatever-He-Was-Up-To-Now just to give his hands an outlet for his nervous energy. "Even I’m tolerable sometimes," he reasoned. "I just want to know if you were ever close."

"Close to what?" the Asgardian replied.

"To each other."

"Of course … we were often in proximity to one another." The awkward press of his eyebrows betrayed that Thor was still not fully comprehending.

"Okay," Tony laughed slyly, "so that’s not a term you use in Super Space-Viking World. Let me rephrase: were you ever really friends? Best buds? Inseparable and such?"

Thor’s eyes finally cleared. For an instant, he seemed pleased that he finally understood the mortal’s turn of phrase, but the satisfaction was soon tempered with a wistful sorrow. "I wish I knew precisely how to answer that, Mr. Stark."

"‘Tony,’ please, for at least the hundredth time. No ‘Mr. Stark’ while you’re staying under my roof and putting enormous strain on most of my extremely pretentious furnishings, I might add. What are you guys made out of, anyway? Dark matter?" The human wiped the trails of grease from his hands as he walked and spoke. He paused by the steel counter of the bar in the corner of his workshop and pulled a root beer from the refrigerator. "You want a drink, your Godliness? Non-alcoholic, while I’m working, of course. So I don’t lose any fingers." He proudly indicated that he currently still had all of his digits by rippling them playfully in front of his face.

"No, thank you, Mister--Tony," the larger man answered hesitantly. After centuries of living in a royal court, it was not exactly simple to drop formalities, but he would attempt it since the mortal continued to insist.

"Well, at least ‘Mr. Tony’ is progress," Stark chirped. He expertly pried the cap from his beverage with a nearby flathead screwdriver. "Sláinte," he said, tipping the neck towards Thor as he knocked back a satisfying gulp. "But don’t let me change the subject--I was making you uncomfortable by bringing up the sensitive matter of your creepy, horned space-brother."

"Indeed you were," Thor conceded.

"The one who tried to assassinate you, failed, and then killed himself instead," Tony continued indifferently.

The Asgardian nodded weakly.

"Except he wasn’t dead, he was just off in some other dimension becoming completely deranged." Stark crossed back over to the suit pieces which were waiting patiently to be assembled. "Then he came back with an alien army and tried to conquer your girlfriend’s home planet, which also failed. Whereafter he saved the life of you and said girlfriend while sacrificing himself to prove that he wasn’t completely insane or evil."
Thor was nodding along in agreement to all of these statements, albeit with an expression of quiet melancholy.

"Which all turned out to be a lie, wherein he humiliated you by impersonating your father and then escaping from custody with several key holdings from Asgard’s Weapons Vault of Ultimate Awesomeness. Is this all pretty close to the mark?"

"Indeed," the blonde man huffed, petulantly.

“So, then . . . were you ever close to the little sociopath or not?”

Natasha was just rounding the corner towards the workshop when she overheard the two men conversing. “Subtle, Stark,” she chastised him in a whisper. She paused before she entered, hoping that Thor would answer the question before she was forced to interrupt. Or that he would at least throw Tony around comically in a rage from the slight to his sibling.

“Again, I must say that the inquiry is not a simple one to which to respond,” said the deeper voice diplomatically. “We have known each other for centuries. There were decades during which we hardly acknowledged one another, and then there were others when we never went a day without being in one another’s company. I presume that we have been both the warmest of confidantes and the most distant of strangers, depending on which point in time you choose to analyze.”

“And the bitterest of enemies,” Stark offered.

“That time has been very brief in the entirety of our existence. Overall, Lo--” The abruptness of his pause was too distinct to dismiss; it was obvious that even saying his brother’s name was freshly wounding to him. “... my brother,” he persevered, “has been very dear to me. I do not always understand him and the workings of his brilliant mind . . . “

“Okay, I’m going to have to stop you there, my huge, blonde friend,” Stark interjected. “I mean, I know you could break me in half with your eyebrows, but I have get this off of my chest--brilliant?”

“Most certainly,” retorted Thor.

“You mean that in a ‘fine line between genius and madness’ way, right?”

“I know this must be difficult for you to fathom due to the relative length of your lifespan, but L--” The warrior governed his hurt more deftly this time, connecting his sentence almost seamlessly. “. . . he has been my adversary for just a few years, and my little brother for more than a thousand. The difference was instantaneous, a point where his mind fractured rapidly, and he changed from light to shadow in a moment as brief as the taking of a breath. It has been . . . mystifying to me.”

“So, I have to ask,” Tony challenged his alien cohort, “if you were to meet him again--in combat, of course--could you kill him?”

There was a strained silence during which Natasha leaned in to detect the sounds of Tony being thrown, struck, or chortled, but there was only a lingering stillness, threatening in its absolute calm. Finally, the Asgardian gave his measured response. “If I had to . . . yes.”

“Forgive me if I question your sincerity, big guy,” the human went on, “but you have let him stab you in the heat of battle --point blank, no less--and escape. Plus, when you answered, you hesitated.”

“Do not misunderstand, Mr. Stark, I have no lingering trust in him. I know that he is not the man
he once was, but I do not think he is irredeemable. However, I would not allow him to harm any of you,” Thor stated with all sincerity. “If it came down to destroying him to save one of you, I would do what must be done.”

“But what about yourself, Thor?” Stark continued to prod. “If it came down to him or you--what then? You’re grappling with the fate of a realm--or maybe all of them--and he starts giving you the puppy eyes, brimming with ‘I promised I’ve changed, baby’ tears . . . I mean, I’m sorry, but I have zero confidence that you would drive your magic hammer right through that ‘brilliant’ skull of his.”

Natasha leaned towards the entrance in anticipation of the Thunder God’s response but was first startled by a voice at her back. “Would you like me to announce you, Agent Romanov?” asked J.A.R.V.I.S. from an unseen speaker in the hall.

“No, thank you, J.A.R.V.I.S. I’m sure Tony is well aware that I’m here by now,” she answered, dryly.

“Indeed, Agent Romanov. He has asked me if you would liked to be ‘played in’ with some classic rock ‘n roll?’

It was borderline adorable how the refined computerized intonation had overemphasized the ‘n’ in rock ‘n roll, like a sophisticated aristocrat trying to seem current with the lingo. “What did he have in mind?” she smirked.

“He has recommended ‘Killer Queen,’ if you are amenable.”

“You know, I would prefer something a little smoother and a lot more flattering,” she suggested, trying not to show how put off she was by not knowing where to look while addressing a bodiless voice.

“Then I would go with ‘Black Magic Woman,’” Tony interjected, his head popping suddenly into the hall from the workshop entrance. “I wasn’t aware that you were going to be dropping by, Agent Romanov.” The tone was more than a little accusing.

“I wasn’t expecting to have to drop by, Stark, but I have a pressing matter to take up with Captain Rogers.” She had not intended to fold her arms in such a guarded fashion as she spoke, but it had just happened. “Is he here?”

“Currently, he is out running in Central Park with your work husband, which I am sure is not attracting any unwanted attention whatsoever.” Natasha had heard rumours that Steve was being dogged by paparazzi while on his leave from active duty, which would have been laughable if he wasn’t such a painfully private person.

“By ‘work husband’ I assume you mean Agent Barton?” Her imagination was filled with an amusing image of Clint literally being circled by a superhumanly fast Captain America. “I don’t really remember him being much of a runner, though.”

Tony ushered her into his workspace with an amusing flourish. “Well, the way they do it, Cap goes for a run around Central Park, and all the bloodthirsty photogs get pegged in the head with rubber-tipped arrows. But no one ever sees where they come from.”

“Funny, that,” she mused. Now that sounded more like the Clint she knew.

Stark steered her gently towards the sitting area, where Thor was still taking up an entire loveseat on his own. He rose courteously when he saw her enter, hand extended in a warm greeting, and his
features dominated by the fullest, most sincere smile Natasha had ever seen. She was reticent to
grasp the hand he offered as she was fairly certain that her own would be ground into powder by
the Asgardian’s strength; however, she was pleasantly surprised when she found his grip to be
gentle, bringing her knuckles to his lips for a surprisingly tender kiss. “It is a pleasure to see you
again, my Lady,” he murmured.

She waited a few beats in case his head happened to suffer any rubber-tipped arrows before she
responded. “Thank you,” she smiled cautiously. “Please, call me Natasha.”

“Good luck with that,” Tony chided. “But in her case, you may as well use her first name. I worked
with this one before that messy business in New York, and, I assure you, she is not a lady.”

“I would dispute that,” Thor said in return. “She is not gentle or yielding, but, then, that describes
most of the ladies where I come from.”

“I appreciate you defending my honor, Thor, but I’m going to have to agree with Tony on this one,”
the Agent admitted. “I don’t exactly have the integrity or breeding of a lady.”

“Well, then we will have to remain respectfully at odds on the matter,” the enormous man said
graciously. If it was possible, his grin became even wider, his face practically glowing. “I have
fought by your side and would be proud to do so again.”

Tony’s hand snaked over her left shoulder, uninvited. “Yeah, he would even kill his brother for you
if he had to. It’s all very chivalrous of him,” he whispered over her shoulder. If Thor heard the
man’s taunt, he did not acknowledge it. “Which leads me back to the original conversation we
were having before we were so cagily interrupted, involving the Sibling of Mischief and Lies . . .”

“Tony,” Natasha said forcefully, brushing his grip from her shoulder. “You should ease up a little
on the brother-bashing, okay?”

“Who’s defending whose honor, now, Agent Romanov?” Stark teased. He flopped down
gracelessly into a recliner and wiped his brow with the sweating bottle of root beer.

“I just think you should tone down the snarkiness. He told you that he has a centuries-old
relationship with Loki, and that he turned evil practically overnight. Haven’t you ever cared about
anyone enough to understand how conflicting that must be? To have the fate of others potentially
hinge on the death of someone you once loved?” The words came tumbling out faster than
Natasha could consider them, and as she heard them, she knew they both realized that Tony
probably did not have a base of reference for this--but that she did. The weight of her words was
deepened by the too-lengthy silence which followed, and Tony’s face was taught with anticipation.

“I have,” came an answer from the entryway. A sweaty, sullen Captain Rogers was leaning in the
doorframe, dressed in a navy blue t-shirt and dark gray sweats which both closely hugged his
muscled frame. “And I think that Natasha does, also.” His voice was so measured that the effect
calmed her immediately. “We’ve both had very close friends who became the enemy, and we had
to struggle with what the outcome might be. It doesn’t mean we cared any less for who they used
to be.”

Stark’s posture deflated, and the softening of his features from arrogant to accepting was likely as
close to an apology as she would likely ever receive from him. “Well, I suppose if Pepper became a
powerful supervillain, I would be loathe to do her in.” He was trying to be humorous, but his sad
tone of submission made the effect seem strained. “Although, if Pepper became a supervillain, the
planet would be, in fact, doomed,” he added, gently.

Throughout this discourse, the Asgardian had been sitting quietly, hands folded beneath his chin,
his face unreadable. Certainly, he had every right and reason to be irritable, and yet he remained placid and unmoving, his eyes seeming to chase images from long ago. When he sensed the lull in the discussion and all focus upon him in anticipation of his response, he raised his face wearily. “Truly, my friends, I have come to terms with the fate of my wicked brother,” he sighed in answer to the unasked question. “Although I may never truly reconcile him with the person I once knew.”

Despite her recent encounter with Loki in her nightmare-- and compounded by the torments he had delivered upon Clint--Natasha was moved by the obvious affection that Thor still held for him. It was more out of compassion for the large, merciful man before her than any pity she could ever hold for that traitorous wretch that urged her to go on. She rested a hand tenderly on his knee and looked up into his gaze with all the earnestness she could convey. “I would like to hear about him someday--the Loki you knew,” she breathed, and she so wanted him to believe her.

But nothing could have been further from the truth.
Part II Anger Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I've been on vacation so updates may be slow for a while as I recover from the upheaval.

--2--

The rat-like man had been confined to this 10-foot by 10-foot enclosure for nearly a week now, and he was beginning to adapt willfully to the routine. Every day or so, the cell door would open, one of many similarly dressed men or women in black uniforms would come and ask him for information, and he would feed them tiny bits of whatever they wanted to know. It never improved his situation, but it didn't exactly make it any worse for him, either; plus, he was fed minimal amounts of slightly palatable food and allowed artificial light for 12 hours of the day. All in all, it was better than he had been treated in years.

In this particular instance, the prisoner was sitting in pitch darkness, fingering the outline of the shackles on his wrist and memorizing every unseen detail of the metal. He had no superhuman strength with which to break them, although he was strong as any man on Earth could hope to be. He did not possess any superior intelligence—at least not anymore—which would help him come up with an escape plan. He found himself in a familiar predicament, at the mercy of someone else’s intentions with only a scant amount of information with which to bargain. The situation was so recognizable that he felt completely at ease in this cramped, dark, subterranean chamber. Besides, he really didn’t have any urgent need to see his surroundings—it was a cell like any other, with a bed, a table, and a chair, plus meager toilet facilities. His keen senses of smell and hearing were far more useful to him in most places these days, anyway.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the metal door being unclasped. A thin beam of light flooded in from the hallway, and his eyes stung briefly before adjusting to the onslaught. A figure then stepped into the blackness, only his outline visible due to the brightness which framed him. He was not a particularly tall or imposing man from what could be determined from his form, and he stood in anticipatory silence for several moments before he finally cleared his throat and spoke.

“Mr. Whelan?” the obscured man asked calmly. As he said these words, the fluorescent lighting above their heads buzzed into life, and the prisoner found himself temporarily blinded again. He had spent enough time in dark places, however, that the discomfort was minimal. He nodded in response to the inquiry.

“I am Agent Coulson with S.H.I.E.L.D.,” the man went on. He smirked then as if he had made an inside joke. “Well, I guess you probably know who I’m with. Force of habit. I once answered the phone at my mother’s house that way, and, boy, was her Medicare case manager confused.” He gave a gentle snort which the captive did not share. “Anyway, I am here to . . . “

“Ask me a few questions,” the rat-man finished testily. “I know. Please, sit down, Agent Coulson.” Although he had said ‘please,’ the tone was anything but welcoming.
There was only one chair, metal and welded together so that no fasteners could be loosened and thereby be accessible to the incarcerated. It sat at the point furthest away from the prisoner, who was shackled to his bunk. “I’ll just sit here, then, shall I?” the Agent replied, indicating the solitary chair.

Again, the other man maintained a look of sour disinterest.

“Mr. Whelan . . . “ Coulson began, and was quickly interrupted by the man he addressed.

“Vermin,” he said coldly.

“I’m sorry? I don’t follow.”

“Call me ‘Vermin,’” the rat-man clarified impatiently. “No one calls me ‘Whelan,’” Not anymore, he added internally. Somehow, that thought still saddened him, even though the memories of the time before he became this creature were ambiguous to him now, as if he had experienced them through a fever.

“Suit yourself, Mr. . .  Vermin,” the Agent stated uncomfortably. “I need to request some more information of you. It seems your friend, Mr. Blackout--”

Vermin chuckled at the use of the title in reference to his acquaintance.

“Blackout,” Coulson corrected himself, “has ceased to offer his cooperation in our investigation into the incident at the Raft. . . “

“I’ve told you what I know,” the captive snapped with an air of finality.

“You’ve been most helpful, yes,” the suited man went on, “but we need to know a little more about who might have been behind the prison break. You see, we have determined that whoever was directing the breakout is of extraterrestrial origin . . . “ Well, they had not determined that definitively, but he was hoping that this little conversation would confirm it. . . . and I need to know who that alien mastermind might be.” He raised his eyebrows at Vermin hopefully. It was a long shot, he knew, but the prisoner had been privy to part of what Blackout knew since they were....friends, of a sort, he supposed.

The rat-man’s eyes lifted carefully, and the agent’s heart paused for a hopeful moment as he spoke: “I don’t know who it was.”

Well, that was anticlimactic, Coulson thought, balefully. To his delight, however, the prisoner continued, “I don’t know who let us out. I do know who Blackout was working for before he was captured. I doubt it was the same person.”

“An alien?” the agent asked. He was leaning forward as if feeding off the words that Vermin was dropping in such small helpings.

“Oh, yes. And Blackout was loyal to him, at least until recently.”

“Tell me,” Coulson said too eagerly.

“Well . . . “ the rodentine being drawled, his fingers tapping lightly on the steel post of his bunk, “I might be able to tell you . . . but I just can’t remember his name right now.”

Disappointing, but not unexpected. “Would you be willing to listen to an audio recording and tell us if you recognize either speaker? Or the language, for that matter?” The agent hoped he wasn’t
tipping his hand by revealing that the language was unknown to them, but that could hardly be changed now.

“I’m through talking about the Raft,” Vermin said disinterestedly. “I just want to speak to Blackout.” He was picking at the skin around his pointed and elongated nails.

Okay, time to change the subject and then circle back to the main point at the appropriate time.

“What about Kaal? Does he know whose idea this was?”

“I don’t know Kaal,” the prisoner answered, his eyes glazing over with progressive indifference. “Ask Blackout about Kaal.”

“We have, and he is no longer cooperating.” The interrogator sighed as if he had expected this outcome all along. He skimmed a hand along the top of his hairline in momentary consideration of how, or even if, to continue. “Mr. Whelan, if there is anything we can do to assist you in remembering . . . “ Agent Coulson began, but he was abruptly cut off by the prisoner.

“I want to see Blackout!” he shrieked, pounding his closed fist on the blunt end of the bedpost, the pink tinge of his skin deepening to a full-on red with his anger. “And there is no Mr. Whelan!” he howled violently. His arms strained against the pull of the shackles on his wrists, but the metal resisted the enormous strain beautifully. He spat and seethed in his enraged state, continuing to pull against his restraints until the effort looked quite painful. Then the rage passed within the space of a few seconds, and he sat back against the wall of his bunk, heaving, as his face turned slowly more passive and his breathing evened.

“Edward Whelan is dead,” he muttered, finally. “All that’s left is a monster.”

Coulson had vacated his chair and backed up several paces during the outburst, his back meeting the wall and his hand hovering over the holster of his weapon. “I meant no disrespect,” the agent said breathlessly, withdrawing his hand tentatively from his hip. “Truly, it’s just that, well, we dwell on formalities at government agencies. It’s really hard to call someone something so casual.”

The prisoner had gone slack against the end of his bunk, and he was no longer responding to the presence of the other man. “Let us help you. If you can tell us anything about Blackout’s extraterrestrial contacts, or if you know anything about who might have been behind these prison breaks, I could arrange some privileges for you in exchange for that information.”

Vermin was no longer listening to what Coulson was telling him; he sat dead-eyed and limp, his lips moving soundlessly with what appeared to be a litany of inaudible words. Whatever he was saying, they were spoken for himself alone, and the agent felt sharply ignored.

“I’ll just let myself out then,” he indicated sardonically.

The whispering became slightly louder then, and Coulson thought he could make out several words in repetition: “Not him . . . only Thanos. Just Thanos . . . not him, not him . . . ”

“Okay, then,” the agent finished awkwardly. “I thank you for your violent--and weird--cooperation.” He backed himself up to the entrance door and rapped quickly on the rough metal to indicate he was ready to come out.

****

After the agent had departed, the being once known as Edward Whelan continued to repeat the words he had been reproducing for several minutes. It was a prayer to the unseen voice who had been invading his subconscious for the last few days, the one that promised him freedom if he
would help to destroy those who had used him so selfishly as a means to their own ends. Still, he could not agree to the destruction of the one friend he had left: Blackout had looked out for him when no one else would, even if he had been so blatantly utilized as a pawn in his schemes. No, he would not agree to help the voice murder his only companion. He would not, he would not, he would not . . .

Not him . . . only Thanos. Just Thanos . . . not him . . .

****

Upon exiting the cell, Agent Coulson walked swiftly back to the main control room. He leaned calmly against the nearest workstation and considered his current options. What had he really gained in the last 48 hours? An audio clip in a language no one could decipher, the name of an intergalactic prisoner with a Titan-sized chip on his shoulder, and one word mumbled by a self-proclaimed monster . . . Thanos. The same name as the Titan so reviled by the mysterious hooded psychopath, and no one was giving up the goods on him. Still, there was perhaps one being currently (hopefully) on Earth who had some knowledge of interstellar affairs, and he just might be familiar with someone so notoriously bad-ass. He pulled out his mobile phone and selected a contact. When the voice on the other end answered with formal politeness, Coulson asked him quite bluntly: “J.A.R.V.I.S.? Is there a Thunder God anywhere in the facility?”

“Yes, Thor Odinson is currently residing at this address.”

_Damn, why hadn’t he thought to do this before?_ “Can you put him on, please? It’s kind of important.”

“I will locate him immediately. Please hold.” The line was briefly silent and then some soothing music began to play. It took several moments before Coulson could place the tune: it was a harp arrangement of ‘Enter Sandman.’ The agent tapped his foot along with the melody appreciatively. After what seemed to be an eternal wait, the music finally ended abruptly.

“What do I say?” came a deep voice, somewhat muffled by movement on the other end of the call.

“‘Hello’, Thor,” responded someone else--obviously Stark.

“Hello?” This answer was still muddled.

“Not to me, big guy--into the phone.”

“Hello?” This time the word was clear and of greater volume.

“Hi, um, Thor?” It was embarrassing to admit, but Phil was actually a little anxious about speaking to this supernatural being--who was regarded by some as a deity--over a palm-sized mobile device. “This is Agent Coulson of S.H.--”

“Agent Coulson! How can this be? What manner of device is this which can speak to the deceased?” The powerful and sincere timbre of his words left Coulson wondering if he should not just pretend to still be dead in order to appease the mighty warrior.

“It’s a long, horrible story, sir. You wouldn’t want to hear it right now. I have far more important questions which need to be answered, and I think you might be able to help me.”

“I shall do my best.” Thor sounded truly honored that such a favor would be asked of him. “How long can we communicate like this?” he asked without pretense. “It must take considerable energy to conjure up a spirit from the afterlife.”
The muted sound of the phone being taken from Thor was heard, and then Tony Stark was heard again faintly, saying, “Okay, it’s time to level with you, Hammertime. Coulson’s not dead. He’s just calling you over a regular cell phone, and the signal is being beamed from one point on the Earth to another point on the Earth via an ordinary, boring, old satellite. K?” There was a pause during which Thor presumably indicated his answer. “Carry on,” Tony finished.

“How may I assist you, Mr. Agent Coulson?” Thor asked in a more subdued tone.

It was disheartening that he had been stripped of all the awe he had held just moments before, but Phil continued. “I’m going to play a little game of Interstellar Word-Association with you, okay?”

There was no response.

“He can’t hear the rocks in your head! You are going to have to speak!” Tony chided him in the background.

“Um . . . I was nodding to indicate the affirmative,” Thor stated.

Oh, this was too much. He was going to have to drunk-dial this guy when the fate of the entire planet wasn’t hanging so precariously in the balance. “Okay, first word: ‘Kaal.’”

“I’m sorry. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“He would have been a prisoner at an intergalactic prison facility. Kind of crazy--very deadly.” Coulson clarified hopefully.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know him.”

The agent’s heart was starting to beat rapidly in his chest, as if he knew for certain that the next word was going to bring a response--and he was not sure if he was elated or devastated. “Okay, second word: ‘Thanos.’”

“Where did you hear this?” Thor boomed back immediately.

“From a prisoner in our custody. We have reason to believe that whoever bears that name was involved in the release of several high-level prisoners, and the death of many others.”

“Here? On Midgard?” The Asgardian’s voice had raised an octave with what was probably trepidation.

“Yes, sir. On Earth.”

There was a painfully protracted silence during which the only sound was the Thunderer’s labored breathing. “I do not believe it,” he murmured eventually, almost as if he were speaking to someone else entirely.

“Thor?” Coulson prodded. “I’m going to need to know who that is.”

“He is a monster,” Thor said forthrightly.

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Phil added. “Would you be able to tell me what manner of monster we might be dealing with here?”

“He is an Eternal, a race with which you have had no contact, I believe. Yet he is also a Deviant, a mutant member of the species who is stronger and more formidable than his counterparts. He is powerful, ruthless, and all but unstoppable.”
Coulson didn’t miss a beat. “So should I be concerned that he is raising an army of lunatic killing machines from all corners of the universe?”

“Most assuredly.”

“Noted.” Coulson exhaled slowly, unsure of how to use the information now that he had it.

“Would this be an opportune moment to also express that he is mentally unstable, and he wishes to cause as many fatalities across the galaxies as possible?”

“Sure.” The agent sighed. “Why not?” His hand was now plastered to the curve of his forehead in distress.

“If his interest has fallen upon Midgard, then I am most concerned. You are possibly--and by this I mean no offense, Son of Coul-- the realm least capable of repelling him. When he launches an offensive against a world, he goes for total annihilation of its native species.”

“I’m not offended,” Phil assured him. “I’m just . . . a little overwhelmed right now. I mean, you wake up in the morning thinking that Hydra is the worst possible thing that could happen to your planet, and then suddenly you’re launched headlong into a supernatural cluster-- thing,” he ended, adeptly switching gears at the end to avoid the obscenity.

“Mr. Coulson, I should also inform you that Thanos has shown more than a lingering interest in the Tesseract in the past . . . “

“Well, at least that is something we don’t have to worry about in this case. It’s safe in Asgard, right?”

There was an extended pause which became awkward and then quickly advanced to alarming.

“Right, Thor?”

Still dead air.

“Look, Thor, I really need you to give me some good news here, buddy. I just learned that my home planet may be next in line for destruction by an alien madman, so please don’t tell me that a weapon of potentially infinite power has gone missing right before we suffer an extraterrestrial attack.”

“I . . . um, I am dreadfully sorry, but the Tesseract is no longer in Asgard.”

Well, he was wondering how this could possibly get any worse. He supposed that was as good an answer as any. “I’m afraid to ask you what happened right now. The way this conversation is going you are probably going to tell me that it’s in the hands of some crazy sorcerer or something . . . “

Another telling silence.


“Well, there was much that transpired, but the summarization would be that Loki impersonated my father by taking his form for a time, and was therefore able to abscond with the Tesseract.”

“Swell.”

“. . . among other things . . . ”
“Alright, Thor, I think I’ve heard enough for one night. If I keep talking to you, the world will be over by the end of the six o’clock news.” The agent’s palm had begun to sweat profusely, and he was having difficulty keeping the smooth metal from sliding out of his grip. “Take care okay?”

“I am sorry that I could not have been more helpful.”

“I appreciate that.”

“And I am also deeply sorry that my brother killed you.”

“Thanks, Thor. Bye-bye now.” Coulson ended the call before any more disturbing sentiments could be expressed. He lowered the phone with a defeated gasp, concentrating exclusively on breathing for several minutes. He then raised the phone in front of his face and stared blankly into the screen; then after several moments more, he pressed and held the button on its face. A pleasant beep resounded in the now empty control room, and then he said, “Siri? Where is the nearest liquor store?”

****

“What was that all about?” Stark asked as Thor stood stagnant, his enormous hand still gently grasping the mobile phone. “What’s the matter: super-secret government agency got your tongue?”

The Asgardian recovered slowly from his torpor and placed the device complacently back in Stark’s outstretched hand. “I don’t know how to tell you this, Mr. Stark--Tony,” he caught himself absentely. “But your world is in grave danger.”

“Around here, we call that ‘Tuesday.’ Seriously, my friend, a world in peril is just another day in paradise for us.” Tony had to stand on tiptoe to place a comforting hand on Thor’s shoulder, but he did it without humility. “Still, you seem really put out. Can I offer you a shoulder to cry on? Unless, of course, your tears weight as much as a mid-sized sedan, in which case, Captain Spangly Pants would be more than happy to let you lean on him.”

“I need some time alone, if you would.” The mighty god sank helplessly into the nearest chair, his eyes glassy.

“That serious, huh?” Tony folded his arms, his look suddenly softening. “Would you like me to bring you a drink or four?” When Thor did not respond, Stark finally realized the gravity of the situation.

“Hey . . .what’s up?” Stark offered more gently.

Thor absently ran his fingers back through his loose blonde locks. “One of the cruelest, most powerful beings in existence may be targeting your planet for elimination.”

“Oh,” Tony replied, emotionless. “So, Manhattan all over again.”

Thor shook his head weakly. “Not exactly. I do not think that all the powers in Asgard could hinder Thanos. Perhaps not all the Nine Realms together.”

“Oh,” the human remarked again just as flatly. “So, bar crawl then? That’s when you consume alcoholic beverages in a series of different establishments until you have to crawl home,” Tony explained.

“Perhaps later,” the blonde sighed. “Currently I must try to steel myself for an errand I hoped I would never have to perform again.”
“Can I help?” Tony asked. “I mean, whatever gets us closer to the bar crawl . . . “

“No,” Thor replied emphatically. “This I must do alone.” He crossed over to the nearby window where the skyline of New York City was laid out magnificently at his feet. At last, he breathed: “I need to find my brother.”
1097 A.D., Northwest of Västerås, Sweden, Along the Svartån River

Loki elongated the line of his body, stretching his arms almost cruelly taught above his head. The motion eased the tension in his vertebrae, and he sighed with the painful release he received. It was liberating to be so unburdened, having shed the metal and leather of his armor after the battle. He now stood poised on the bank of the river, its waters cool and smooth as mirrored glass, and it beckoned him in with the promise of soothed aches and cares borne away upon the still surface that flowed at his feet. He dipped a probing toe into the depths, watching intently at the ripple caused by this disturbance, following it outwards into the dark line where the twilight met the waves. He ventured a satisfied smile that he was certain no one would witness before he dove in, and his lithe form broke the pristine topmost layer of the water with elegant precision.

As he returned to the surface, he twisted onto his back, relaxing all of his muscles so that he floated with his face to the darkening sky above, its hues maroon and indigo and sprinkled with the first few evening stars. He stroked lazily backwards along the water, eyes closed and savoring the stillness of the crisp evening. If any of the villagers happened to spy him, he knew that there would be questions; the river was too chilled for a human to tolerate, and the weight of the sodden breeches and tunic he still wore should have been nearly pulling him under. Yet he was a god--at least so far as these mortals were concerned--and he was able to endure far more than was possible for their kind. If fortune was with him, he should be able to float unseen for a few minutes more.

The lean Asgardian had already been seen, however, and a figure continued to observe him undetected. Thor had come down to the river to wash off the blood and sweat from the battle they had just endured, and he had not expected to find his brother already here, particularly not in such an assailable position. Although the pair had had decades to grow accustomed to one another, the elder man still found his sibling to be such a strange creature: careful where he himself was reckless and guarded where the Thunderer was bold. More often than not, they still gave one another a wide berth inside the palace and socialized only at feasts and festivals. They were simply too contradictory, and their encounters were strained. Thor just could not find any warmth or welcome in his brother’s ways which made him eager to seek him out.

He opted not to disturb Loki, partially because he wanted him to remain relaxed (since he was seldom so) and also because he did not want them to have another awkward confrontation. The blonde knelt cautiously on the bank and splashed the frigid water over his forearms with as little
noise as he could he manage; meanwhile, his brother continue to float along the current, only
occasionally propelling himself with a long, lazy drag of his limbs. Eventually, the draw of the
flow led him to a pocket by the far bank where his prone body lay motionless against the shore, in
the shadow of a small figure that he had not yet discerned. When his eyes fluttered open, the pale
Asgardian became aware of the person standing over him on the shore: a fair-haired girl not more
than seven years of age. His sudden awareness seemed to surprise them both, and they gasped
simultaneously.

From his vantage point on the opposite bank, Thor chuckled softly and paused his ministrations
with the water in order to witness the scene unfolding before him more closely. Loki was now
crouching in the stream, and the elder man could see that his shoulders shuddered with unheard
laughter. The child had skittered backwards several steps in her apprehension. She was covered
head-to-toe in furs and skins, and even at her tender age, she was wary of one who did not feel the
sharpness of the air in this far northern clime.

“Do not be afraid,” he heard Loki laugh. “I do not wish you any harm.”

The girl kept her distance, her stance defensive.

“Please--” he smiled. “I won’t hurt you. It’s just that you startled me.” His words contained a hint
of kindness that Thor had not heard before. He found himself straining to see and hear more of the
interaction between these two dissimilar beings. To Thor’s astonishment, Loki appeared to be
gentle and genuinely amiable towards the tiny human. “Please,” he encouraged her again, “Come
down to the water. There is no reason to fear.” He rose to his feet then, standing aside with a
deferring bow.

The child remained vigilant, but she sidestepped the larger figure and cautiously approached the
edge of the river. She held a wooden bucket in one hand, and she gripped it protectively in the
small of her back as she passed the man, facing him at all times. Her eyes were wide with unease,
but she overcame her fear to kneel by the waterfront, constantly aware of the stranger’s location,
but Loki did not move to hinder her, observing her movements from afar with amused
consideration. She was forced to turn away for an instant while she dipped the bucket in the cold
current, and when she pivoted to draw the full and now more cumbersome vessel out from the
murky depths, the silt beneath her feet shifted and caused her to slip perilously towards the stream.
Her throat could barely loose a rudimentary cry before a firm grip pulled her back to solid ground.

“Are you alright?” he asked tenderly, but she pulled her forearm away from his grasp as if she had
been seared by it. “You should not be out here alone. Do you not know that these woods are
treacherous for one so small and unprotected?”

The girl continued to stare at him mutely as if gazing upon a predator. It was several moments
before she realized that the bucket lay upended at her feet, the contents running back towards the
river. She looked urgently torn between completing her errand and fleeing from the outsider. In the
end, she merely stood transfixed to the spot.

“May I help you?” Loki offered softly. He appeared to be both wounded and amused by her fear of
him, and he looked determined to win her trust. He crossed gingerly over to the fallen object, slow
and deliberate in his movements so as not to raise any further alarm in the youngster. “Why are you
out here unaccompanied?” he said, in an attempt at conversation which was presumably an effort
to calm her. He swiftly refilled the bucket and extended it towards the girl.

“My--my brothers,” she stammered. “They dared me to go to fetch the water on--on my own.”

“Ah, yes . . . brothers,” he lamented. “I know how that can be.”
“You have brothers?” she answered hesitantly.

“Just one,” he smiled. “But I do not think he is very fond of me.”

Although the sentiment was likely deserved, Thor could not help but be stung a bit by this confession. He realized that it was a show of ego to expect someone to like you when you have made no effort to forge a bond, but it was hurtful all the same. They simply did not share the same interests or hold similar views about . . . well, almost anything. Still, there were millennia left to rectify this error--regardless of whose transgression it truly was.

“They were cruel to send you out here alone,” Loki continued. “They might have endangered you.” There was no malice in these words, but his expression betrayed that the thoughts in his head were quite active. “Surely they must have known that these waters are magical?” he asked with a sly tilt of his head.

Her jaw fell open in innocent disbelief.

“I see in your face that you doubt me, but it is true. Here, come see for yourself.” He coaxed her over with a fluid motion, and she stepped toward him, tentative but curious. As she approached the shore, a dim pulse of light became visible along the water’s edge. The evening had all but yielded to a moonless night, and the eerie greenish glow was reflected fully by both of their faces as they were spied from afar. Loki leaned over the ghostly shimmer, and it caused the phosphorescence to reflect in his eyes. He did look like a spectral vision from this distance, the light dancing along the lenses of his irises, his lips slightly parted in concentration. He circled his fingers nimbly over the surface, and in the reflection Thor could see that the trails of luminescence were mirroring the movement. The child took two steps closer, her mouth now fully agape and her eyes so wide they appeared to be lidless.

The seemingly young man then withdrew his hand, and immediately figures rose out of the swirls of light--green-tinted forest creatures each as large as the girl herself, turning in the same roiling pattern as before. Each one moved within its own sphere as the true animal would--hopping, darting, pawing, bearing radiant teeth--until he swept his arm over it in another fluid motion, and they all dissolved back into the blackened depths below. They were replaced now by fantastical creatures, some which Thor recognized from their home in Asgard and others which existed only in the mystical legends of Midgard. This time, the small, blonde mortal raised her hands to her cover her mouth, so overcome with awe that she was nearly forgetting to draw breath.

“Can I--can I touch them?” she murmured. It was unclear whether she was aware that she had spoken. Loki only nodded in response. She moved timidly forward and stretched out her elfin fingers; Thor could see even from this vantage point that they trembled. Just as the tips made contact with the closest gleaming creature, the entire illusion dissipated in a frenzy of sparkling dust which cascaded ethereally back onto the surface of the river, glowing brighter and then fading away gently like the pulse of a firefly. The child’s entire body quivered with her uncontainable joy, and she giggled as loudly as if she meant the Gods to hear her. “That was amazing!” she gushed, and her palms flew up to cover her mouth again.

Loki chuckled also, his cheeks burning with self-satisfaction. “I am honored that you think so,” he replied, handing her back the bucket which was brimming with cool water. “However, now you must repay me.”

The fear played briefly again upon her visage, but she managed to keep it in check.

“When you return to the village, be certain that your wicked brothers look into the magic water that you have brought back to them, in penance for the peril they have forced you to endure.”
She nodded obediently, the trace of an impish grin upon her lips. As she turned away, he stopped her once more. “Oh, and be certain that as they do, you say this...” He cupped his hands around the shell of her tiny ear and whispered something. She nodded again and skipped off fearlessly in the direction of her home.

Loki lingered for several minutes on the riverbank, surveying the clear blanket of stars and running his hands through the sand on its shore, while Thor quietly finished his washing up and crept soundlessly away toward the horses and the battalion they had both recently departed. Nearly a quarter of an hour later, his brother returned from the scene of the incident they had both witnessed, his face still wearing an uncharacteristic grin. He was back in his armor, but it was a less ornate version of the mail he normally wore. The Asgardians were here to aid a clan of humans that had earned great favor with the Allfather, but he did not intend the mortals to know that their assistance was divine; therefore, the warriors had gone to great trouble to ensure that they looked as native to this realm as those men beside whom they fought.

Thor deliberately moved to his brother’s side and clapped a friendly hand on his shoulder. “There you are, brother!” he said with almost too much enthusiasm. “I was wondering where you might have wandered off to!”

His sibling seemed startled, wincing somewhat at the sharp contact, but he did not pull away. “I went down to the river,” he said with a hint of suspicion. “I wanted to wash up and... be alone.” One eyebrow was cocked skeptically at his brother’s sudden interest in his movements.

“And were you?”

“Was I what?” Loki shot back defensively.

“Were you alone? I would hate to think that the mortals may have seen you and recognized you for what you are.” Thor tried to temper his deep, resounding voice so that their discourse remained between the two of them. He was challenging Loki, testing him to see if he would be forthcoming with what had been such a private moment. The response would determine if his brother harbored any trust in him at all.

“Oh, I was and was not,” the younger man answered cryptically.

“How do you mean?” Thor pressed him.

“Honestly, Thor!” Loki crossed his arms haughtily. “I followed your footprints all the way back here! Only one hulking barbarian has feet that size, on or off of Midgard,” he scolded.

Despite that fact the he had been so embarrassingly revealed, the larger man could not help but be impressed by his sibling’s cunning... and pleased by his honesty.

“So, what did you tell the girl?” Thor probed as he nudged the slighter man playfully in his ribs.

“Nothing much,” Loki shrugged. “Just having a bit of fun.” And with that remark, he strode off back toward where their mounts were waiting for them, a subtle mischievous grin upon his lips.

Two important milestones had occurred that night. First, the local villagers received quite a fright when the spectral image of a brown bear rose out of an ordinary bucket of river water and terrified three young boys. When their sister was asked how this had been accomplished, she described a magician in the form of a young man who was resistant to cold and fatigue and who had given her the words to a magic spell. Thus, the legend of the God of Mischief was born to the northern lands, although later it became distorted and entwined with some other pieces of oral tradition.
Secondly, the mighty Thor, Norse God of Thunder, decided that there was some value in his brother, something worth preserving.

Something worth saving.

****

**Present Day, Avengers’ Tower (formerly Stark Tower) Manhattan, NYC**

Clint and Natasha were up into the early morning hours in the Avengers Tower’s common rooms, catching up on old business and marathon-watching several seasons of the ‘Amazing Race.’ The other members of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes were in and out, sometimes commenting on the action onscreen (Tony), and sometimes just sitting silently observing the interactions both on and offscreen (Steve). It wasn’t until Tony was joyfully re-enacting what he thought Thor and Loki would be like as a pair of dysfunctional contestants that Clint finally began to show some of his notorious moodiness, and he excused himself curtly, grumbling about needing some fresh air while Stark continued his rather accurate performance. Natasha lingered for several minutes before guilt bade her to go after him.

“Hey, there you are,” she said with an attempt to sound unassuming. Agent Barton was in the adjoining study and had not bothered to turn on any lighting; instead, he stood pensively in the glow from the ridiculous wall-length saltwater aquarium that Tony had demanded was necessary. Clint was hovering over the back of chair, his hands gripping the object with such force that she worried he might sever it from the lower half. He did not react to the sound of her voice so after a few more moments she approached cautiously and tried again. “Clint?” she asked, softly. His only response was a frustrated shake of his head.

“I just . . . “ he tried to say, but then halted and dropped his head to stare at the furniture he was still holding like it was the anchor of his whole world. “I just can’t, you know?”

Yeah, she knew. No one else on the entire planet would know, but she did, and that’s why they were best friends. Or as close to best friends as two criminals turned top-level secret agents could be, anyway, seeing as how their profession was rooted in a lack of trust for other human beings.

“Tony’s an idiot,” she replied calmly.

“Tony’s a genius,” Clint answered without raising his head.

“Not when it comes to people, Clint. Ask Pepper--she’ll readily confirm that.”

“Yeah, probably.” He cracked a minimal smile, but it was agonizingly brief.

“Hey,” she tried again, bridging the short distance between them by resting a hand gently on his forearm. He flinched, but he allowed the contact. Again, Natasha was absolutely certain that he would have endured such an intimate touch from no other person at that moment. “I know, okay? You don’t have to waste a single second explaining yourself to me.” She could feel the tension in the muscle beneath her fingers lessen somewhat.

“I just can’t find the humor in all this, Nat,” he said directly to the chair. “That . . . that evil son-of-a . . . “ His inability to finish his thoughts only served to exasperate him further, and his knuckles
whitened with the increased pressure. “He invaded my brain, rifled through my secrets, used all of my weaknesses against me. He-he made me kill other people--good people . . . “

Natasha nodded along silently although he was still looking downwards and could not see her agreement. He knew that she knew, and that was all that mattered. “I can tell you again that you were in no way responsible for all of that, but I know that you won’t forgive yourself so I’ll avoid it.” She worked her hand up until it rested on his shoulder. “But, there is someone I think you should talk to.”

He kicked the leg of the chair sullenly. “I’m not going back to a therapist, Nat, I told you that--”

“I know, I know.” She backed off, her hands spread in a gesture of surrender. “I was talking about Thor, actually.”

At that remark, he finally turned his face towards her with a look that was clearly one of shocked indignation. “Thor? The guy that still cares about that monster even though he has become the embodiment of evil? That Thor?”

She shrugged. How many other Thors did he know?

“I can’t see how that would seem like a good idea to you, Natasha. He’s just going to tell me that he’s not so bad once you get to know him, even if he does try to enslave entire planets!”

“I hardly think so, Clint. Thor is not a fool. He’s hopeless with Earth technology, but he is not a fool. If you need answers about what happened to you, he is the closest you will be able to get to hearing them from Loki himself.” She watched carefully for a reaction to the use of the name, but she did not receive one. “Even if it changes nothing, at least you will have tried. It couldn’t hurt.”

Clint exhaled sharply. “Alright, Nat, I’ll try. Since you think it could help.” He was resigned to her suggestion, but his face was still austere. He was only doing this for her and not for himself, she realized, but if it did help in any way, it would be worth it.

“Okay, then--let’s go.” She soberly motioned towards the exit.

“What--now?” Clint shot back with annoyance.

“Yes, now,” she insisted. “Thor will be leaving in the next few hours--to find his brother. If you don’t ask him now, you may have to ask him in front of Loki when he returns. And that would be terribly awkward, wouldn’t it?”

****

The pair had found Thor in the 17th floor library, looking somber. Apparently there was a certain amount of mental preparation required in going to find your snarky sidekick-turned-supervillain baby brother after he’s come back from the dead--twice--and it was taking a noticeable toll on the usually unflappable Asgardian. His tortured demeanor was almost enough to cause Natasha to abandon this little project altogether, until she concluded that it could be beneficial for Thor as well as Clint. This escapade could turn out being a very therapeutic airing of resentments or a bad episode of a television talk-show, complete with furniture-throwing. Yet, there was never any healing without picking a little at the existing wounds.

So, what the hell.

Natasha stayed for the entire discourse at Thor’s insistence; it seems that she was not the only one considered about the state of the furniture. In fact, she had actually had to bicker a little with the
enormous, blonde man before he would agree to discuss anything regarding his brother in the presence of Agent Barton. In the end, the redhead was forced to pull out all the stops on her powers of persuasion in order to close the deal, but she managed it with only minimal episodes of raised voices. She then took a self-righteous seat in a corner wing-backed chair to provide whatever silent support either party might conceivably need.

The two men seated themselves on opposite sides of a well-cushioned, rust-colored sofa with a ludicrous amount of throw-pillows and stared each other down for several minutes without a word. Thor’s eyebrows pressed together sympathetically, and he opened his mouth to speak. Clint immediately cut him off. “If you start off with an apology, you’ll wish you hadn’t,” he snapped. It sounded uncharacteristically harsh even for him, but it was sincere enough that Thor’s mouth actually closed in response. “You spend too much time apologizing for crimes that aren’t your own,” the human clarified. “I would appreciate it if you would neither be sorry for, nor downplay the severity of, what your . . . brother has done.” There, the ground rules were laid, albeit venomously.

“That is fair,” Thor admitted with a gentle nod of his head. As placid as he seemed on the surface, his front teeth were gnawing relentlessly on his bottom lip. “I will not defend him, but I will be honest even if it will not please you to hear the truth. What do you want to know?”

“You can’t really tell me what I need to know, which is why I’m not sure why I’m even here,” Clint huffed despondently, his hands finding his hair and lingering there.

From her vantage point in the far corner, Natasha cleared her throat forcefully.

“Oh, right. Because Nat thinks that this will be cathartic. And I trust her judgment,” he finished, and his tone became more gentle at the last.

“You are wise to do so. She is a knowledgeable ally.”

Hunched over before the bulky Asgardian, Clint appeared like a worried child who had been called to the principal’s office. He still managed to meet his gaze in brief increments which was admirable.

“Do you consider her to be a good person?”

Clint’s head snapped up suddenly as if he would dare the enormous man to suggest otherwise. “Of course I do,” he answered without hesitation. “She is my closest friend. I l--” Clint’s features went blank for a moment, like he was adrift at sea. “I like her very much,” he finished as the stern mask came flooding back over his face.

Well, that was interesting, Natasha thought. She noticed Thor was now looking at her for guidance on how to continue. As urgently as she would liked to have explored what he had nearly conveyed, she opted to put her own curiosity aside for the moment and nodded at Thor to go on.

“And yet you know about all the things she has done in the past? Deeds which were . . . not good?”

A knowing air crept over Barton’s visage, and he cracked a smile that was anything but friendly. “I see where you are going with this, Thor, and I appreciate it, but . . . “

“But nothing. If you are appreciative then show it, and just listen.” The words sounded so much like they were coming from a schoolteacher and not a millenium-old, firmly muscled warrior that Natasha had to bite back a snicker.

“There are several things you should know about my brother,” Thor spoke in the same
authoritarian tone. “First, he is dangerous.” Clint started to interrupt again. “You already know this. However, the reasons why he is so dangerous are the same reasons why he was my closest ally for centuries: he is calculating, charming, and extraordinarily intelligent. That makes him resourceful and difficult to fool. Yet it also makes him manipulative, obstinate, and able to conceal his emotions from anyone. It’s what makes him such a treacherous enemy. It is also a perfect description--forgive me, Natasha--of your closest friend, Agent Barton.”

Barely-controlled rage crackled across Barton’s forehead. Natasha was a little stunned and sore herself at the comparison between herself and Loki; however, the umbrage subsided quickly when she concluded that he was, in fact, correct.

“If she tried to kill you tomorrow, Agent Barton, would you despise her?”

The question lingered in the air like an accusation, but Clint did not immediately respond, though his eyes still sparked with fury. “No more than I could despise myself,” he said through clenched teeth.

“If she deceived you and tried to destroy all that you held dear, would you hate her?”

“She would never do that,” Barton seethed.

“Why do you believe that?” Thor asked coolly. “Because she has confided in you? Shared your deepest fears? Knows your most closely guarded secrets?” The Asgardian’s look held a perceptive undertone which Natasha knew would play right into his hands in just a few more exchanges. For the briefest of moments, he reflected his brother perfectly, although they admittedly shared no blood. “Because she saved your life?” he questioned teasingly. “Because you saved hers?”

Clint nodded, but his conviction was obviously waning.

“Because she loves you?” There it was--the crux: the point driven home like a blow to the chest. You cannot know that, never for certain. You can only trust that when someone says it, that they truly mean it. But it is all just so many words. Love can only exist where there is trust, and trust is a weakness. One that lays us bare and open to betrayal.

If you love her then she can destroy you.

A few more agonizing heartbeats elapsed before Clint could respond. He did look like he had taken a potent physical blow, and his hands sought his chest, his mouth slack. When he answered, his voice was raw. “You really do care about him, don’t you?”

Thor gave a positive inclination of his head.

“I know that should mean something to me--that you care for him and have known him for so many years, but I can’t forgive him, Thor.” The agent’s eyes were starting to well up, but he was clearly trying to dampen the sentiment. “He defiled me--took out my insides and threw them away like so much garbage. He infected me with his own horrors, and I can’t see anything else!” This confession chilled Natasha to the bone. She had never heard Clint speak like this, almost eloquent in his torment, and so vulnerable to judgment. A few tears did finally cascade down the swell of his cheeks, but he kept his overall composure.

Thor’s features had softened into exhaustive compassion. “It is not a matter of forgiveness, my friend,” he said gently. “Nor is it about justice. It is only a matter of finding out why this happened, and then determining if there is any way that he can be reclaimed.”

“And if he can’t?” Barton wiped away the wetness from his cheek without pretense.
“Then he must be destroyed.” The statement was quiet but blunt.

“Would you be able to do that?” Clint almost glanced back at Natasha as he said this, indicating that he was wondering if he would be able to do the same to her, if necessary. He checked himself quickly.

“I am not certain,” Thor sighed, his hands resting on his knees. They looked large enough to crack a human skull, and yet the grip was delicate. “I have had my opportunities, and I have squandered them all. Yet, I do think that if he is beyond hope, I may be able to stand aside long enough for someone else to do the deed.” The blonde then placed a hand on Clint’s shoulder and smiled genuinely. “Do you happen to know any volunteers?”

These words actually brought out a laugh in the generally stoic agent.

“In all sincerity . . .” the Thunder god continued, “I do not think that we are too far apart, ideologically. We both need to know the reasons behind Loki’s madness, and I vow to reveal to you whatever I may unearth.”

Clint indicated his silent acceptance of these terms. “I have to know,” he stated, his voice becoming measured again. “I only hope that . . . .” His words trailed off, and he dismissed the thought with a shake of the head.

“Go ahead, my friend. I will not judge you for your candor.”

Barton cleared his throat and sat silently for a moment. “I only hope,” he muttered, “that we both don’t regret what we find out.”

“For myself there can be no other ending,” Thor said sorrowfully.

Chapter End Notes

The introductory scene for this chapter was inspired by the song, "Riverside" by Agnes Obel.
“I understand how he feels,” Steve remarked. “One of my oldest friends became the Winter Soldier.” He and Natasha had exchanged protocols regarding the whereabouts of former-Director Fury and were now conversing casually in the library just off Rogers’ sleeping quarters. The subject was Thor’s departure to find his bellicose younger brother and the wisdom of such a risky errand. “The ‘how’ of him becoming a killer might be different, but the feelings involved are probably similar.”

“I can’t imagine what it must be like to be betrayed by someone that close to you.” Natasha was holding a picture of Steve and Bucky when they were in basic training together, each in a neatly pressed uniform with primly slicked-back hair. She traced her fingers delicately over their smiling faces, their arms slung haplessly about one another in a carefree embrace. “Mainly because I never allow anyone to get that close to me.” Even to her, the words sounded a little wistful.

“I think . . . “ Steve smiled, gently plucking the object from her grasp, “that is likely an honor reserved for only one.” He placed it reverently back on the mantle next to to his chair.

She gave only a furtive tilt of her head, careful not to confirm or deny anything so personal. “So, where do you fall on Thor going after Loki? Noble or insane?” Sure, it was changing the subject, but it was the question on everyone’s lips today.

“If Loki has the Tesseract, I think it’s honorable.” Captain Rogers had a fist resting thoughtfully on his chin in a pose Natasha was sure the paparazzi would kill for. “Someone like Loki doesn’t go to the trouble of stealing something that powerful without a specific purpose in mind. If Thor thinks he can prevent him from using it then I support that.”

“Have you ever heard him talk about him, though? Thor about Loki, I mean?”

“Oh, yes,” Steve chuckled. “At times he speaks about him at length. You can tell he almost idolized him at one time.”

Natasha raised a questioning eyebrow at that statement. “Really?”

“We, really. I mean, we know that Loki has always been envious of his brother, but I think it was sometimes the other way around, as well.” His mouth turned upwards in an involuntary smile, and his look became nostalgic. “Some of the things those two got up to were not so far removed from the things Bucky and I used to do -- just on a more epic scale, I suppose.”

“I don’t think Loki and Barnes are as similar as you might think,” Natasha commented. She took the opportunity to fill up her glass with scotch again from the decanter Steve left out for guests; unsurprisingly, Captain America did not partake of liquor for his own part. “Your friend was captured and brainwashed, but Loki just lost his mind.”

“That may be why I pity Thor more than myself in this situation. With Buck there was someone to finger, and he was just a victim of someone else’s evil intentions. With Loki, it was a psychotic break, almost. I’ve seen men come back from the horrors of war completely changed, so much so that their loved ones barely recognize them anymore. It seems the same here.” He shook his head sadly, obviously focusing his compassion on the older sibling. “It’s like watching someone you
“Maybe worse,” Natasha stated. She threw back a quick swallow of the burning liquid without even cringing. “In Thor’s case he has to watch a monster with his brother’s face hurt innocent people . . . sometimes people he loves. Plus, he now has an enemy that knows all of his weaknesses.”

Steve smiled again, the gesture broad and warm. The ease of this reflex was similar to that of Thor’s, and she wondered secretly how anyone could be that affable without pretense. When Steve grinned, it seemed so legitimate, as if the smile was his natural state and all other expressions were merely affectation. “Instead of ‘the devil you know,’” he said, “it’s more the ‘devil who knows you.’”

“Exactly.” She was on her third scotch, by her count -- which was likely still reliable at this point -- and the pleasant feeling of flushed detachment was starting to kick in. “Of course, knowing his brother only from violent confrontation, I can’t really imagine him as anything other than a vicious madman.”

“Agreed,” Rogers responded amiably. “Until Thor and I started exchanging stories a few weeks ago, I would have likely said the same thing.”

It did not go unnoticed by Natasha that he had pushed the decanter of alcohol back on the table to a point where it would be more difficult to reach. She did an internal eye-roll. ‘Come on, boy scout,’ she thought, ‘don’t try to impress your morals upon me. I’ve had nowhere near enough, let alone too much.’

“I mean, for example, he told me this story last week about this time he and Loki were sent to kill a beast who had been terrorizing a village in Nornheim -- I think it was Nornheim -- anyway, it was a ‘-heim’ of some sort, near Asgard.” Steve leaned forward, placing his palms on his thighs. “Apparently this was a migrant species, one that did not typically spend much time in that ‘realm,’ I suppose he would call it.”

“Mm-hmm,” Natasha confirmed. Her hand darted out to grab the bottle of scotch faster than she ought to be able to at this point. Was it possible for liquor to improve your reflexes? It hardly mattered; she was able to dispense the drink and return the container before Rogers could even begin to protest.

Steve gave her a sheepish shrug before he continued. “Well, it seems that the Asgardians were somewhat unfamiliar with the finer details of this particular species -- he described it as kind of a big lizard with three horns and two pairs of wings, probably dragon-like, I’m guessing. It was rampaging through the village, damaging houses and eating cattle and pack-animals alike when Thor and Loki finally approached it. It was two-and-a-half times their height, with enormous claws and several rows of pointed teeth. So they engage it -- they’ve fought beside one another for centuries so they get the better of it fairly quickly since they each know what the other will do, and when they’re just about to relieve it of its head, the mother shows up. It turns out that this was just a fledgling -- the mother is almost twice as big and definitely twice as angry.” He was chuckling to himself, and Natasha could tell he was building to an amusing climax.

“So this is too much for just the two of them to handle -- this was in the days before Mjolnir, Thor said -- and they decide to retreat. Actually, I think Loki had to sweet-talk Thor into giving up a fight that was obviously futile, but that is beside the point. They get back to their horses, and they’re riding away just as fast as they can, when Thor gets a wrist tangled pretty tightly in one of his reins, and try as he might, he cannot shake it free. So he asks Loki to help him, even though they’re still riding at top speed over hills and into valleys. Loki takes out a knife and grabs Thor's
horse by the bridle to pull it closer. Just as he cuts his brother loose, he realizes they are heading into a gorge full of briar bushes -- huge ones, with spikes as big as fingers. Thor is loose and is able to steer his mount off to the side, but Loki’s horse stumbles and throws him headfirst into the thorn bushes. The beast following him stops right before she gets to the briars and just waits for Loki to come out. Eventually, he drags himself out from the bushes, and he’s covered head to toe in cuts and blood -- he looks a real mess. Plus, he looks angry -- like really, really not in the mood to have to battle a creature of any size, let alone a monster. The beast starts to roar at him, but he just turns to it and yells back at her instead, right in her face, something to the effect of ‘Oh, shut up, you insufferable creature!’

Steve made a heroic attempt to duplicate the accent, but the results were comically dubious; plus, this anecdote was reminiscent of the confrontation between Loki and the Hulk, and so they both had to pause a moment to laugh unashamedly. “This turned out rather differently, though, because this 30-foot creature with claws and teeth and a bad disposition decides she wants nothing to do with someone who can make such a nasty face, and she just gives up and walks away. Loki literally defeated a huge, raging monster with his bad attitude.”

Natasha had to admit that the scene she was imagining to accompany this little vignette was quite humorous: the catty immortal standing disheveled and blood-soaked before an enormous creature who is intimidated by just his bitch-face. Or maybe it was the drinking that enhanced the tale, although Steve was stone sober and was enjoying it just as much the second time, she noted.

“My way home,” Rogers heaved through minor bouts of laughter, “Thor said Loki chewed him out in all thirty-six languages that he knew, and in others he wasn’t so fluent in.”

“It’s just a shame there’s no video,” she grinned, taking another prolonged taste of the golden liquid. Then she stiffened and sat quietly for several seconds. Steve noticed the change in her demeanor almost instantly. “Wait -- how many languages does Loki speak?” she asked, impassive.

“Thirty-six, Thor said.”

“Are these alien languages, by chance?”

Steve nodded. “Most likely. Thor said he was quite a scholar, and he learned the languages of all the major interstellar civilizations fluently in order to aid in diplomacy. It was a role that Odin apparently encouraged Loki to pursue for some time. There were at least two dozen others that he knew conversationally, or so Thor claimed. It was one of the skills for which he actually envied him.” When she did not immediately react, he asked, “Natasha . . . are you alright?”

She stared straight ahead but still managed to refill her beverage without changing her gaze. “An alien with an advanced linguistics degree,” she muttered, paraphrasing Coulson’s earlier words. “I’ll be damned. . . “

****

The Starship, Sanctuary II. Current Location: the Negative Zone
“Show me Prison Alpha,” Nebula demanded of the ship’s computer, and the screen dissolved into an image of the interior of the facility. It was sleeping hours, and there was nothing but empty corridors and shadowed holding cells to be seen. It was also eerily silent throughout the interior of the starship with all the Sakaaran troops filed away neatly in their matching bunks for their six-hour rest. She lived for these small hours of sentient reprieve, when all that existed were herself, the gentle whirring of the ship’s moving parts, and her stygian thoughts to accompany her. When the known universe was comprised solely of the dense mass of antipathy in her gut, marked by the superlative sting of the nails which bore into her flesh, driven in by her own hateful grasp . . .

Then there was that sound again -- the soft intake of a breath followed by a muffled exhale -- an obvious attempt to hide a living presence. She cocked an ear towards the vast expanse of the room at her back, listening fervently for another sound which would confirm her suspicions. Moments passed before the gentle gasp of breathing was repeated, again in a manner so hesitant that it was barely discernible. “Show me Tarsuu,” she stated, absently. The screen’s picture then morphed into an image of the planet’s surface, but she was not the least bit focused on the visual she had requested. Instead, she monitored the surroundings for motions or the faint brushing of fabric against skin which would indicate unseen movement.

Then there it was: the merest whisper of friction between cloth and the settling of a limb coming from the closest corner of the darkened room. She continued studying the shifting viewpoints on the monitor before her in order to mask that she had detected an unwelcome presence. At the same time, she reached back quietly to grasp the weapon at her back -- a handle which contained a telescoping metal scepter that was blunt on one side to serve as a bludgeon and honed on the opposing side to a deadly-sharp edge. Once her hand was tightly nestled against the grip, she simultaneously unsheathed it while crossing swiftly to the source of the muted breathing. She expertly levelled the blade swiftly against the throat of the veiled figure which knelt before her.

“Reveal yourself, creature,” she spat, her tone merciless, “so that I might see your eyes as I end your wretched life.”

The being lifted its head weakly, and the cowl of its hood fell away and revealed the identity beneath: a slender, dark-skinned Sakaaran, its face twisted in innocent fear. “That’s impossible,” she murmured. “The Shadows sleep during these hours . . . unwakeable . . . “ Just as her mind fell upon the likely explanation, she felt a hand on her waist and a pinch at her throat. The person before her dissolved in a viridian layer of haze, thinning and then evaporating like mist. The hand on her midsection pressed firmly and just short of ungently before she felt the breath of her assailant against her ear, the air warm and insistent.

“I had hoped you would be pleased to see me,” a masculine voice sighed at her back. She recognized it instantly, and the knowledge sated and incited her concurrently. The blade against her neck dug more deeply into the flesh beneath it, and she moaned with a mixture of rage and anticipation.

“Oh, but I am,” she stated between clenched teeth. With that, Nebula drove an elbow into the man’s ribs hard enough to expel most of the air from his lungs. She then swept his legs out from under him with the blunt side of the weapon she still carried, and as he landed roughly on his back, she kicked the dagger from his grip with the tip of her boot. She jammed the dull side of the blade up under his chin and pressed until there were distinct sounds of strangulation. “However, I am more pleased to see you like this,” she smiled. She let up on the pressure just enough that her opponent’s color returned to normal -- a pallid, nearly opalescent white complexion, unblemished and lean. It’s unbroken surface nearly begged to be bitten, she thought as she took in his panting gasps for breath, and she was suddenly very aware that she was straddling her adversary, her long legs splayed and kneeling on either side of his slender torso. She tangled her fingers unkindly in
his smooth, dark locks and wrenched his head harshly backwards to expose his neck more fully, a cruel reminder of his vulnerable position. “I have missed you terribly,” she laughed, her rimless eyes black and glossy like liquid.

She released him suddenly and unfolded her legs from alongside him, standing with a fearless grace. She retracted the scepter and replaced it in the holster on her back, stepping away to allow him room to collect himself. Though his look should have been fearful and defeated, he instead seemed placid, his demeanor serene. The poise with which he drew himself to his feet and smoothed the folds of his garments mirrored her own nimble bearing, and his face betrayed no fear despite his recent precarious position at her mercy. When he raised those eyes to her -- the ones so swimming with pain and yet flickering with an indomitable resolve -- she found herself struggling with an inexplicable need to do whatever would ease his torment. Yet, this was a perilous precipice she was treading; it was not in her nature to bend to the will of any being -- male or female, terrible or beautiful. It was her way to make others fear, respect, and crave her. Never the other way around.

He had been the sole exception in all this time.

“I remember the first time I saw you,” she said unashamedly. “Broken . . . lost . . . half-dead. I was not certain whether I should save you or end your misery.”

“To my chagrin, you chose the former,” he said mirthlessly. “I often wonder why you did.”

“You truly do not know?” she asked coyly, arms folded and hips cocked in a vexatiously brash manner. She approached him boldly, and she openly searched his eyes for any hint of duplicity. He studied her back with an equally unflinching gaze which betrayed nothing of his inner thoughts, his intentions expertly masked. “I saw an ally in you -- someone just as damaged as I was,” she explained. “Saving you was my way of preserving myself.”

“Should I thank you?” he asked coldly. “Do you perceive saving my life as a favor?”

The sudden twist in his tone was like a blow to her; the pleasing low hum of his voice became a wicked, accusatory inflection, heady with the venomous insinuation that she had wronged him. She had never seen her decision to help him as an error, but he was implying that perhaps he would have been better served by being allowed to die. It was never like that, she thought sorely. It was not pity that had driven her actions, nor was it an act of premeditation, intended to benefit her at a later time. What it truly was, she had not even allowed herself to openly consider. Seeing him again, healed and determined, his firm, sinewy limbs strong against the force of her retaliation, had caused her to confront the doubt he had stirred within her when she had first beheld him in the infirmary on Algorant. Even emaciated and bleeding, he had still been enticing to her.

“Would you have me amend my error?” she taunted him, her hand hovering fiendishly over her weapon again. She strode purposefully over to where he stood and gripped his collar, pulling the ends of the fabric until it was taut. “I could kill you now,” she offered playfully.

“Could you?” he whispered, his eyes dancing with a teasing fire.

“If it would please you,” she lied.

“I’m sure you know by now that I am not so easily pleased.”

“And to think I showed you the Tesseract,” Nebula murmured with malignant intent. “Which, by the way, I understand you now have in your possession.”
“I am simply holding it for a time,” he chuckled. “It was gifted to an unworthy group of miscreants. I merely relieved them of the burden of custody.”

“How generous of you,” she cajoled. “I do not suppose you have brought it along with you? I long to see you bend it to your will; such a powerful object could fulfill both of our dark ambitions, with plenty of energy remaining for whatever our imaginations can conjure.”

“Oola,” he scolded, his tongue clicking in disappointment. One of his long, slender arms encircled her waist, and she stiffened for a moment before yielding to his volition. “Such substantial gifts should not be squandered on petty personal grievances. These opportunities are wasted unless they are bent to fulfill much larger agendas . . . rife with proper vengeance.” As much as she wanted to balk at his use of the diminutive form of her name -- the one reserved for the few who had held her affections -- she had to harken to his promise of requital, loosening the constraint at his throat in inquisitive submission.

“Proper vengeance?” she echoed with naked interest.

“Against He who has wronged us both.”

Nebula’s face became a plasticine mask, fluid and unreadable. “He has given me life,” she parroted. “He has shown me worlds beyond the known universe, and He has returned me from the brink of death -- stronger and better than I had been before.”

“My Oola,” the man purred, his thumb tracing the line of her chin affectionately. “He has taken you apart, piece by piece, until there was nothing left for you to give him but your soul. A price you thought to be too high in the end.” He tilted his forehead to press against hers, their breath mingling in the potent stillness. “Do you not remember . . . ?”

There were no pictures associated with this memory, only the more visceral senses: she could feel the pain -- hot, white, and blinding -- coursing through the nerves that remained after the limb had been severed. ‘Flesh is weak,’ the sonorous voice of her Father repeated from the record in her memory. ‘Metals are more lasting, more enduring . . . ’ Then the scent of scorched flesh, her flesh, met her nostrils as the new appendage was molded into its place, the pressure against her exposed neurons agonizing and primordial. She listened intently to the raw screams that resulted, using the cacophony to ground her and to still the horrible lurching of the room. It was only when she tasted the blood from her shredded vocal cords that she realized the cries had been her own. Not until she moved the joints of her dominant arm for the first time had she become aware of the deadened sensation, her inability to feel the gentle brush of the wind or the softness of skin against her own. It was like moving through thickened air, no fine bristles of contact or delicate response. She was numbed to all outside tactility -- less than alive. And several other parts of her would suffer this fate in years to come, all at His behest . . .

The impression dissipated again into something more tangible. She was in the prison hospital on Algorant, treading indifferently between the cots laden with the injured and ailing, determining with impunity the fates of the forsaken beings at her feet. She felt nothing for these deplorable creatures -- less than nothing, as she wandered among them, burdened with finding any who might be worth preserving, but all she could perceive were dismal, ignoble prospects. Then she had brushed a man’s seemingly lifeless foot in error, and he twisted slowly towards her, his breath expelling in a muted sigh, the knotted crown of his sable hair tumbling aside to expose his brutalized features. The extent of the beating he had endured was far beyond what was typically suffered by even those in the Pit; the blood from his nose and ears had bathed his neck and shoulders until their true shade could not be surmised, and one arm and both legs were badly misshapen from the number of broken bones they contained. ‘What happened to this one?’ she
‘He tried to escape,’ the Badoon indifferently. ‘He killed four guards and injured three others.’

She looked at the shattered being before her, the one they had named ‘Kaal’ for his ability to dole out death both grandly and surreptitiously. He had been used as an object of amusement until he had dared to reclaim his freedom, and then he had been ground into the dirt beneath the boot heels of his captors.

‘Terminate them all . . . ’ she had commanded, dispassionate. She had pointed to the pitiable man before her almost as an afterthought. ‘. . . except him,’ she finished. No, this one she would spare, if only to claim something so resilient as her own . . .

Another vision appeared, and this scene found her kneeling before His throne, her fists balled in exasperation, and her pleas ignored.

‘Then he will try again!’ the Titan’s voice reverberated against the walls angrily. ‘He will learn to control the Tesseract, and he will not rest until he can conduct its power.’

‘But Father, it is destroying him!’ She dared not look Thanos in the eye while openly defying him. ‘He will be useless to us if he does not survive it!’ She also hoped that not meeting his gaze would conceal the true reason she wished to preserve his life - - that despite how she had struggled to avoid it, she had grown close to him. Such weakness would condemn them both.

‘If he cannot be trained to wield it then he is useless! He will learn to wield it or he will be consumed by it!’

‘If he fails, it will drive him to madness! His mind will be ripped apart!’ she insisted, and the crude edge of her fury was nearly uncontainable.

‘If that worries you so deeply, then perhaps you should ensure that he does not fail.’ The Titan’s slow smile was tinged with mockery. So he had already guessed the depths of her affections for the sorcerer, and he was using this knowledge to manipulate her into doing his will. She could taste the blood as her teeth sank into her tongue, desperately trying to contain her wrath.

The scene dissipated again into a thick, empty blackness -- desolate and silent. Then she could hear her own voice again, now deathly sincere, her barren eyes searching the callous visage of Ronan the Accuser. ‘You kill him, and I will help you destroy a thousand planets,’ she had vowed, if only he would help her to eliminate her tormentor, that brutal fiend whom she had called Father . . .

The sudden halt to the impressions which had been changing so rapidly before her left her head and stomach swimming momentarily, and she clung to his elbow absently to steady herself. It was his sorcery which had fed her these fleeting tastes of her past, driving home the misery that she had endured in the service of Thanos. It was also unlikely that his inclusion of the moments when she had showed compassion for him had been coincidental, for he was nothing if not an expert manipulator. The fact that she knew this did nothing to prevent her from being vulnerable to his deceptions.

“And how many worlds would you destroy for me?” he teased, tightening his grasp on her hip, and the hum of his silvery voice trailed across her cheek like a wisp of honeyed smoke.

She breathed his name -- his true name -- like a disparaging sob into the shell of his ear.

“For you, “ she admitted to her own disgrace, “Ten thousand.”
His smile was satisfied but tenuous, and he released her without reply. She saw that he was turning to leave, and knowing that the thought of this was cutting her to the bone made her harden her feelings in retaliatory spite. “However . . . “ she hissed, and the acrid tone made him pause. “If you betray me, I will destroy only one.” He pivoted back slightly, not fully turning to face her again, but just enough that his profile was visible in the backlight of the screen which still glowed at the ship’s helm.

“Yours,” she promised him, with every ounce of sincerity she had given to Ronan.
Part III: Bargaining Ch 1

It is a trick among the dishonest to offer sacrifices that are not needed, or not possible, to avoid making those that are required. -- Ivan Goncharov

‘Welcome to Broxton,’ the sign before him read, ‘An Unincorporated Community of Caddo County.’ Overall, Thor surmised, Oklahoma was not so different from New Mexico: both had a
distinct golden hue, although one was born of deserts and the other of restless fields of grain, and each was serenely beautiful in its own way. The inhabitants were mostly sincere and welcoming, as well, and Thor did not wish to startle them by landing in full Asgardian regalia and brandishing a warhammer in the center of a town. Therefore, he had alighted on the outskirts (Mjölnir tucked safely into a satchel at his back) dressed in an unassuming pair of blue jeans and a red-and-blue plaid flannel shirt rolled up to his elbows. The ensemble was completed by a new but worn-looking leather belt with a buckle that declared Oklahoma the ‘Best Place Ever,’ which he had picked up at a truck stop along the interstate. He felt reasonably camouflaged as he strode into town, his long tresses tucked up beneath a cap with ‘OU’ printed in large letters across the front of it (also a truck stop find). He did not know the significance of the letters, but their bold message somehow appealed to him.

The Asgardian was actually destined for the neighboring town of Fort Cobb, a small community with just a few restaurants and a handful other businesses, and which had once been a military installation. He had walked most of the distance before a friendly young man in a sleeveless t-shirt -- who talked endlessly and smoked as if it were a religious experience -- offered him a ride into town. He had accepted, finding the genial conversation more to his liking than he would have guessed, and if the man was taken aback by Thor’s unusual manner of speaking, he did not show it. When they parted ways, Thor found himself overcome with a feeling which was not unlike loneliness, abandoned in a small, rural town in the middle of so much open land with no practical way to contact his friends back in New York. Unless, of course, he wanted to try the ‘cell phone’ again, which had not exactly been to his liking; the interface was a bit too small for someone with hands of his size.

What Loki was doing in a place like this, Heimdall could not explain, only that he had arrived here earlier that day with what seemed to be a specific purpose. His brother was typically adept at shielding himself from the watchman’s gaze, but the effort took more power than Loki liked to expend at times. Therefore, he showed up in the Gatekeeper’s sightline for brief instances, tiny blips on his radar that the guardian could not piece together into anything useful. It was frustrating, mostly, but it just so happened that today was when both Loki had revealed himself and his brother had arrived briefly in Asgard to inquire into his whereabouts. So Thor was now meandering between storefronts, peeking out from beneath the visor of his hat to try and catch a glimpse of his erstwhile sibling and feeling like he might be questioned any moment for his cagey behavior.

Then there he was, unmistakably: the tall, lithe frame of his brother, pausing before the door of what appeared to be a drinking establishment. His ebony locks looked short, the way he had worn them in the past, the tips barely skimming the collar of his shirt. He was not clothed as formally as when he had visited Midgard before in secret, but he was still overdressed for the occasion in a button-down cream polo and dark slacks but no tie. Thor could not help but think that this entire situation was completely illogical -- Loki was wanted by not one but two entire realms for dire crimes, and yet here he was casually slipping into a tavern in perhaps the humblest town in all of Midgard. Plus, if he still possessed the Tesseract, he could be absolutely anywhere in the known universe so why would he be here? He gave his brother several minutes to acclimate himself before he followed him, his fists clenching in barely-restrained exasperation.

The god took a seat inconspicuously in a darkened corner of the bar where he could just make out Loki’s features as he spoke softly, head lowered, to the man in the seat across from him. The other man was dressed predominantly in black, and his back was to Thor so his face was unseeable. The conversation did not seem to be going pleasantly, as the fugitive Asgardian spent the majority of the clandestine exchange with his brow furrowed and his lips tightly pressed against one another, pausing only infrequently to hold back an incredulous laugh. With his hair clipped and his garments so crisp, he looked younger -- less harrowed and unburdened from his fractured mind. Yet he knew this was clearly an illusion, at least in part; Loki could hardly stride along the streets
of Midgard with his unkempt hair and the wild, ravaged glint in his demented eyes. He must still have had enough of his wits about him to take such things into consideration, it seemed. As Thor thought about what this awareness might indicate, the room grew silent and all eyes turned to a disturbance at the other end of the room.

All eyes, that was, except for Loki’s.

****

“Where are you, exactly?” Natasha inquired, irritated. Tony was currently suited up and presumably cruising over some unsuspecting city on an errand — her errand, in fact. The billionaire had been surprisingly insistent that she remain with Clint in his emotionally labile state, and he curiously volunteered to go careening across middle America in order to find Nick Fury and consult with him. Although Romanov was fairly sure that his true motivation was a chance to confront Fury about some of the items he had been recovering from his analysis of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s master files, she had to concede that it would be more time-efficient for him to fly there and relay her inquiries to the former Director, and Stark would send the answers back to her from his helmet-cam.

“I am . . . “ he paused as if looking around, as if he did not know exactly where he was down to a tenth of a mile from his display, “. . . in the exact middle of nowhere. Hold on -- I’m touching down.” The whine of the thrusters powering down could be heard, followed by a tense silence.

“Tony -- where is Fury? You said he wasn’t at the address that Steve gave me.” Natasha was growing impatient of Stark’s cat-and-mouse routine. “Just tell me where you are.”

“No yet, Ms. Romanov. Let me get my bearings, and then I’ll return you to regularly scheduled programming. Stark out.”

If Tony was pretending that he had ceased communications, he was hopelessly betrayed by the ambient noises around him since the distinct sound of traffic and Stark’s weighted footsteps could still be heard as he moved towards his unknown destination.

“Stark!” the red-haired agent seethed, “Tell me where you are or so help me --”

“I’m less than thirty miles from the address you gave me. Fury was not home, but his well-meaning and, thankfully, clueless landlady told me that he has been here just about every night of the week to watch the World Poker Championships. Not exactly high espionage, Natasha, so you can calm your babushka.” Tony spat the words out so abruptly that it was clear he was growing annoyed in return. The sound of a door being pushed open and the jingle of a bell which signaled the entrance of customers could be detected in the background. The muffled sound of honky-tonk music was briefly heard along with the atmospheric chattering of many voices . . . and then silence.

Tony grinned smugly at the uproar his entrance had caused -- the room had been rendered both mute and dormant as soon as he had crossed the threshold. Still, it was not likely every day that a superhero in a mechanized suit comes sashaying into a dive bar in a small town in such an isolated part of America, he thought, so he may as well play to the crowd. He retracted the visor of the suit and moved calmly (but loudly) to the counter of the bar, and all gazes followed him in astonishment.
“Can I get a, uh, scotch and soda with a beer back -- domestic is fine.” He looked up and down the bar at each row of bewildered faces, falling finally upon the young, buff hayseed at the end of the line of stools he was occupying space in. “And one for my friend over there in the hat, please -- whatever he’s drinking.” He gave the man a spuriously friendly nod of the head, but the man just gazed back at him with his jaw open, the shock he conveyed a full-fold higher than the others.

“Sooners fan, eh?” Stark continued, indicating the man’s headgear with the brush of a finger across his own brow, but this effort to make conversation also failed miserably. When the awkward lull continued, Tony grew more eager to return the state of affairs back to its normal, undramatic atmosphere. The man in the Oklahoma U. hat continued to stare blankly at him as if he were not a superhero but, in fact, a fantastical illusion, and Stark tried not to glare back at him, he really did, but it was just so . . . rude to continue to gape at someone like that. “Is there something I can help you with?” he said in a clipped manner, glaring back at him indignantly.

Then Tony took a closer look at the face, and he must have mirrored the man’s look exactly.

“Thor?” he managed, his features still aghast. “But I thought you were going after . . . ?”

The astonished Asgardian pointed gingerly over Tony’s left shoulder, and he turned to find the countenance of the younger sibling studying him with wry amusement from an adjacent booth.

“Oh.” Stark shrugged indifferently. “So, I’m guessing you’ve lost the element of surprise, then?”

Thor’s recovery from the jar of seeing Iron Man stride into the very bar in which he had found his brother was happening painfully slowly; he moved languidly, almost as if he were struggling through tar. His head nodded in a laborious motion, and then he pointed again over to where Loki was still sitting, poised as if he were sharing afternoon tea with the Duchess of York, his hands clasped neatly together and his elbows propped up on the surface of the table with perfection. The raven-haired being was studying Tony’s face carefully, obviously waiting for some reaction from his human quarry, but what could he possibly be wanting to see him do? Suddenly, the realization was obvious, and for the first time in his life, Tony Stark did an unmistakable double-take.

Loki was casually sharing a booth with Nick Fury.

Several phrases came spilling out of the billionaire’s lips all at once: “What the - - ? Why are you - -? Why is he --?” Then he spun towards Thor again, “Why are you --?”

“Good evening, Mr. Stark,” Loki drawled from behind his knuckles. “Brother,” he added, less cordially. He nodded his head coolly to acknowledge that Thor’s presence had been recognized, and from his nonchalant manner, that he had known his brother had been present for some time. Fury, on the other hand, was seated restlessly, his hand cupped to the top of his head as though he wished it could make him invisible.

Tony stomped over to their table, the feet of his suit resounding painfully in the still-silent surroundings. “You!” he barked accusingly at Loki. He subsequently seemed to lose his train of thought and pursed his lips in agonizing indecision. “You stay right where you are,” he told the Asgardian. “You, on the other hand --” he then wheeled toward Fury with eyes wild and yet violently lost. “I don’t even know what to say to you!” Stark allowed that sentiment to settle in the air for a moment, arms crossed heatedly, waves of differing emotion racing across his brow.

“Look, Stark, this is far less sinister than it seems,” Fury assured him in a forceful whisper. “Now, please keep your voice down! This is not the place to set off an international incident!”

“Then maybe you should have picked a more appropriate place for your little planet-betraying
hook-up with Larry Poppins over there!” Tony used the thick metal glove of his suit to indicate the amused Asgardian. Although the spectators remained quietly observant, several of their number had produced cellphones and were snapping away gleefully with the cameras they contained.

“Can we talk about this outside?” Nick grumbled through clenched teeth.

As the two humans continued their impassioned debate, Thor stood awkwardly, his legs threatening to buckle beneath him like those of a newborn fawn. He had been so certain that seeing Loki again would cause him to flood with rage -- that he would have to wrestle with his instincts so as not to throttle him on the spot. Now, faced squarely with his moment of dread, he found that he still longed for some measure of retribution, but his need was not to end his treacherous brother’s life but rather to shake him repeatedly until it forced all the wickedness from his slighter frame. Instead, he simply crossed over to his placid sibling with hesitant steps, ignoring all other activity in the vicinity as he made his approach.

The Thunder God tightened his jaw and furrowed his brow in an effort to convey his displeasure. “Loki, we need to talk,” Thor growled roughly.

“I have grown weary of speaking, for my own part,” Loki replied offhandedly. “Could we not simply settle this over ale and some genial sparring?” There was a caramel-colored glass of liquor sitting before his brother which remained untouched, while Thor noticed that Fury had made his way through most of his draft beer. Why would one order a drink and not partake of it? The likely reason was suddenly apparent to him.

“I would gladly spar with you, brother, if you would tell me where you truly are. If I sought to strike you now, I fear that my blows would simply pass through you.”

Loki’s mouth parted in a perceiving grin. “And they said you could not be trained,” he mocked the larger god. “I am not so far from here, truthfully, but not close enough that Fury’s former colleagues could easily apprehend me if they chose to make an appearance. Although they would find that I do not intend to go gently regardless.”

“Indeed,” Thor said, his words tinged with reproach. “That only happens when you wish to be caught.”

“It seems you have unearthed all of my tricks, dear brother.” Thor’s skin began to spark with a prickly sensation, born of the knowledge that this was all very wrong: ‘dear brother?’ Loki had not called him this since he found out about his true ancestry, and if the word ‘brother’ had been spoken on its own he never failed to taunt him with it in a biting, venomous tone. Now Loki sounded cool and focused, absolutely in control of all of his faculties. Even in Manhattan, his brother had not seemed so absolutely cocksure.

This was a precarious situation, indeed.

The arguing at Thor’s back had subsided into conversation-level bickering, and so the pair of supernatural siblings turned their attention back to the mortals. Tony’s voice was softer now with less homicidal intent, and most of the crowd had finished taking selfies with the heated confrontation in the background and gone back to their drinking and dancing. Fury was sitting calmly with his hands flat on the tabletop, and he nodded to a young woman in a pencil skirt and patterned blouse who was alone in a booth in the neighboring row. She spoke a few inaudible words with a finger pressed to her left ear. So S.H.I.E.L.D. was still watching over their former director even if he was technically ‘off the grid,’ Thor acceded with a gentle hum.

Loki, however, did not turn to acknowledge Fury’s gesture, nor did the muscles of his face twitch
even lightly in response. While few other beings would have considered this reaction irregular -- particularly from a projected image of a person -- Thor found that he was unsettled by the lack of recognition on his part. Even these projections were capable of sight and hearing, the results of which were related back in real time to wherever the magician was concealing himself. The only rational explanation was that Loki -- the real Loki -- had already been aware that the agent was present, in the same way that he must have known that Stark had entered the establishment due to his lack of concern. This, therefore, could only mean one thing: his treacherous brother was closer than he had implied and was seeing everything that happened in the bar with his own eyes.

The next few minutes were filled with blurred activity: a dozen armed agents clad in charcoal gray SWAT garb came rushing into the seating area, pointing a variety of rifles and handguns at the side of the booth which they believed to contain their enemy. The image of the being that was being confronted raised his hands in surrender, but its face wore a teasing smirk. Several other agents surrounded the area which contained the primary assault team and eased the patrons of the bar towards the exits, calming them as they did so. Since Thor appeared to be just another onlooker in his civilian wardrobe, he was urged with the others out onto the street. A clean-cut man with a dimpled chin was leading him by the elbow and assuring him that the situation was completely under control. From what Thor had ascertained about the situation, however, this was not true in the least.

The bulky Asgardian allowed himself to be herded with the other members of the crowd onto the surrounding streets, a specific purpose behind his blind compliance. Once he was out in the open, he carefully scrutinized the area, including his fellow evacuees, with a critical eye. One member of the throng immediately caught his eye: a tall, unassuming young man dressed casually in a white tee and long cargo shorts, a head of curly chestnut curls clipped short. It was not his physical appearance that drew Thor's attention but rather the casual demeanor with which he surveyed the scene, his lean frame posed collectedly, his hands resting in his front pockets. If this was the veiled guise of his villainous younger brother then Thor would need to move quickly in order to ensnare him; Loki was likely overexerting his powers by maintaining two false images and trying to process the mayhem that was unfolding inside the tavern, and so he was likely vulnerable . . . but only for a few precious seconds. The blonde man sauntered over to a point which was nearly directly behind the suspicious figure. As the agents began to pour from the front entrance, having presumably discovered that their intended target was only an image, the sanguine young man turned to make his escape -- and collided with the broad chest of the God of Thunder.

Thor grasped at the boy’s neck, swinging him into the neighboring alley and pinning him to the rough brick like a ragdoll. “Drop the illusion, brother -- you are apprehended.”

For a moment, the youth’s wide, hazel eyes were so filled with innocent surprise that he doubted himself. However, the hands which gripped his wrists, insistently trying to part them in order to free himself, were stronger than the pull of any mortal man. Thor tightened his grasp on the man’s throat, blatantly daring him to continue his pathetic ruse, and the mirage dissipated into a wisp of green-tinted light. Thor was subsequently met full on with the visage of his tormented sibling, the reality of which caused him to still his breath for a beat. His head was still wreathed in a mane of sooty, unkempt locks, but his once-alabaster skin was fading into a deathless gray, and dark haloes like bruises ringing his haggard eyes. He looked every inch as mad as Thor’s fellow Avengers believed him to be, his lips twisted in an obscene, goading smirk which bared most of his perfect teeth.

“You continue to impress me, brother,” he hissed through the insistent pressure on his windpipe, and the familial term finally held the disdain to which Thor had grown accustomed. “You have twice seen through my illusions.” His sea-green eyes narrowed with contempt.
The larger man’s grip faltered as he took in the decaying appearance of his brother, and he fought the urge to pull him into a tearful embrace; however, he was also keenly aware that this would most likely lead to another dagger to the midsection so he held firm.

“What are you doing here, Loki?” Thor demanded. “And why are you speaking with Nick Fury?”

“I think I have the answer to that,” said a voice to their right. Tony Stark was approaching the pair from the direction of the bar, flanked by the S.W.A.T. agents from inside, guns now levelled at the pair of siblings in the alley. Fury was also among the throng, although he remained further back. “The former ‘Herr Direktor’ was a step ahead of our current one, and he had set up a meeting with our consulting supervillain regarding all of this foreboding outer-space business.” Tony paused momentarily, his eyes rolled upwards, listening. “The feminine and belligerent voice in my ear is now asking how that is even possible, or, i.e. how would Fury be able to set up a rendezvous with Tall, Dark, and Menacing over there -- -- who, by the way, has really let himself go -- when Thor didn’t even know where he was. Well, Nick tells me that apparently he knows a guy, who knows a guy, who knows a whole lot of bad guys, and he had to phone in a favor which will haunt him to the grave.” Stark seemed more than a little satisfied with this last piece of information.

Loki continued to smile the same seething grin throughout Tony’s explanations. Along with his long, bedraggled hair and the wet, desperate gleam in his eye, the Asgardian looked positively feral.

“You wanna hand that thing over?” Stark asked Thor drily, making a beckoning motion with one glove.

So that was how they thought of Loki -- just a ‘thing’? Thor searched those wild, urgent eyes once more, and he realized that he was beginning to agree: there was no empathy remaining there, no warmth, no merciful reason, just madness -- a thousand self-fabricated crimes against himself which needed to be put right through malicious deeds. Perhaps this was a hopeless mission after all.

The Thunderer nodded solemnly and released his hold on his brother’s neck. As he did, the agents rushed in to seize their prisoner, encasing his wrists in the very magic-dampening shackles that he had urged the Midgardians to devise for their own protection. Thor had personally mediated the travel of the Asgardian craftsmen who had assisted in their forging, and now he was both relieved and deeply remorseful that he had done so. Was there no reprieve from the unmitigated guilt that his association with his sibling brought upon him? Yet even as they led Loki away, still leering like he had planned this outcome all along, Thor could not help but recognize that he would be bound to this world until this peril had run its course and he was certain that his brother was safe.

Lost to him in all possible ways, but, otherwise, safe.
Light deprivation only made the images from his past more vivid; additionally, it caused every brush of his skin against the sheets to seem amplified to a monstrous degree. There was no division of day from night, and so he dozed frequently, not knowing at times if he was truly awake or facing an elaborate nightmare. How deliciously ironic, he chuckled softly (the sound of it causing his eardrums to ache), that he should have the ability to bring everything around him to such desolate darkness, and yet he could not bear the presence of it for any length of time without going slightly mad. Currently, the Lilin thought he was very much awake, but the pictures before his eyes were so lifelike -- so terrible that they had to be cruel memories.

It had been the first of very few days of light on this hemisphere of Algorant, and the number of total hours of daylight would be very limited. Blackout had awakened just before the promise of dawn, the first he would have seen in nearly four months. His cellmates were sprawled carelessly along the floor around him; there were no beds or blankets of any kind, and there were six inmates packed into every bare area of floor. The surrounding cells were segregated only by walls of bars, and so there was no privacy afforded in the sea of enclosures. They were animals in pens, and their fates would be much the same: they would exist for the use and benefit of their unknown masters, and then they would die or be killed to serve another’s purpose. A death by the ravages of time was beyond their expectations.

There was a dim glow of artificial illumination present within the holding areas, and so he could observe his surroundings only somewhat hazily. There were no windows in the cells in order to reduce the possibility of escape, and so any pre-dawn rays from the planet’s nearest sun would be invisible to the prisoners; however, the Lilin had made a deal with Forty-Three which was going to allow him to bathe in the radiance of the elusive star for most of the day, such as it was. Although he would be required to perform hard labor for the latter part, he would be allowed on patrol with the Badoon for at least the first half-hour of the frugal minutes of sunlight.

Kaal stirred in the neighboring cage, gathering his wasted arms to his chest as if to seek a warmth which was unobtainable. The raven-haired man still bore the remnants of the wounds he had received in the Eye the previous day, although even the deepest lacerations were starting to knit together with roughly scabbed tissue. Most of the inmates were members of hearty species which healed more expeditiously than average, and Kaal was even more fortunate in this respect. His crown of blackened hair sat unruly upon his shoulders, and his eyes searched the dimness, dead and unfeeling. His usually unblemished skin was marked with several different stages of open sores -- some seeping, and others crusted with mending tissue. He cracked each knuckle of his left hand sequentially, the sickening resonance spreading deftly throughout the silent space.

The grinding of the unkept hinges on his cell caused the Lilin to disregard Kaal for the moment. The misshapen head of Forty-Three appeared with little pretense, gesturing for the demon to follow him. He rose as softly as he could, although he had to pause an instant in order to extend his cramped muscles after another night spent on a hard stone surface. Just as he was stretching the muscles of his tormented neck, the sound of choking -- raw and deliberate -- came from the next cell. It was not Kaal, but rather an emaciated Arcturan with a belly rounded obscenely from either starvation or parasites. His hands were dripping with blood and sputum from the effort of trying to regain its breath, and his face was deepening from its native pale pink shade to a deeper,
purplish color, unable to draw a proper breath. Forty-three produced a key from the heavy ring of
them at his waist and began to rattle the rusted lock in an attempt to assist the struggling being.
The demon’s ebony-haired rival remained listless and mute, studying the veins in his gaunt
forearms with far more interest than the creature who was dying almost at his feet.

When the door finally opened with a loud groan of protest, Forty-Three rushed to the side of the
gasping Arcturan . . . only to find that the being was immediately able to breathe again. However,
the Badoon found his own airway constricted by the firm, finely-honed edge of a dagger pressed
expertly to the nape of his heaving throat. “Open the door, you wretched cur,” Kaal commanded
him, the curl of a sneer playing upon his lips.

Forty-Three must have immediately recognized the voice that goaded him because his hands
instantly began to tremble as they clutched at the air around his neck, instinctively raising to free
himself from the press of the blade that threatened him. “I will -- I will -- “ he stammered
gracelessly, stumbling backward with a jerk from his captor. “Just spare me, Gorharath . . . Let
me live.”

‘Gorharath’ was the Badoon word for ‘devil’ -- their Lord of the Dead and tormentor of wayward
souls. Blackout almost chuckled at how easily the guard allowed this epithet to spill from his
panicked lips; it was demeaning how these figures of authority allowed the much slighter prisoner
to intimidate them into weeping and begging at his feet, like supplicants rather than jailors. These
entreaties did not serve the Badoon well, however, as he was lying slain beneath the footsteps of
his captor, his throat sliced heinously, the head nearly severed the second the inmate’s feet met the
bare ground.

The Lilin was not certain to this day why he had followed him, whether it had been out of curiosity,
or to determine if Kaal could lead him to freedom . . . or if he had intended what actually occurred
to happen all along. The landing area for the incoming ships was not so far beyond the Eye, and
Kaal knew that journey all too well. He easily managed to find all the shadows and nooks into
which he could fold his diminishing frame between the holding chambers and the fighting arena,
and Blackout found himself using them moments later, trailing his steps, mesmerized. As the
bedraggled prisoner made his way toward the hangars, two more Badoons had fallen to his cryptic
blade (where could he have obtained a weapon like this in the open cells, and where could he have
been concealing it?) He then soundlessly approached the entry doors where a third guard was
standing watch, unaware of the lissome darkness which was bleeding towards him from the
periphery, and in whose wake Blackout was being dragged numbly like a living shroud. This sentry
he only threatened, surprising him from the side and then coiling his nimble limbs around him in a
serpentine fashion until one knife was at his throat and another at his back (another dagger -- but
from where?) The Badoon then had no choice but to comply with his assailants request to allow
him entrance into the control room. Kaal then grievously wounded his hostage by driving the
blade into his back and then throwing the creature aside, howling in agony and bleeding
profusely, but still very much alive.

This disturbance called the attention of those in the control room -- there were two Kodabaks
(large and swine-like in appearance) as well as two more Badoons who were hunkered over
illuminated screens -- and they immediately came to investigate. The first two to venture out into
the steadily increasing half-light were the Badoons, and each swiftly suffered a pointed object to
the forehead. The Kodabaks then retreated inwards to protect themselves, but it was mere seconds
before they were laid out, stunned by the electronic weapons carried by the Badoon guards who
had just met their fates. The deathly shadow then slipped into the open room and crept over to the
controls which opened the main hangar doors, visible from behind a wide pane of glass at the rear
of the chamber. Kaal turned towards them as they parted, his body shifting to face their movement
as torpidly as if he were made from clay: the rays of the newly risen sun were just beginning to
peek over the horizon beyond, and the vast space was being bathed in extraordinary light. He was enthralled by the illumination, having not seen sunlight for months, probably years, and he inched toward it, stupefied, as if he could not determine the veracity of what he was seeing.

The demon breached the interior at that moment, moving as soundlessly as he could manage. He could see Kaal drifting sluggishly toward the brilliant radiance, so enraptured by the sight that he was utterly unaware of his surroundings. It was as if the light were transforming him -- his eyes ignited with color as the rays of the sun explored them, and his face softened, losing age and malice as the glow engulfed him. His lips melded into a genuine smile, and his eyes glistened with the ebb of tears. A pained, breathy laugh stammered out from between his clenched teeth . . . and then blackness, overwhelming and impenetrable. The anguished wail which followed brought a remorseful ache to the Lilin’s chest. He was unsure of why he had done this, why he had chosen to strip the man of this one happiness among endless days of pervasive pain, but it served a dual purpose -- Kaal was blind and therefore completely vulnerable to attack. A company of heavily-armed Badoons subsequently rushed in, and Blackout withdrew the illusion. That was the last time he had seen Kaal, that vicious, haunted look in his eyes boring through the Lilin as the doors closed behind him, the multitude of Badoon guards trying to hold him fast as he howled and struggled against them with a force even he should not have possessed.

‘Curse you!’ the restrained man had spat at him as he was dragged away, shrieking and clawing like a fatally wounded animal. “Damn you! I will find you, you faithless demon! I will repay you in your own miserable blood . . . I promise you that you will gladly skin yourself alive rather than face what I will do to you when I find you--’ Kaal’s vows continued even after the sound of the guards blows began to intermingle with them, followed shortly by the crunching of distressed bone. His muffled blasphemies continued as the assault went on for what seemed like an impossible amount of time.

Blackout’s continued demonstrations of his loyalty were what had allowed him his advantage among the throngs of the malicious and depraved with whom he had been cast down. It was only later when he had learned the similar secret that Kaal had been keeping so buried beneath that pale, perfect skin of his: he was a sorcerer -- a being of exquisite magical power who could kill without weapons, or conjure his own as long as his magic was not bound. He had harbored this mutinous secret and used it to his advantage, and so while others had hungered and thirsted and suffered, the mage had been able to eke out just a little bit more than his condemned brethren could by using his magic when there was no one present to witness it. He deserved whatever fiendish trials had befallen him after he tried to escape, and so why should he weep for this trespass against one who was just as duplicitous as he had been? Besides, his associate had gone on to earn his own favor with the Master when he had learned to control that damnable Cube of which everyone seemed to be so fond, and he was not looking too worse for wear during their confrontation at the Raft. They were practically complicit in their crime of thriving in adverse circumstances . . . so why these tormenting images?

During the entire memory, the details had been unspeakably pure, so much so that the deranged sorcerer’s words could be heard echoing off the walls of his current enclosure. Was this all a persecution instilled by his own remorseful mind? If he reached an unsteady hand out into the all-consuming blackness would he feel the sinewy form of his rival standing proudly in the darkness, feel the stuttering breath of his laughter seconds before he felt a blade breach his throat? The Lilin could feel beads of moisture forming along the line of his brow, and his breaths were coming hurried and shallow.

“I will find you . . . “ came a voice in the void, so convincingly real that goosebumps shivered across the surface of his flesh. “Demon . . . “ the voice continued in a whispered hiss, and the words were so distinct that the sound hung in the air for several seconds afterwards. Then there
was a waft of air as if a body had passed by within inches of where he sat so vulnerably in the blackness. The frequency and intensity of his heartbeats increased, but he ground his pointed fingernails determinedly into his palms as he tried to master his swelling fear, a motion which must have drawn blood because he could feel a warm wetness traveling downward in rivulets across the skin.

“I will not die here!” the Lilin pledged to the emptiness. “If you wish to seek your revenge then do it! I can do nothing but wait for it as I am bound here, caged like an unruly animal!” He paused to growl with contempt at the darkness, but no further sounds or movements could be detected. “Face me and be done with it, instead of taunting me from the shadows like a coward!” he challenged through heaving breaths.

There was no reply.

****

“He’s doing it again, sir,” Agent Fallon stated into his headset. “Do you want me to send over the audio?”

Agent Phil Coulson was standing at a self-service checkout station of the all-night supermarket near the townhouse he was currently calling home. “Of course. So what is he yelling about this time?” The cheerful electronic voice from the machine interrupted to give him his total and explain his payment options.

“Pretty much the same as usual: daring someone or something to come at him. He seems fairly obsessed with someone being out to get him, I would say,” Fallon informed him without humor.

“I have a fair idea of who that might be,” Coulson responded. The voice then reminded him to take his receipt and thanked him for shopping with that particular chain of grocery stores. As if he had a choice at 2 a.m., which should actually be their tagline.

“Have you heard from the team in Oklahoma?” Phil asked hopefully as he crossed the half-lit parking area. His ego was still very tender from not being informed of the Loki incident, as well as the boorish decision to take him into custody under such circumstances. Admittedly, there was also a tiny fraction of his psyche which was not exactly celebrating the idea of seeing his murderer again, face-to-face.

“They are en route to the Vault with the cargo now. Preparations are being made here at headquarters for a transfer when the facility is appropriately secure.”

“I appreciate the administration keeping me informed of these developments,” Coulson sniffed sarcastically. “Are there any further annoying details which I might lose sleep over tonight?”

“Well . . . “ teased the voice of the junior agent.

“Why do I feel like I’m going to regret asking that?” Phil grunted. These long days were not doing much to help his patience.

“Tony Stark has insisted on overseeing the construction himself,” Fallon confessed. “He says he doesn’t want any more clandestine extraterrestrial torture facilities being built by the government. He wants to make sure -- and I quote-- ‘that fascist Asgardian fiend gets treated in a manner he doesn’t deserve.’”
Someone up there clearly didn’t like him; having to tolerate Stark and his prima donna demands at every turn was the last thing that was going to make this endeavor run smoothly. “Very good, Agent Fallon,” Coulson breathed half-heartedly. “The agency thanks you for your extraordinary service in this time of crisis.” ‘Wow, Phil,’ Coulson thought to himself, ‘That sounded incredibly cold and impersonal. Bravo. Add a cantankerous undertone which constantly says ‘but if you fail me, I will make your life unbearable,’ and you could practically be Nick Fury. ‘ If there was going to be a new kinder, gentler S.H.I.E.L.D. era, then he was going to have to lead by example. “Listen, R.J.,” he started again, “I appreciate you keeping me informed, but it’s late, and you’ve been putting in some long hours lately . . . ”

“Yes, sir. That’s my job, sir.”

“Isn’t there anyone waiting for you at home?”

Fallon chuckled good-naturedly. “Just a fat Persian cat that goes by the name ‘Maleficent.’”

“Well, she sounds lovely,” Phil sighed. Were they all married to the job after all? “You should go home for a while and be with her. Read a book -- call your parents.”

“Afraid that I won’t get another chance for a while, sir?” Coulson could hear that he was still smiling, despite his admission that his life was mostly empty.

“Right . . . yes.” He didn’t have the heart to say what he was really thinking: that it might be his last chance.

“I appreciate your concern, sir, but I know my priorities. Besides, there will be time for all that after retirement, right, sir?”

Phil sincerely hoped the lump in his throat wasn’t audible. “Of course there will. Goodnight, R.J.”

“Goodnight, sir.”

The agent stood frozen under the hum of the dim overhead lights of the parking lot, willing himself forcefully not to shed the tears that he could feel burning behind his eyes. Was this to be his final burden to bear as one of the hidden guardians of this planet? To watch unstoppable evil racing towards everyone he’s ever known and being unable to tell anyone that all of their lives were about to end, violently and senselessly?

Coulson fumbled for the keys to the company vehicle he had driven home with him. He placed the bags on the passenger’s side and slid into the driver’s seat with an exhausted exhale, reaching blindly for the controls to tune in some easy listening to soothe his nerves. Before pulling out, he took a moment to skim through some neglected e-mails and text messages which had been lingering throughout the day. Among these was one from a blocked origin that simply read: “When Loki decides to cooperate, play him the audio. He speaks 36 alien languages, on good authority.” It was signed ‘BW.’

‘Well, then -- maybe the fate of the planet is looking up’, Coulson mused, but he did not dare to let even the trace of a smile venture across his lips.

*****

Deep within the Rocky Mountains, the former Prince of Asgard was sitting cross-legged and motionless, his countenance fixed in quiet repose. The capabilities of this Midgardian penitentiary were indeed formidable, but his power had grown to the extent that he was able to penetrate its magical defenses, albeit with an extended bout of intense concentration. He was able to contact
others for brief periods . . . and others, sadly, could reach him. As he was posed serenely on the bare floor of his reinforced cell, he could sense the consciousness of his Master attempting to commune with him through the layers of confining rock.

“Did we not have an understanding, my friend?” the deep, resonant voice spoke into his mind, its words just the dullest whisper through all the space and earth that lay between them.

“We have a perfect understanding, my Lord,” he communicated in return. “My preparations are nearly complete. You will have what you require in mere days.”

“Do not disappoint me, my Dark Prince,” He bellowed across the vast distance that separated them. “I have plans which cannot linger, and if you fail me again, I will see that all you hold dear is ground into dust. You cannot hide from me -- as you have discovered.”

Loki bowed his head, ashamed of the weakness he had shown which had led him to this vile servitude. His voice cracked as he replied, betraying his humiliation, “I am yours, my Lord. I serve you gladly and utterly.”

“Excellent, my friend,” the voice boomed heartily. “I must have it by Terra’s next full moon or you will find that I am a man of my word.” The words hovered malevolently in the air for several moments before the threat finally dropped. “If you do not deliver it, then I will destroy your brother and all of Asgard with him -- the only home you have ever known will burn to embers, and it will be your transgressions that will be its cause.”

Loki visibly flinched at this omen, deepening his shame by his blatant show of sentiment. “I will see it done,” he vowed steadfastly. “Have no doubts in this regard: I will bring you what you desire,” He felt the presence of the other leave him then, and he communicated his relief in an elongated sigh.

‘I will bring you what you desire,’ he vowed to the empty blackness, ‘Indeed, I shall . . .’
S.H.I.E.L.D.’s newest captive had to spend two weeks shackled in a dungeon-like cell deep within the confines of the Vault until adequate holding facilities could be constructed for him at agency headquarters. During this time, Thor remained nearby in a company safehouse, and while he checked in with the staff at the prison regularly to ensure that his sibling was treated humanely, he did not visit him. It would simply be too difficult to face that deteriorating version of his brother with any regular frequency. It was better to save his emotional reserves for when they were at the Hub, when Loki’s cooperation was imperative to halting the wave of evil which was threatening to consume this world . . . and, likely, worlds beyond.

Meanwhile, a team of top secret architects, engineers, and construction personnel readied a suitable series of rooms back at HQ where Loki would be held, and -- assuming he was agreeable -- where he would work. It was the agency’s proposal that the criminal be allowed to offer his cooperation in the field of extraterrestrial intelligence in exchange for leniency in his eventual sentencing for the incident in Manhattan, although Nick Fury appeared less than satisfied with this development; he had lured Loki to the rendezvous under the guise of helping them in exchange for harboring the fugitive from his interstellar enemies. He had not been aware that the agency intended to take him as a prisoner. The operation had been bungled from all sides, it seemed, and, in the end, no one was content with the outcome.

The issue seemed to be that S.H.I.E.L.D. was no longer in charge of managing the threat to Earth, and jurisdiction had been given over to a sister-agency known as S.W.O.R.D. -- Sentient World Observation and Response Department -- which was only in its infancy. After the upheaval at S.H.I.E.L.D., S.W.O.R.D. was at least as developed as its predecessor but with slightly more manpower. Plus, it was formed to handle hazards like this one. So the bureaucrats gave S.W.O.R.D. the go-ahead to take over the operation (code name “Lokasenna”), and their agents largely replaced the ones that were originally assigned. When Iron Man made an unexpected appearance in the middle of their risky venture, the senior S.W.O.R.D. agent had made the call to bring in the enemy before he could flee. Without Thor’s intervention, however, the entire ordeal would have been a dismal, costly failure. Not that this thought gave the warrior any comfort whatsoever.

Meanwhile, Tony had travelled to the Hub to supervise the preparations for the “Supervillain Suite,” as he had deemed it. Although his assistance was spurious in the beginning, consisting mostly of wisecracks and insults aimed toward those who were allied with the S.W.O.R.D. faction of the project, he eventually settled into a quieter routine, using his billion dollar neurons for more useful pursuits than verbal abuse. He again proved himself to be quite the engineer, but when one of his concepts was particularly successful, he did not tend to let the others forget it. The senior S.W.O.R.D. agent on this assignment, Agent Gyrich, often bore the brunt of Tony’s displeasure, and not gladly, at that.

“So, Good-Witch, are there any other super-secret and cleverly acronymed government agencies out there that we -- referring to myself as a layman, of course -- are unaware of?” Tony mocked from beneath the visor of his welding mask. “And if so, are they all named after items that you can buy at the gift shop at Medieval Times? For example, will your lovable band of misfits be superseded by a group of agents from a previously unknown department named C.O.D.P.I.E.C.E.,
perhaps?"

Gyrich remained stoic, refusing to answer Stark’s challenges with anything more than a raised eyebrow. However, his policy of silence did nothing to stem the tide of comments that Tony was unleashing with the glee of a schoolboy. Over the next fifteen minutes, the taciturn agent was bombarded with endless suggestions for what the individuals letters in C.O.D.P.I.E.C.E. might represent, none of which were flattering. After the billionaire finished fusing the last bit of the joint he was attempting to seal, he removed his equipment and dropped onto the nearby bench, a self-satisfied air wafting over him. “The good news, Agent Garbage,” Tony concluded, “is that I will be back here in about three hours with a very talented catering staff and a ridiculous array of hors d’oeuvres in order to declare the Supervillain Suite officially open for residence. How does that sound?”

The S.W.O.R.D. agent did not react.

“You can tell your minions to move the Scourge of Upper Manhattan here at their leisure,” Stark instructed, checking the time on his cell. “Personally, I have a date with someone who is not dressed in one of a thousand identical black-and-white suits and is a much more engaging conversationalist. Ta-ta!” Tony stood and gave the agent a comically stiff salute before breezing out of the room.

As the door closed behind him, Gyrich gave a relieved sigh and finally allowed himself a smile.

*****

“I’m going with you,” Clint insisted, reaching for his jacket. There was an implacable determination in his voice which put Natasha immediately on the defensive.

“I don’t think that’s the best idea, Clint,” she retorted, unable to keep the resistive nature of her tone completely restrained. “They’re bringing Loki to the Hub as a potential source of information. Any emotional interference on your part will likely jeopardize his cooperation.”

Agent Barton rounded on her, the look on his face one of both shock and disappointment. “Unbelievable, Nat,” he huffed. “I cannot believe that you would go all ‘protocol’ on me about this.”

“Believe it, Clint,” she stated solemnly. “I cannot let you hinder this operation for personal reasons. It’s too damn important.” As soon as the expletive left her mouth, she knew it had been a mistake; it placed too much gravity on the situation with Loki and possibly, depending on how he chose to interpret it, a de-emphasis on his own inner conflict. Of course, Natasha was not unconcerned with his mental state -- actually, quite the opposite when you consider how few hours of sleep she had been able to achieve lately -- it was just that the stakes in this confrontation were much higher than for anything that had come before, perhaps in the history of the planet.

Coulson had spent most of his morning briefing a few key players (including herself on a very secure line) on the ‘Thanos Imperative,’ and the imminent likelihood of a devastating attack from a hostile alien force seemed to be an ominous prospect. If true, there would likely be no portal to close this time and no hope that a fighting force made up of a few gifted individuals would be able to curb the onslaught. If this ‘Mad Titan’ did have designs on their world, he would presumably have the ability to strike undetected and with a force that was rivalled by none in the universe, a campaign which would extinguish life on the planet in a matter of days if not hours. Unravelling the mysteries of the dual jailbreaks and the force or forces behind them had become a matter of immediate concern – and their best hope was also their most perilous. To place their trust in a being who until just recently had been the planet's most insidious enemy was perhaps the purest
insanity, but it was a testament to how hopeless Coulson suspected their situation had become. S.W.O.R.D., however, was counseling him to delay any rash actions involving the captive Asgardian until more intelligence could be gathered.

“I assure you that I don’t know anything for certain,” the senior Agent had confessed during the conference call. “I can’t tell you that our days are numbered. Thanos does exist -- of this I am sure, and he is not the kind of guy whose attention we want to attract. And I promise you that I intend to be prepared for all possible scenarios, even the most desperate ones,” Phil had spoken as his parting words. Natasha could hear the truth of what she feared very plainly in his voice: he already believed it. In his heart, he was convinced that this was a bonafide End-of-the-World scenario, and he was preparing to fight just as unscrupulously as was necessary to combat the impossible odds. So it was either Blackout or Loki -- someone needed to start spilling some intel, and the results needed to be immediate.

And now Clint was reading the reality of this all-consuming jeopardy in her unsettled eyes.

“What’s going on?” Barton demanded of her. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You know I can’t tell you anything,” she responded, her eyes refusing to meet his, a reaction which was blatantly guilty. “If I could, I would already have told you.”

He clamped a hand onto the crook of her arm with too much force, and she gasped in both surprise and a modicum of pain. “Bullshit, Natasha! This is more than just business -- you know this is personal for me! There’s nothing stopping you from telling me other than your own ludicrous sense of morality!” His eyes were wild and unfeeling, and he pulled her flush against his body roughly. She tensed reflexively into a defensive stance, preparing to physically retaliate if necessary. She could feel that he was about to lose control of his actions, and she secretly steeled herself to respond in whichever ways were necessary to de-escalate the situation. “Tell me, dammit!” he spat. “Tell me what has you so afraid, or --”

“Or what, Clint? Or what!” she shouted back at him, refusing to shrink from his show of aggression. “You’ll hit me? You’ll kill me?” She felt his grip slacken a bit as she said these words. “You wouldn’t even get started before I knocked you on your sorry ass,” she taunted him more softly, bringing a hint of a smile to his lips that she carefully mirrored. He released his hold on her, and she watched meticulously as the reason returned to his features before she relaxed her posture. As his muscles loosened, she could see the shame creeping over him, and he ran his hand impulsively through his hair, gripping unkindly at the roots in frustration.

“What did Loki do to you?” she asked, gently but firmly. “It was more than just mind control so don’t try to tell me differently.”

“I don’t know, Nat. I’m -- I’m sorry.” He was averting his gaze with clear embarrassment. “I’m so sorry.” His voice was trembling with the imminently tears which he was trying to restrain. “I wish I could tell you, but I’m just not sure exactly what happened to me.” He turned away, humiliated, and she placed a hesitant hand on his shoulder. “I’m just -- I’m changed somehow.”

She was unsure if he would allow the gesture, but she embraced him from behind. To her wonder, he wrapped a determined arm over her right one and interlaced their fingers. His breath was coming in difficult gasps, and she knew he was still struggling with the will to just sob hopelessly. When his respirations softened, she rested her chin on his left shoulder and tightened her hold around his chest.

“I’m broken, Nat,” he whispered, defeated.

“No,” she breathed. “You’re human. There’s absolutely no shame in that.” They stood entwined
like this for several minutes, the only audible sound being the other’s breathing. Finally, Natasha stated, “You know I have to go, right?”

He nodded. “This is really important, huh?” he chuckled weakly.

“It would have to be for me to leave you right now,” she assured him. She squeezed his hand firmly before untangling her fingers from his, “Just trust me -- it’s a big deal.” They faced each other again, and there was a long, awkward moment where neither one of them knew what to do or say. Finally, they both succumbed at once to the urge to embrace the other, and their holds lingered just a little longer than what was considered comfortable between friends. When she looked into his eyes again, she felt tears threatening to well up in her own, and so she quickly looked down and away. “Goodbye, Clint,” she mumbled, praying that the tremble in her voice wasn’t obvious.

“Goodbye, Nat,” he answered with a surprising smile, his own words somewhat tremulous and his eyes still wet.

Natasha gathered up her jacket and reseated the holster at her hip. Then she inhaled deeply in an effort to regain control of her quickly faltering composure. “Do me a favor,” she requested, still not meeting his gaze. “Try not to be too hard on yourself . . . while I’m gone, I mean.”

“I can try,” Barton replied, “but I make no promises.”

“You never do,” she said to the floor. “It’s one of the things I’ve always loved about you.” With these words, she turned to make a hasty exit, her legs carrying her down the hall with a determination she didn’t really feel. She could hear Clint’s footsteps behind her, and her thoughts immediately turned desperate. Please, Clint, don’t make a scene. Not here where Stark has eyes in every room . . .

The footsteps halted, and she could not help herself -- she turned to see if he had indeed tried to pursue her. He had followed her to the doorway, and he was tarrying there, his face drawn with indecision. Finally, he said, “Hey . . . Nat?”

“Yeah, Clint?”

He had folded his hands and was absently wringing them in a habitual fashion. When he eventually did speak, he did not meet her eyes. “Call me when you get to the Hub, okay? So I know that everything’s alright?”

“Sure,” she replied. Certainly, she would call him.

Even if everything was going to be far from alright.

*****

True to her word, Natasha did place a call to Agent Barton just before she entered the Hub, as cell phone use inside the premises was severely limited by agency protocols. Strangely, it went straight through to voicemail, and so she left a reassuringly upbeat message about being just fine and expressed that she hoped he was much the same. Then she powered the device down before she stepped over the threshold of the main entrance. She knew that his well-being was now completely out of her control, and she would be unable to check in with him for an unknown span of time.

“Please be alright, Clint,” she whispered to herself as she entered the agency compound. “Please, please be alright . . .”

“Agent Romanov?” said a voice as she entered the highest security sector of the building. Agent
Melinda May was waiting for her at the perimeter of the holding area, and while Natasha knew her only by reputation, that reputation did garner her a fair amount of respect. Referred to cryptically as “the Cavalry,” May was known for being a one-woman -- well, whatever the agency needed her to be. Even if they had never interacted, Natasha felt a kinship with this woman whose life was strictly her work; she could almost imagine them meeting for ridiculously overpriced coffee when all of this was over. Well, if anything existed when all of this was over.

“Have they brought him in yet?” Romanov asked after the cursory introductions were complete.

May nodded, her manner stern but calm. “He was brought in several hours ago. He seems pretty subdued so far, although I didn’t really interact with him in Manhattan so I wouldn’t know firsthand.” She led the red-haired agent through several well-guarded checkpoints. “I understand you did, though.”

Natasha indicated the affirmative. “On the Helicarrier, actually,” she replied. “He was a worthy opponent, I have to confess. I’m not exactly sure what his being ‘subdued’ this time around really means for us. I mean, last time he was passive but talkative, and it turned out to be an elaborate ruse.”

“Well, he’s certainly not very conversational right now,” May informed her. “He’ll interact, but only with certain personnel. He’s actually not at all like I imagined him, at least from the way everyone has described him.”

“Really?” Romanov countered with an intrigued tilt of her head.

As she considered the implications of Agent May’s description, the pair rounded the corner to where Loki’s quarters had been constructed. There was a large room, about 15’ x 20’, with a few drab furnishings which were all built to prison-friendly specifications. There appeared to be a couple more rooms beyond which would afford the prisoner at least the illusion of more privacy, although Natasha was certain these were also highly surveilled. The wall which faced the hallway appeared to be some sort of glass or clear plastic in nature, but she could see from the close-up views on the monitors in the control room (which was positioned directly in front of the cell) that there were thin strips of reinforcing metal which formed a mesh beneath the transparent outer layer. She could only assume that the most sophisticated magic-containing technology had been borrowed from their Asgardian allies in order to assure that their fallen Prince would not slip his leash this time. There was also an entire squadron of surveillance staff buzzing about the control area, which gave the impression that S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn’t so much restraining a supervillain as launching a manned space mission.

“Well, this is a little . . .” Natasha paused in order to find the right word. “. . . surreal.”

She surveyed the contents of the room preemptively, scanning for signs of the extraterrestrial inmate it contained. On first glance, it was unoccupied . . . but then she saw the trace of a lump cowering under the covers of the rudimentary bed in the foreground, a crown of black hair at its peak. As if sensing her presence, the lump stirred and elongated, tossing the blanket aside in a manner that was both spontaneous and elegant. The figure beneath stood and stretched briefly and then crossed in front of the long transparent wall, moving as if he either did not know or did not care that there were about a dozen other persons in his general vicinity. It was unmistakably Loki: a tall, graceful being with a porcelain complexion and a fearless swagger. And yet there was something that was fundamentally different: he was clad in a shapeless gray prison uniform, and the clothing hung from him like an ill-fitting costume, the width of the fabric incongruous to his towering frame. He seemed so slight with his limbs clad in such conventional garments, as if he weighed next to nothing, and it made him seem anything but intimidating.
“Is he how you remember him?” Agent May inquired formally.

“He seems a little rangy,” Romanov quipped. “What have they been feeding him out in Colorado?”

“Would you believe ‘fava beans and a nice chianti’?” asked a voice to their right, imitating the trademark stuttering inhalation that accompanied the quote.

Natasha was fairly sure that the sound of her eyes rolling up into her head could be heard across the room. “Stark! Imagine seeing you here,” she chided brusquely.

“Why I practically built the place, Agent Romanov!” Tony bragged. “And don’t worry, my dear, he can’t see you -- there is a one-way panel which keeps him from seeing out unless we want him to.”

“Excuse me, Agent Romanov, Mr. Stark.” May nodded to each of them in turn. “I have an operations meeting with Agent Coulson that I need to attend.” Her disposition had grown stilted as soon as Tony had made them aware of his presence, betraying that she likely wasn’t very fond of him. She left without any further comment.

“So, my dear Natasha,” Tony grinned, “What do you think of the new digs? Pretty outstanding if I do say so myself . . . and I do, obviously. In case that part was at all unclear.”

The red-headed woman sneered playfully at him. “I have to admit they are pretty impressive.”

Stark placed an unwanted hand gently in the small of her back and eased her over for a closer inspection. “From inside this gilded cage, our little jailbird is under constant supervision, his vital signs being continuously monitored and displayed for about a dozen other people to study and become completely bored doing it.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and lifted his shoulders like a self-satisfied child.

“Just vitals? No heat signatures? Infrared?”

“Oh, but of course! I spared no expense to house Loki-Dokey over there. And I want to be sure that there is no way he is going to be throwing his image and then running one of us through with any pointy-glowy things this time around.” The pair had continued to approach the room as they spoke, halting just inches from the perimeter. The being it contained continued to move about routinely, offering no indication that he was at all aware of the team of agents just outside his chambers.

Suddenly, the atmosphere somehow changed, and, although Natasha could sense that something was altered, she was unsure of exactly what it could be. It was a different feel to the air around them somehow, and when she glanced over Stark’s shoulder (he was turned towards her now) she knew instantly what it had been: Loki had turned to face them, and he was staring straight in their direction, obviously aware that they were standing just inches from him and separated by a relatively thin layer of -- whatever it was. Tony continued to extol his own virtues, babbling on about the masterful way in which he had completed his task, and yet all the while the Asgardian was approaching their position, gaze trained unmistakably on the pair of them. Agent Romanov knew that her mouth had fallen open, but she was unable to make any noises to warn the other man about the approaching figure. As Loki drew nearer, she was finally able to discern the details of his face: he looked drawn, weary, and his eyes were almost hollow as he trained them upon her, drawing ever closer by agonizingly slow degrees. His raven, shoulder-length plaits fell in unkempt folds alongside his countenance as he bent his head down towards them, his hands still clasped neatly at his back, and just as his visage fitted itself neatly behind Tony’s left shoulder, Stark pivoted slightly to follow her line of sight, meeting the gaze of the ancient creature behind him with full-on shock.
“Oh, holy shit!” Tony gasped, starting violently and then clutching his chest in undignified panic.

There was a long moment of complete silence, and then Natasha erupted into laughter. After all the dread of facing Loki again, the gnawing anticipation mixed with the horror from facing him in her dreams, this result was surprising even to her. However, the absurdity of Tony’s surprise and his subsequently inelegant response was just too much to resist. After a few seconds more, the agents in the control room echoed her with full-on amusement, and Natasha turned towards the outpouring of mirth, a wide smile still on her face. She noticed Agent May standing next to the far end of the control panel, arms folded, barely restraining a mischievous grin of her own.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark. I must have flipped something,” she shrugged. “My bad.” At that, the room erupted into another fit of hysterics.

Natasha continued to giggle until tears welled up in her eyes. “You should have seen yourself, Stark . . . that was priceless!” Tony did not seem to agree, however, judging by the crimson creeping from his neck to his ears.

Behind him, Loki had risen back to his full height, an amused simper playing upon his lips. He still looked dishevelled, and his complexion appeared to have an almost sickly gray undertone. Furthermore, the look on his face was wild, almost savage -- the effect was indescribable. He was like a dying animal, and yet he still projected enough strength and focus to strongly discourage anyone’s interference with his progressive demise. “Forgive me, Mr. Stark,” he purred, his voice still as calm and lilting as she remembered it. “I hope I didn’t frighten you.” Tony did not reply, as if knowing that there would be no denying he had been spooked to see Loki standing behind him based on his ridiculous reaction. “Agent Romanov,” the prisoner continued, training his attention on her now. “What a pleasure to see you again.”

Having those piercingly cruel eyes upon her sobered her mood instantly. “I wish I could say the same about you,” Natasha replied. She instinctively crossed her arms over her chest protectively.

“So I gather you have not been thinking about me?” he countered. Their eyes met in a sentient glare.

“No,” she lied. “Not at all.”
“So what did it take?” Romanov asked as they observed the prisoner working diligently through the observation window.

Coulson was watching with her, and he had been mostly silent as they looked on. “We had to promise him his life, of course, as well as asylum from his domestic and interstellar enemies. He also wants to stay in his rooms here at the Hub; I’m guessing he prefers it to the dismal accommodations at the Vault.”

“Isn’t that going to be a little weird? Having a supervillain living on the premises while conducting sensitive, top-secret intelligence work?” Natasha had taken to dressing again in her black company uniform, and it was certainly helping her feel the part of a fearless undercover operative. It also reminded her that she should probably start ordering the non-fat lattes, as she had grown surprisingly fond of the beverages despite their farcical cost; this fabric was not at all forgiving.

“It will be,” Phil sighed. “However, we will deal with that when and if we all survive long enough to have to worry about it.” His forehead creased deeply with concern.

“Has he seen you yet?” She couldn’t help but ask this with a wry bit of humor.

Phil shook his head, one finger pressed anxiously to his chin and his lips squeezed into a tight line. “Can I please be there when he does?” she jested, nudging him playfully with her elbow.

Coulson did venture a hint of a smile, but he did not laugh. “I’m not sure he’s going to get that opportunity.”

Natasha rested a reassuring hand on his bicep. “Come on, Phil,” she coaxed. “I know that this has been a serious emotional trauma for you, but I think it would be therapeutic if you faced him.”

The male agent just nodded willfully and said nothing.

“Besides,” she reasoned, “how often do you get to watch a god’s head explode?”

He did chuckle softly at this notion. “I suppose that would be novel. Almost as novel as being able to confront your own murderer.” He looked back into the holding cell as if he were imagining the scenario. “That is a contingency most people don’t get to experience.”

“See,” she urged him, “you have two compelling reasons to do it. Three, if you count that ‘it might be good for you’ thing.”

“What about Agent Barton?” Coulson asked hesitantly. “Would you offer him the same advice?”

Her face became more serious while she contemplated this inquiry. “That is trickier,” she confessed. “At this point, I would advise him against it. He’s not in a good place right now -- he’s still pretty emotionally unstable.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the senior agent replied gently.
“Eventually, I think he’ll need a huge emotional outlet in order to really get past it all,” she murmured. “I just think it will be years before he’s prepared for that.”

“Is he still seeing the counselor?”

“No,” she smirked. “That didn’t really go so well, either.”

“I have a bit of a funny anecdote in that area, if you don’t mind my changing the subject a little.” Coulson’s face formed into an incipient grin. Natasha nodded her consent. “I know S.W.O.R.D. is new to this arena, but I couldn’t help but be amused by their negotiation strategy. Their senior agent on this -- Henry Gyrich, I don’t know if you’ve met him yet -- has insisted on leading the mediation. He’s a good man -- I mean, I was at the academy with him, and he’s tough as nails but not really battle-tested. He sat down with Loki like he was his defense lawyer, trying to be his friend and lull him into a false sense of security.”

“Interesting choice of method,” Natasha huffed, one eyebrow crooked with sarcastic disapproval.

“Indeed,” Coulson conceded. “Anyway, he got him to agree quickly to all the things he would have been promised even if he hadn’t been taken prisoner: his life and protection from enemies in exchange for information. So it was, in essence, going very smoothly; no harm, no foul. Loki tried to add on a few ridiculous requests just to throw Gyrich off his game a little, but Henry held firm, and things looked like they were wrapping up nicely. So just when the rest of the team is getting ready to pack up and leave, Gyrich does something . . . well, it was bizarre. Like, indescribably brazen.”

“I take it not ‘good’ brazen. If there is such a thing.”

“Oh, not at all. He throws down this folio of documents, and it lands in front of Loki with a very loud smack. Loki raises an eyebrow as only he can, and then he just stares at Gyrich as if to say, ‘And this would be . . .?’”

“I can imagine it all quite clearly,” Natasha praised.

“‘Oh, and by the way,’ Gyrich said, ‘that’s the outline for your rehabilitation plan.’”

“What?!” Natasha nearly shouted, her words echoing painfully in the corridor outside the control room.

“I believe that would be the appropriate response. You could have knocked me over with a feather, Agent Romanov, you truly could have. I mean, that took way more . . . “ he cleared his throat, “testicular fortitude than I would have had under any circumstances.”

“And what did Loki do?” Natasha was leaning in like they were a couple of gossiping old women sharing a scandalous bit of small town news, but she simply could not prevent herself.

“Well, he was completely mute, but that eyebrow kept creeping up like it was going to fly right off his forehead. Gyrich just kept talking, though -- telling him how he was serving at our pleasure, and he was going to have to work to earn our gracious hospitality. He kept going on and on about how Loki was going to have to submit himself to psychiatric counseling five days a week, how he would need to consent to experimental doses of antipsychotics in order to treat his ‘condition,’ etc., etc. -- how he was going to come out of this as a valued asset to the United States government.”

“No!” the female agent gasped.

“Oh, yes. I almost had to call for a wheelbarrow to pick my jaw up off the floor. It was really
transcendental stuff.”

“I can’t even imagine!” Natasha wheezed. “Please tell me that Gyrich is still alive.”

“I don’t even know how to describe the response to you. Well, actually, I can describe it nearly word-for-word because I’ve watched the playback so many times, but I don’t know that I fully understand it, even now . . .”


Loki just sat there silently, hands folded and his eyes boring into the agent but smiling like he found the whole situation delightfully comical. “Sit down, please, Agent Gyrich,” he instructed smoothly; it was every inch a request and not a demand, which was stunning in and of itself.

Gyrich hesitated, the corner of his mouth twitching with an uncertainty he was desperately trying to smother. After a few painful seconds, he slowly came to rest in the seat across from the Asgardian, now with just a few inches of tabletop separating them.

“I just want to be clear, Henry -- may I call you Henry?” Loki continued in a sweet, gentle manner. The agent nodded and folded his arms, still trying to convey a mettle he did not completely possess. “Oh, good. You see, I want us to understand one another.” His silky, tranquil tone stood in flagrant contrast to the haunted cast in the blue-green orbs which followed Gyrich’s every twitch like a lazy housecat. He leaned back against the chair he occupied and drew one knee over the other in a motion which was excruciating in its sloth. “Do you know how old I am?”

“I do not,” the man replied bluntly. He sensed a trap of some kind, but he was powerless to avoid any consequences by this point.

“I am one-thousand and forty-nine years old,” Loki said matter-of-factly. There was neither malice nor pride in this statement. “If I live as long as the average members of my race, I will exist for about another four millennia.” The raven-haired being began to pick absently at the cuff of his right trouser leg, and then smoothed out the fabric with an elegant brush of his long, slender fingers. “Yet . . . “ Loki cooed, ”Even if I endure for as many years as I potentially may, and if you add that to the long years I have already lived, I would still not have enough time to consider your pathetic proposal.” As his words turned acrid, he placed two fingers firmly on the document which Gyrich had tossed at him and pushed it back across the surface of the table toward the agent. When he did so, the man recoiled slightly. “You see, Henry,” the Asgardian spat as if choking on the name, “it is not in your best interest to rehabilitate me, because there are lines of morality that your soldiers and ‘good men’ will not cross.” Loki leaned forward and placed his hands on the tabletop, interlacing his fingers and inclining his head toward the agent. “Those lines mean nothing to the enemy you face. He sees you not as a means to an end but rather as an obstacle to be removed and brushed aside.” The longer he spoke, the more deep and raspy his voice was becoming. “It is time,” he finished, his eyes suddenly ablaze with a menacing radiance, his smile still wide like it was no more than a mask clinging to the diminishing flesh beneath it.

Every eye in the room was fixed on Agent Gyrich, who sat frozen, dumbfounded, and unmoving for several moments. Then his lips moved minutely, and he uttered, “Time for what?”

The older being bared his teeth slightly, and then his chest rumbled with derisive laughter. “It’s time that you woke up to the potential for evil in this universe,” Loki hissed. “There is cruelty on other worlds which you cannot even fathom, and it has made countless monsters of ‘good men,’” he mocked callously. “You will be faced with this Darkness, and you will fall to it,” he scoffed,
one hand clenched now into a fist which was fixed to the table. “And you will be forgotten.”

Gyrich had paled, but he still held his position with as much honor as he could manage.

“You are going to need someone who knows that kind of evil intimately if you are going to be able to meet it with any substance at all,” Loki continued. “And -- if I’m not misguided -- you have precious few options in that area. So, admit it, my dear Henry . . .” he seethed, “I am much more use to you crazy.” The Asgardian then leaned against the backrest of his seat and splayed his long legs out before him.

The team of negotiators sat in uncomfortable silence for a time, and then Loki dismissed them with an imperious wave of his hand. Eager to escape the tension, the majority of the agents grabbed their equipment and made a swift exit; Gyrich, however, moved to stand more languidly, his demeanor relating that he was still trying to determine when he had lost control of the conversation. He was instantly reminded when the folder of documents landed in his unsuspecting arms.

“Do not forget to take that drivel,” Loki fumed. “We will not be needing it any longer.”

The senior agent was the last to depart, a puzzled and broken look remaining plastered on his features. Just as he was reaching the exit, he turned back to the Asgardian who was now sitting mutely, a finger crooked to his chin. “I . . . I don’t understand,” Gyrich stated uncertainly. “Do we have a deal or not? I mean -- about all the other things?”

Loki looked at him with exasperation. “I suppose I have a vested interest in saving your feeble little world now, seeing how I am trapped upon it,” he snapped testily. “Consider that to be most fortunate for you.” With these words, he waved Gyrich away again, and this time, he departed without further comment.

*****

“So whose idea do you think it was?” Natasha asked. “The rehabilitation thing, I mean?”

“I can’t even begin to imagine,” Coulson replied, shaking his head again in disbelief. “I find it miraculous that he’s even still helping us.”

“Have you played him the audio from the Raft?”

“We haven’t yet,” Phil revealed. “I was actually waiting for you to arrive, so you could assist me in watching his reaction. I want a second opinion on how genuine he’s being with us, and you seem to be a better reader of Loki than the average ‘Earthling’,” he quipped.

“What about the video? Have you shown him that?”

Coulson indicated that they had. “He was not able to expound upon anything beyond what we had already determined.”

“That’s disappointing,” Natasha admitted. Then she fell silent for a few moments as if turning the information over in her head anew. “I have to confess that there is something about that video that disturbs me.”

“Oh?”
“That blue light -- the one that starts right before all the commotion. When everything else goes black, it doesn’t,” she considered aloud. “I’m assuming that Blackout was doing his little parlor trick, because I’ve checked the records and there was no internal loss of power. But why the glow? It never went out, even when everything else went dark.”

“Hmmm -- it’s a good point,” Phil commented. “I actually haven’t considered that. It might be worth running some tests with Blackout’s abilities to see if we can find anything that might resist the effect. That is if he agrees . . . or if we can trick him into a few spontaneous demonstrations.”

“We should also probably ask him what the blue glow was,” Natasha deadpanned.

“That too,” Coulson agreed. “Couldn’t hurt.”

“So can we have Loki listen to the audio now?” she inquired.

“We may as well.” Phil rapped on the one-way glass. “Agent Fallon?” he asked while activating the microphone in his earpiece. The young man at Loki’s side pressed a finger to his ear. “Yeah, boss?”

“Play him the audio from the Raft, please, R.J. I want to know the origin of the language and the identity of the speakers along with the translation, if he knows.”

“Sure thing, sir,” the junior agent chirped. There were some words and hand gestures exchanged between Fallon and the staff in the control room for half a minute, followed by a brief but seemingly cordial conversation between the young agent and Loki. Shortly afterwards, the cryptic voices began playing over the speakers both in and outside the holding cell.

The Asgardian appeared to be listening intently, a focused but troubled twist to his features. After twenty seconds or so, Loki asked for the recording to be restarted from the beginning, presumably to discern more details from a second listen. When the other voice came in, however, there was a distinct change in his face; his look went from sharply blank to distraught, and then descended quickly into pained disbelief.

“He understands it,” Coulson murmured, with a hopeful note in his words.

“Most likely,” Natasha agreed. He could be only pretending, she knew; he was certainly intelligent enough to pull off such an elaborate deceit. Yet it looked purely genuine from where she sat, and the distress was particularly convincing. In fact, by the time the entire playback ended, he was visibly perspiring, and he was rubbing his index finger repeatedly across his chin in frenzied thought.

“Bring me some paper . . . and something with which I can write,” he stated while still gazing at nothing.

The young agent stared at him questioningly.

“I want to write it down,” Loki growled irascibly. When there was still no response, he strengthened his inflection: “Now!”

R.J. began to dig clumsily through his satchel for a pen and paper, pulling out unnecessary objects as he went and tossing them aside in desperation. When he found the items he desired, he held them cautiously out toward the other being who snatched them away in a movement which was nearly imperceptible. Loki hastily began scribbling with the ballpoint, scratching words furiously across the paper.
“Should I have them replay the audio, then?” Fallon asked delicately.

“Not necessary,” the black-haired man shot back, all the while continuing to write with feverish enthusiasm.

“But don’t you want to --”

“I do not need to hear it again,” Loki enunciated clearly without looking up from his efforts. He continued his writing for another few minutes, and then he paused to reread what he had created, swiftly skimming his eyes back and forth across the transcript he had produced without making any corrections. “Here is what they said,” he concluded flatly, forcing the paper into the agent’s hands. “I have indicated the language and the identities of the speakers accordingly,” he added blandly.

Fallon looked out towards Phil and Natasha, pleading for guidance.

“I think you’re done for the day, R.J.,” Coulson commended him. “Why don’t you bring that out so we can begin to analyze it.”

Agent Fallon responded to the voice in his ear with a curt nod, and then a few conclusive words of goodbye to the inmate, who was now pointedly ignoring him. “Is there anything else I can do for you before I go?” the agent offered as he was gathering up his work gear. Natasha smiled to herself at how sweet the gesture was, particularly since the young man seemed to ask reflexively, almost as if his manners had blindly taken over. Not anticipating an answer, he was partway into the chamber’s anteroom before he heard Loki speak.

“Yes, actually, there is,” the Asgardian said offhandedly. Fallon hesitated but did not look back. “Never make me listen to that again,” Loki stated with firm resolution.

*****

The hand in which the conversation was written was a careful, elegant script; Natasha would have known it was Loki’s even if she hadn’t witnessed him producing it. It was refined even with the hasty imperfections it contained, seeming almost ancient in its complexity, and yet clearly drafted with a modern ballpoint pen. It read as follows:

The language is that of Titan.

(Voice number one: Only known to me as ‘Mephisto.’)

M: Everything is going smoothly so far, my friend. The prison incidents have caused plenty of chaos, and the Terrans have been suitably distracted. It is only a matter of time now before we claim this world and rid the universe of its (pause) unpleasant inhabitants. Please tell me that you are still going to allow me dominion over those souls who are unfortunate enough to survive?
T: Of course, of course, you evil fiend! I would not dream of depriving you of the pleasure of numerous years of torment and persecution. You have more than earned a little hell-fire for your own gratification.

M: Oh, bless you, you crazy (no direct word in Midgardian English; probably the closest would be ‘bastard’)! You will also be most pleased with the sorcerer. He has reclaimed the Cube from the underwater prison, and he is making preparations to see it returned to your hands. In fact, he has exceeded our expectations by destroying the place and leaving no witnesses. We should be able to advance the Skrull army within a few Terran days.

T: We are ahead of schedule, then?

M: Of course! I am a natural leader, you know. So now we can proceed with deciding how we shall execute the actual attack. I favor slaughtering the males, which they will undoubtedly send out first, and saving the more helpless ones for the subsequent torments. Their females and their young have much loftier voices and, therefore, create the most exquisite cries. Although, we will need a few strong male specimens to save for breeding. Their lifespans are lamentably short, as you know.

T: Yes. They are quite pitiful, aren't they?

M: Oh, deliciously so. I am (indecipherable due to static) anticipation of what’s next. I only hope that he does not fail us.

T: He wouldn’t dare.

M: I hope for both of our sakes that you are correct. Without it, everything does rather fall apart, doesn’t it? Oh (pause) their forces of authority have arrived. I will contact you next at the time and place we agreed. Farewell.

T: Farewell.

Natasha read over the words twice, and then once again before she handed the paper back to Phil, her hand trembling ever so slightly. “I need to know if this is genuine,” she said. “I want to speak to
“I still can’t guarantee his cooperation,” Coulson informed her. “Even if we confirm the veracity of this -- and I’m still not exactly certain what I’m reading here -- what do we do with it?”

“Loki needs to talk. Get Fallon back in there and get that son-of-a-bitch to tell us everything: about Mephisto, about Thanos, about anyone else he can think of who might be a threat. We need to do whatever it takes to start him spilling information.”

Phil looked skeptical. “Can we really act outside of our protocols at this point, Agent Romanov? I mean, we haven’t verified this intel, and we have a code of ethics . . . “

“Days, Phil. They spoke of a span days until they would be ready to mount an offensive! If we’re wrong, we’ve wasted a few days time; if we’re right, we have impossible odds to face and probably less than a hundred hours in which to do it.”

Coulson was obviously struggling with this decision. His face was an obvious mask of misery, considering the consequences and weighing them against the enormity of the actions he would be forced to order. “But if it’s not real . . . “ he said weakly and mostly to himself. “I need to be able to sleep at night after all of this has ended.”

“Do you think you can sleep as it is? Do you want to read this again?” Natasha shoved the page back towards him, but he did not move to take it. He shook his head; he appeared exhausted and emotionally drained. After a few more minutes of strained silence, he put his hand up to his earpiece. “Agent May?” He paused to listen for a response, and then continued. “I need you to declare a Level Nine emergency with all necessary protocols in effect, including the emergency lockdown procedure and the rescindment of all applicable prisoner rights under the Patriot Act.”

There was a long pause while Phil listened carefully to May’s reaction.

“Yes, Agent May, I am certain . . . I know we were taught at the academy that there technically is no such thing as a Level Nine. Yes, this is a Level Nine . . . I am almost one-hundred percent certain, anyway. Yes, I’m willing to bet the integrity of everyone in this agency on that assumption. . . Melinda!” he said sharply. “Just do it!” Then he took a breath and softened his tone. “Declare a Level Nine. I know what I’m doing.” Then he turned to Natasha. “Dear God, I hope I know what I’m doing,” he muttered.

****

The voice came again after about two day’s reprieve. “Hello, Vermin,” it wheedled. “Have you been considering my bargain?” Its soothing resonance did nothing to quell the dread that its unwanted presence brought to the surface.

The rat-like man shivered in the consuming darkness. “You know my terms,” he mumbled gruffly. “Blackout is not part of the deal.”

“Of course,” the voice sighed. “Although I do regret that I cannot convince you otherwise.”

Vermin sniffed the air around him to try to discern a living presence, but all he could detect was a faint odor which was not unlike electricity. “So, who are you then?” he demanded, his words terse. “I think I should at least be allowed to know who I’m considering whoring myself out to.”

The voice laughed in response. "A fair condition, indeed,” it shorted. Then there was an eerie
luminescence which grew like a wave, exposing the form of the being he addressed from the head downwards. Vermin shielded his light-sensitive eyes from the overpowering glow, and when it faded to a faint glimmer he was able to look upon his tormentor in full.

The first thing that Vermin surmised was that his voice was complementary to his appearance: he appeared young and graceful, with well-kept hair and an unblemished complexion. He was dressed in dark, close-fitting apparel which all but disappeared in the gloom that surrounded him, and he looked human, of European descent, with delicate bone structure and fair skin. Yet it was his eyes which revealed him -- he was thinking, always thinking, Vermin noted, and probably balancing several possibilities at any one time. Duplicious, he snorted -- a liar. “What do you want with me, then?” the rodent-man growled. “You must have powerful friends, and so I am too weak a specimen by your standards to be of any use to you. What can I offer you that you don’t already have?”

“It is not what you can offer me, Vermin,” the man replied smoothly, “but, rather, what I can offer you.”

Vermin assessed the interloper carefully once more, reading him from the top downwards. The man stood proudly, his legs apart in a fearless stance, and his arms folded before him assertively. His head was cocked slightly to the left, and his alluring smile caused a faint dimple to reveal itself on the corresponding cheek. It should have been a charismatic bearing, one that should have invited his trust unequivocally . . . and yet it was having quite the opposite effect. “Then let me save you some breath, my pretty little deceiver,” the rat-like creature admonished him. “I have been crushed beneath the wheels of the plans of others more times than I can count. There is nothing that you ply me with that will make me trust you.”

“You are not mistaken,” the man confessed. “I cannot make you trust me, nor do I imply that you even should. I can only ask you to consider that things are not always what they seem.” With these words, he bowed his head, and the ghostly radiance swept over him again, only to leave his appearance greatly changed. Now the man looked more haggard, his hair long and dishevelled, and his form was not only thin but gaunt. Even his clothing was tattered and worn at the edges, and he bore bruises, cuts, and open sores upon most of his visible flesh. His eyes seemed hollow -- dead, in fact -- their gaze empty and unseeing, and his mouth was twisted in a caustic smile. He was terrible and yet pitiable at the same time. “Do you know me now?”

Vermin nodded wordlessly, startled by his ghastly appearance in spite of himself. “Not by my own eyes, but from a description,” he said finally. “You are Kaal.” His tone was neutral as he said this, and no prejudice seemed to be implied.

The figure nodded solemnly, and then allowed his image to shift once again, this time into an aspect that was somewhere between the two -- a blend of both damaged and dignified. Vermin cracked an approving but minimal smile. “Does it please you more to see me as I really am?” Kaal asked with a note of provocation.

“You are not a man who is impressed by grandeur,” Vermin huffed. “I used to live in the sewers of New York, after all.”

“Which is why I believe you will want to hear me out,” Kaal continued, his intonation more realistic and less seductive than it had been in his first manifestation. “For what I intend to offer you is neither wealth nor power but that which you desire most: your freedom.”

The rat-man perked up upon hearing these words, but he still did not seem fully convinced. “I can promise you that when the terms of your service have been fulfilled you will be beholden to no one but yourself; you will never have to bend to the will of another in order to survive. You
will never grovel nor cower beneath the maltreatment of another being so long as you live,” Kaal assured him.

The chained man laughed mockingly. “You cannot promise me that,” he sneered. “No one can promise such things to another. It’s absurd!”

The sorcerer smiled wrily in return. “I have often been told that I do not know my own limitations,” he teased. “However, in this case, I am confident that I can honor this pledge to the extent that any being could be capable. In fact, I will go a bit further and throw in your dear friend, Mr. Blackout’s well-being, as well.”

Now Vermin seemed even more incredulous. “I don’t believe that,” he challenged the man. “Why would you offer to free the person you’ve been trying to persuade me to help you kill?”

“I’m not proposing to free him, actually,” Kaal mused. “I’m only promising that I will not harm him so long as you are living.”

“I sense a trick, deceiver,” Vermin replied, “but I am still willing to listen to your foul words because I have little else to do here, other than rot. However, I would not lay your hopes upon my involvement.”

“Oh?” the sorcerer taunted, those expressive eyes darkening with a foreboding chill. “Then let’s explore your options, shall we?” He moved towards the restrained creature on the bunk with a step which was agile and confident. “You can sit here and continue to rot,” he said, clenching a fist of his gloved hand to emphasize the point, “while I roam the outside world, posing an ominous threat to your only friend . . . ” He stopped a few paces from the bedside and began to tap his chin as if considering the circumstances very carefully. “Or,” he smiled, allowing those cruel lips to form a sinister grin which bared most of his perfect teeth, “you can wager what is left of your miserable life on a chance to free yourself and secure the life of your -- ahem -- friend, such as he is. Even if it is only for a time.”

Vermin chuckled mirthlessly. “You are aware of the irony, of course, that you are vowing to free me from being used by others by using me yourself?”

That bleak smile was still draped across his face. “Oh, absolutely,” he admitted. “However, I believe the result justifies the transgression that I will commit in achieving it.”

“But why do you even care? Why should it matter to you if I languish here in darkness forever?” the rat-man challenged him.

“Because I know what it is to be exploited for the gain of others,” Kaal spoke, his hand clasped partially over his mouth as though he seemed to remember these iniquities all too well. “And to be broken in the service of those who prosper while you bleed.”

This revelation seemed to give Vermin pause. His features grew austere, and he hung his head in abject agony. “But I still don’t understand why,” he sighed. “Why save me? My hands are strong, but my mind -- my mind is feeble. It is a shade of what it once was.” He raised his head to look upon the sorcerer again, and this time he was met with a sympathetic smile.

Kaal slipped two fingers beneath the trembling creature’s chin and tilted it upwards, firmly but without hostility, and forced him to meet his eyes; Vermin was astonished to actually feel the press of a hand when he knew no living being could possibly be standing before him. “Because you are not the fool they think you to be,” the sorcerer murmured.
This comment finally caused the prisoner to choke out a sob, which he caught obstinately before it could amplify into any further show of vulnerability. “But I am not the genius I once was,” Vermin confided weakly.

“No,” Kaal conceded, reaching for his hand and then clasping it firmly. “And yet now you are so much more.”
Part IV: Depression Ch 1

The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil. -- Hannah Arendt

--1--

The following day dawned chilly and overcast. By nine a.m., a relentless drizzle had begun, making it an even more fitting day to follow the misery which the night had yielded. Natasha now stood on a rooftop terrace overlooking the sea of asphalt that surrounded the main compound, her eyes so raw from exhaustion that she could barely discern the outlines of the conifers which walled the complex in from most outside surveillance. Their tips were shrouded in a wet, gauzy mist, and she watched as a few red-dusted squirrels busily circled their trunks as she sipped her lukewarm coffee. The woods were nearly silent, almost eerily so, and she could hear the faint thrum of her own heartbeat, softly insistent in the hollow of her chest. It was the only reason she was sure that she still lived.

Gradually, Natasha made her way over to the railing and leaned her hip against it, drawing in a weary breath as she let the thin rain gradually dampen her hair and clothing. She lingered there, shivering and allowing the crispness of the air to rouse her from what felt like an emotional languor. When she felt sufficiently revived, she crossed over to where there was a hanging canopy so she could protect her phone while she checked for messages; there was only one, and she frowned when she saw that it was not from Clint. The number associated with it was not recognizable, and so she left it for the moment, opening her instant messaging screen instead. She tapped out the words, “When you get this, text me back to let me know you are OK. I won’t be able to check mail or messages for several more hours, but I will look as soon as I can. If you are not okay, then call HQ and leave a message with reception. Tell them it’s urgent. I NEED to know if you are OK.” After pressing ‘Send,’ she proceeded to play back her only voicemail.

There was only silence at first, and then Steve Rogers began to speak: “Natasha . . . I, um . . . I’m sorry. I’m at the airport, and, boy, you should see the looks you get when you ask for a payphone these days!” He sounded as if he were trying to be light-hearted, but his voice wavered. “I’m, uh, calling to say that Clint followed you back to HQ. I tried to talk him out of it, I really did, but he just wouldn’t listen. He says he needs to talk to Loki. I tried to tell him he wasn’t anywhere near ready for that kind of confrontation, but -- well, you know how he is. He wouldn’t listen to me. He told me I would have to use physical force if I was going to keep him from leaving, and, I mean, I could have, but I just . . . I couldn’t bring myself to. I didn’t want to hurt him. I have so few friends . . . I didn’t want to break one of the few that I have.” He chuckled lightly again, but it sounded
mildly despondent. “Anyway, I am on my way out, and I’ll do what I can to help you when I get there. Again, I am so sorry. Um . . . goodbye.” The message then stopped.

It was timed about three hours prior.

“Dammit!” Natasha growled, fighting her dominant urge to throw the phone just as far out across the asphalt as she could fling it. If Clint had left over three hours ago then he was likely already at the Hub, a prospect she was not emotionally equipped to deal with at the moment. She quickly selected Coulson’s cell number from her contact list and waited very impatiently until he finally answered after the fifth ring.

“This is Coulson,” came a thin, fatigued voice.

“Coulson, listen! Clint -- Agent Barton, I mean -- is on his way to the Hub! He may already be here, actually,” she gasped, spitting the words out as quickly as she could force herself.

“Yes, Agent Romanov, I know,” Phil replied wearily. “I’m dealing with a bit of a situation here, actually . . . “ She could hear thumping in the background and a raised male voice. “He’s, um, trying to force his way into the holding area right now.”

“I’ll be right there!” she declared, ending the call as she began to race back towards the interior of the building. Her muscles felt sluggish as she pumped her legs against their will, bucking their resistance from the fatigue of the night’s labors and lack of sleep. She navigated the corridors swiftly, dodging uniformed office staff and fellow field agents alike, with those who recognized her in time stepping sensibly out of her path of their own volition. As she rounded the final turn to the highest security section, lungs burning and knees threatening to buckle, she collided with a solid chunk of matter which gripped her solidly before she could slide helplessly to the floor.

“Natasha!” Captain Rogers exclaimed with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I have to go!” She tried to free herself from his embrace and push past him, but he held her firmly. “Steve, please! I have to get to him before he does something stupid.”

“I think it might be too late for that,” Steve revealed. She made one more futile attempt to wrench herself from him before he guided her unwillingly to a padded leather bench. “Hey, calm down,” he coaxed her gently. “Just breathe, okay?”

She took a minute to slow her inhalations and then ran an exasperated hand through her loose tresses. “What’s going on in there, Steve?” she asked as unemotionally as she could manage. “You sound like you know something.”

Gradually, Rogers loosened his grip on her biceps, watching her eyes to gauge her subsiding hysteria. “They’re taking him into custody,” Steve confessed, his words tinged with sympathy. At this revelation, Natasha tried swiftly to get up, but he glued her soundly to the seat. “It’s not as bad as it sounds, alright? It’s temporary. He did just strongarm his way into the headquarters of a government intelligence agency and try to forcibly confront a federal prisoner.”

“How far did he get?” she asked, her voice rough with worry.

“The control room outside the cell. He could see Loki, but Loki could not see him. I’m not even sure he knew anything was going on at all, truthfully. They seem to have him pretty isolated, from what I’ve seen.”

At that moment, the door to the control room opened, and four agents entered the hall, escorting a ruffled but mostly cooperative Agent Barton, his hands cuffed tightly at his back. “I just wanted to
talk to him,” Clint said sourly.

“I know,” said the tall female agent who held his right arm. “It’s all you kept screaming about while you were wrecking the place.” As they steered Clint off down an adjacent corridor, his eyes found Natasha, and his face became immediately mournful; he glanced quickly at the floor, unable to meet her gaze. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed to the tile at his feet as his attendants led him away.

Natasha let her back fall against the wall in surrender, her head ringing with a mixture of anger, despair, and overwhelming exhaustion. Steve rested a steadying hand on her shoulder, but she brushed it away irritably. “I can’t, Steve -- I just . . . I need to sleep,” she sighed finally, unable to continue fighting all of the stresses that were pressing on her psyche.

“I think you should,” Rogers murmured with encouragement. “You look done in.”

The red-haired woman nodded haltingly but did not move to depart. Instead, she hung her head dejectedly, one hand tangled in her shoulder-length locks. After a long moment of inactivity, Steve finally cleared his throat. “Aren’t you going to go to bed?” he asked gently.

“I don’t think I can sleep right now,” she moaned. “I need to more than I ever have in my entire life -- but I just know I can’t. I’m too . . . “ Her eyes flitted up to ceiling as if the appropriate words would be mercifully written there. “I’m too -- everything. I’m feeling anything you can think of right now. And I really don’t want to spend the last few dozen hours that the Earth may have being unconscious.”

Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise, but he did not address the comment. That was the essence of Steve Rogers encapsulated in one moment, she thought: he had just learned that the world was in dire peril, but he was more focused on making sure that she was going to be alright before he approached the issue. “Can I make a suggestion?” he asked softly.

“Why not?” she replied. “Personally, I am all out of ideas.”

“I can go track down something to help you sleep -- something low-dose, so you’re just down for a few hours. Then I’ll wake you up whenever you say. Would that be acceptable?”

She considered it in silence for a minute and then indicated her assent.

*.**.*

“He’s been at this all night, Nick. We should let him have a break.”

Coulson sat wearily in the chair in his office -- which, awkwardly, had been the other man’s office until just recently -- and sifted through the pages of intel that they had extracted from their alien prisoner over the last few harrowing hours. Some of it was clearly relevant, but as the night had worn on, the information Loki disclosed had become more and more abstract.

“He’s a detainee under interrogation, Phil,” Fury shot back. “We need to continue to push him until the stress makes him break. You know the drill.”

“Yes, I know,” Coulson sighed, “but we aren’t getting anything useful at the moment. And, frankly, Loki is starting to look a little worse for wear. He could use a rest.”
Fury crossed his arms haughtily, obscuring the logo on the S.H.I.E.L.D. t-shirt that Phil had loaned him; the apparel made him look comically normal. “I’m going to have to disagree with you on that point, Director.” He emphasized the word as if Phil needed reminding. In fact, he had not encouraged the use of the term in reference to himself as it still seemed incredibly awkward, even when the former director wasn’t staring him in the face. “We likely have less than forty-eight hours remaining until we have our butts handed to us by an intergalactic war machine, so I don’t think that that cold-blooded murderer downstairs has earned any mercy from us. Actually, I think he needs to work a little harder in order to earn all the generosity we’ve shown him.” Nick was becoming more and more caustic as he continued to speak. He rummaged through the top few layers of intel and tossed each page aside in disgust as he skimmed it. “I don’t think he’s actually been giving us anything of value here, Phil. For example, he names one of the potential threats as ‘Galactus: the Eater of Worlds?’” he read cynically from the paper in his hand. “Come on, now! He’s making all of this up!” He tossed the page toward Coulson where it landed flatly before him like a reprimand.

“As soon as Agent Romanov comes back, I am going to have her start working on the Lilin again,” Phil stated in his defense. “He can likely corroborate the information that Loki has given us. I also think we could use Blackout to bring in this ‘Kaal’ character -- he has to be a key piece of the puzzle. If we can tease out the material that is pertinent, I think we can get some benefit out of this data if we act quickly enough.”

“Okay,” Fury acquiesced. “Let’s suppose that some of what Loki’s feeding us does have a grain of truth to it. Did he happen to mention what he did with the Tesseract once he took it from Asgard?”

“He stated . . .” Phil replied as he rifled through the relevant stack of paper, “‘I sold it to an interested party.’ When asked if he knew for what purpose that party might want to obtain it, he answered, ‘It was business. I did not ask directly.’ Pressed further, he stated, ‘He said that he was going to use it to lure a traitor to his doom.’ He was unable to elaborate beyond that.”

“Well, personally, I feel comforted by that idea,” Fury countered sarcastically. “If Thanos doesn’t have the Tesseract, then I’m glad it’s safe in the hands of someone who is putting it to good use.” He cupped his face in his hands briefly and then dragged his palms down his cheeks in a gesture of exasperation. “I’m going to get some rest, and then I’m going to prepare to kick some serious extraterrestrial ass. Until that time, my phone will be off,” he emphasized as he left the room.

After his former boss had departed, Agent/Director Coulson sat unmoving for several minutes, his weary eyes surveying the mass of written material before him hopelessly. All the pieces were here -- the Raft audio, the transcript of Blackout’s interrogation, the video taken from Stark’s camera during the prison riot -- and surely together the bits had to form a clearer picture. He was just too taxed right now to even begin to analyze it, he realized; his eyes burned from three very restless and nearly sleep-free nights, and his vision was clouded and unfocused. Still, they were running desperately short on time so he continued to search the scraps of facts in vain, wrestling the overpowering urge to slumber.

Eventually, he loaded up the grainy footage from the Raft on his office computer, scanning the visuals perfunctorily but allowing his mind to dwell indirectly on other thoughts. When the playback reached the moment where the lights were extinguished save for the enigmatic blue glow, Coulson leaned in to view the picture more closely; however, he could tell no more about it than he ever could. Then Natasha’s words replayed in his head, ‘That blue light . . . it never went out, even when everything else went dark.’ It must have an extraordinary energy about it, he realized, so it was likely extraterrestrial in origin. A big blue ball of alien energy. Blue energy -- extraordinary power -- blue energy from outer space -- enough energy to shatter the walls of the Raft, perhaps? He queued up the surveillance video from outside the prison, and let it play, as
“What am I missing?” he pleaded to the otherwise empty room. The solution suddenly felt so tantalizing close, and his heart increased its rate in anticipation. Then the words he had read to Nick Fury seemed to stare at him from the desk where he had placed them. ‘. . . an interested party . . . he was going to use it to lure a traitor to his doom . . .’ At that moment, Phil looked up at the screen which was displaying the image of Kaal being ferried up to the entrance of the undersea prison. Once again, Romanov’s words came back to him: ‘They took over a prison just to bring in a prisoner?’ And not just any prisoner at that, but one who was not likely to be easily contained. One who wasn’t contained, in fact -- he had escaped, leaving the others to die, although Blackout and the two others had somehow survived. He had left Blackout to die. There was certainly no love lost between the two of them, between Kaal and Blackout . . .

‘. . . to lure a traitor to his doom . . .’

Suddenly, it was if several pieces had slotted themselves into place, revealing a hint of the image which lay beneath.

*.**.

The Lilin was discourteously awakened by the sound of a bare fist on the thick metal door of his cell. The intruder did not wait for a response; instead, the entrance opened abruptly, and a middle-aged man with a receding hairline and an unassuming face stepped brashly in. He was dressed in a dark suit, but his tie hung loosely about his neck so his appearance was weary -- rumpled, even -- as if he had recently experienced a series of very short nights. He walked brusquely over to where Blackout was still lying limply in his bunk, though he did have the wisdom to stop before he was within arm’s reach of the prisoner. The demon could see that his breath was coming in sharp gasps, indicating that he had made some haste to get here.

“Can you . . . disappear or . . . or project your image . . . in any way?” the man wheezed between heaving breaths.

“No,” Blackout stated blearily.

“Good,” replied the man, who then produced a rather large, menacing weapon from behind his back. “Then let me . . . make some very direct requests,” he continued while levelling the barrel at the inmate’s head. “I have some questions I need answered,” he puffed, “and you . . . you are going to give me some immediate and very honest responses.”

At the sight of the weapon, Blackout sat up promptly and seemed instantly more alert. He raised his hands warily in order to indicate his cooperation, but he did not display any obvious fear. “You seem quite sincere, Agent . . .?” he said, pausing for the man to fill in the appropriate response.

“No,” Blackout stated blearily.

“Good,” replied the man, who then produced a rather large, menacing weapon from behind his back. “Then let me . . . make some very direct requests,” he continued while levelling the barrel at the inmate’s head. “I have some questions I need answered,” he puffed, “and you . . . you are going to give me some immediate and very honest responses.”

At the sight of the weapon, Blackout sat up promptly and seemed instantly more alert. He raised his hands warily in order to indicate his cooperation, but he did not display any obvious fear. “You seem quite sincere, Agent . . .?” he said, pausing for the man to fill in the appropriate response.

“One of the pallid beings hands remained elevated, but the other indicated the single chair opposite his bunk. “Please, Director,” the demon invited placidly, “Have a seat, and I will tell you whatever you want to know.”.

“I prefer to stand,” Coulson retorted. “And this isn’t a social visit, if that’s what you’re thinking. The planet you are sitting upon is about to be the target of a rather devastating alien offensive, and I am estimating the time we have left in hours. Therefore . . .” He ratcheted back a mechanism
located to the right of the barrel, and the hardware seemed to whir to life. “I get to make the requests, and you get to oblige me.”

“A fair accord, under the circumstances,” the Lilin hesitantly proffered. “I wonder, however . . .” he continued, a knowing smile still playing upon his lips, “Do you actually know how to use that rather sizeable piece of equipment? That seems to be a very severe-looking firearm for someone in an administrative position.” He raised a suspicious eyebrow as he tried to read the armed man’s demeanor, his muscles tensing as if he would advance at the first sign of vulnerability.

“Well, let’s put it this way,” said the human without so much as a flinch, “I used the last version of this little beauty to put a god through a reinforced wall. This one has a few upgrades, but, overall, I think I should be able to manage.” His hand on the barrel of the weapon was steady, and his face austere. “So, are we done playing ‘call my bluff’ now?”

The pale man furrowed his brow as if in concession, but he did not verbally respond.

“Okay, first question,” the agent stated in a neutral tone, “Was the Tesseract present at the Raft during the attempted prison break?”

There was a flash of astonishment in the demon’s eyes, but he was otherwise stoic. “Yes,” came the curt reply.

“Did it cause the implosion?”

The Lilin smiled wryly. “Indirectly so, but, yes.”

“And where is it now?”

The ghostly figure folded his arms and stared back at the agent incredulously. “I truly do not know what you mean.” The hefty firearm suddenly lit up, a glow showing through various translucent panels on its surface, and the sound it was making became higher in pitch. Blackout raised his hands again, elevating them slightly more this time in order to cement his cooperation. “I’m not trying to be coy, Director,” he assured him, “I’m simply wondering why you are asking me what you must surely already know.”

“How do you mean?” Coulson said, lowering the business end of the weapon only slightly.

“You know that Kaal escaped.”

There was no reaction from the suit-clad man.

“And he took the Cube with him. After he used it to destroy the entire facility and eliminate its inhabitants, of course. Well, more or less, anyway.”

The agent merely stared back, his visage unreadable.

“Do you need a moment?” Blackout prodded him sarcastically. “Because I can just read a book or something for a while--”

“Kaal has the Tesseract,” Phil stated plainly, his face expressionless. When he recovered from his realization, he continued. “Who gave it to you?” His tone became demanding again, and he aimed the gun squarely back at the inmate.

“No one gave it to me directly. It was a gift to all of those who were incarcerated.”
“From whom?”

“I don’t know.”

Coulson’s finger settled on the trigger mechanism.

“Alright, alright!” the Lilin exclaimed, his hands moving to shield his head involuntarily. “From our Masters. They are the ones who direct us.”

There was a long silence, during which Phil began to tap his foot in exasperation. “Do you think there is any chance I won’t ask about their identities? Could we move this along, please?”

“I can’t tell you because I don’t know,” the demon hissed. “Their identities were not revealed to us. They simply sent messages throughout the prison networks, promising freedom and revolution. They delivered on that promise.”

“Hardly,” Coulson scoffed. “Most of you are dead, the facility is destroyed -- and they gave you the Tesseract to lure in the maniac who caused it.”

“Death can be a freedom of its own,” the demon said cryptically.

“That sounds like a canned expression,” the agent observed. “Sounds like a line someone would feed you if they didn’t value your life very much.”

“Its something we used to say on Algorant, when the suffering became unbearable.” The Lilin continued to hold Coulson’s gaze in a predatory fashion. “And, by the way, Kaal wasn’t lured to the Raft because of the Tesseract. I invited him.” It was plain from the leering grin on his lips that this was meant sardonically.

“I’m sorry?”

The demon laughed to himself as if he alone was in on the humor of his words. “The Cube was gifted to us by the Masters, who sought me out specifically. They told the prisoners that I would know someone who could use it, and so they put out the word throughout the prisons on this planet in order to find me. I told them about Kaal, and then they brought him to me.”

Phil’s face drooped as he mulled over this fresh information. It certainly did not fit seamlessly with his working theory that these ‘Masters’ (one or all of them actually being Blackout himself) had used the object to lure Kaal to the Raft in order to eliminate him. He let his grip on the weapon slacken and framed his chin with a thumb and forefinger. A new premise was forming in his quickly churning mind. “Did you ever meet any of these Masters in the flesh?” he queried, his words soft and reflective.

“No,” Blackout stated. “I spoke only with their emissary.”

“Hmm,” the human speculated. “If I showed you someone, could you identify whether or not he was the emissary you spoke with?”

“I am certain,” the Lilin assured him. “His is not a face you forget.”

Although Coulson badly wanted to challenge the meaning of this statement, he knew their time was limited, and there was one way to confirm his speculation instantaneously.

“Get up,” Phil demanded, the weapon once again pointed at the demon. “We’re going for a walk.”
Thor lingered uncertainly at the entrance to his brother’s holding cell. He had been promised that their interaction would remain as private as the conditions of Loki’s incarceration would permit, but he was still pacing an imaginary groove into the institutional tile in front of the door, postponing their inevitable encounter in a manner he knew was blatantly childish. He clenched and unclenched his hands, his palms damp with perspiration, and his head swimming with every possible outcome of the impending scenario, none of which were particularly appealing. After about fifteen minutes of agonizing indecision, the blonde warrior shook his head in self-deprecation, eventually allowing himself to breach the interior of his brother’s involuntary living quarters.

The lighting was dimmed, possibly implying that the slighter Asgardian was attempting to rest, but Thor could not abandon what he had already had to prepare himself so deliberately to begin. He could see in the half-light that Loki was lying atop the covers on the simple cot he had been provided, his lean frame facing away from the entrance. This simple pose spoke volumes to Thor: ordinarily his brother would always sleep with his front towards the entrance to a room in case any danger were to present itself. However, he must have known that he was about to have an unwelcome (and non-threatening) visitor in order to have consciously turned away from the door. The elder god faltered there at the entryway, now painfully unsure of how he had intended to start this particular conversation. He nudged the handleless door behind him until it closed with a soft click, and yet the sound still echoed sharply through the small, quiet chamber.

He remained motionless for a few moments longer in anticipation of some reaction to the intrusive noise, but he received none. The continued stillness caused the burden of communication to remain squarely with him, and thus he continued to stand on this one spot, rocking his weight back and forth between his feet. There was only the sound of his own nervous breathing, and he trapped the breath in his lungs for a few seconds in order to sense if there were any other sounds at all in the limited space. There had to be air exchanges, at least, but these were surprisingly noiseless. The only whisper was the faint intake and exhalation of the other man’s breath, which was confirmed by its synchronization with the slight rise and fall of his torso. Perhaps his brother was dozing, after all.

Just when Thor had convinced himself that it would be best to come back later, a voice taunted him from across the gloom: “Are you going to say something, Thor, or are you simply going to stand there gawking at me?” The tone was both testy and listless . . . a combination that was fundamentally Loki.

“Very well.” As soon as the words were out, he knew he had nothing with which to follow them. There was another sticky bout of silence which was finally broken by the other being.

“What do you want, Thor?” These words were spoken very meticulously, with an irritable emphasis on the name at the end.

Surprisingly, the elder sibling responded with a silent laugh. It was really that simple, was it not? He had come here completely unsure of what he was going to say to his brother because he was not at all certain of what he was hoping to get out of this exchange. What did he want from Loki, ultimately? An expression of remorse? Any hint of the brother he had known before? Or,
conversely, was he here to sift through the other man’s psyche for some confirmation that the sibling he had lost to madness was truly, irrevocably destroyed? No, he was here for all those reasons and yet none of them at the same time. He was here because it always led to this place -- the confrontation before the chaos, the encounter where the rules were laid out before they met again in the throes of war.

“I came to see how you are faring,” Thor spoke, keeping his tone as neutral as he could manage. It was not completely untrue, and yet it was far from encompassing the entirety of his purpose.

Loki snorted at the sentiment. “You can see how I am faring on any one of a dozen monitors outside of this cell,” he said snidely. “In fact, you could have graphic details of my daily activities far beyond what you would be comfortable in knowing. So, I ask you again, dear brother -- why have you come?”

“I needed to see you.” The thought flew so plainly from his own lips that Thor knew it must be true. “To be sure that they are treating you well,” he finished without guile.

Suddenly, Loki sat upright, though his front was still pointed away from his guest. This new position allowed Thor to glimpse his weary sibling’s reflection in the unusual glass which demarcated him from the rest of the world, although the view was somewhat obscured by the lack of light. “I’m fine,” he sighed unemotionally. “I am fed and clothed and unharmed. Now, please go.” The request was so feeble that it was barely audible, and the younger being remained perched on the edge of the cot with his shoulders slumped and his back arched as if his body had been taxed beyond its limits.

“I’m sorry, brother, but I cannot,” Thor replied gently. “I need to see you -- truly see you. I cannot assess your well-being if you will not even deign to face me.”

Loki’s lean frame shook with muted laughter, but its manner was not jovial. “I owe you nothing,” he spat bitterly, and then immediately buried his head in hands. The ridges of his spine were visible through the thin cloth of the uniform he wore, and Thor tried too late to stifle the surprised intake of breath that followed this revelation . . .

His brother was physically wasting away.

It was undeniable: from the loathsome greying of his skin to the hollowing of the cavities around his eyes, Loki was waning. Although the rate of his decline seemed gradual at the moment, the realization wracked the warrior with a series of emotions, each too rapid and intense to ponder individually. The result was an overwhelming array of guilt, rage, despair, indignation, and uneasy satisfaction, a blend of impressions which left him struggling with each inhalation.

When he was able to draw even breaths again, the blonde man continued. “I think you owe me much, in truth,” Thor said, trying to keep his tone gentle. He settled onto a bench which sat adjacent to the bed and alongside a small metal table, presumably there to provide a surface for eating.

“Is that why you are here?” the black-haired god asked haughtily. “To inform me of my obligations to you?” He pivoted on the thin mattress until he was facing the other man, although his head remained bowed. He seemed to study his long, elegant fingers as they interlaced, locking and unlocking in a restless manner that Thor recognized from their youth.

“No,” the elder sibling replied. “I came to be certain that you were well cared for. That is all. Now look at me, brother.” When there was no verbal or physical response, he added, “Please.”
Willfully, the younger Asgardian lifted his chin so that his face was dimly visible in the dim light of the chamber. “Now you see me, brother,” he said, using words from their recent past as flagrant mockery. “Now, leave me be,” he added sharply.

Thor crossed over to his brother’s bedside and knelt before him, his large hand grasping the other by the chin and using his grip to maneuver his face from side to side in order to study it more carefully. There were no traces of healing bruises or scrapes -- only the signs of internal decay that he had already anticipated.

“Satisfied?” Loki baited him angrily as he wrenched his chin away from Thor’s hold.

The elder sibling just shook his head wearily in response, mouthing the word ‘no,’ but finding no breath to bring voice to his denial. A mist of tears began to dwell in his eyes, and he turned away quickly in the hope that his cunning sibling had not perceived his weakness. Again words from their recent past, specifically from their confrontation on the skiff in Svartalfheim, replayed in his mind: ‘Satisfaction is not in my nature . . . ‘

‘Surrender’s not in mine.’

Loki clicked his tongue bitterly. “You pity me, don’t you?” he accused his brother.

“No.” It was a weak dissent.

“Then why are you crying?” This reply was rife with disgust; it was so like Loki to feel vilified by another’s sympathy.

Thor merely shook his head again without allowing the younger man to see his eyes.

“Why?” Loki demanded again, and Thor was struck by his ability to make such a small word seem so venomous.

“Because you are fading!” The words fell from his lips without forethought, the volume hurting his own ears in the uneasy stillness. When he recovered his composure, he continued more calmly. “Because I cannot bear to watch you die,” he finished feebly. “After all you have done to those I love -- and what you’ve tried to do to me -- I still cannot endure watching the little brother I have cared for all those years waste away.”

The look Thor received in return was one of surprise that melded into condescension. “But I thought you told me in the dungeons that he no longer existed?” The first hint of a disdainful cackle played upon his lips.

“Do not misunderstand me, brother,” the elder man answered somberly. “I do not believe that man still lives. It is just unfortunate that you share his face.”

These words left the room draped in several seconds of chilling silence.

“Our that so?” Loki’s eventual reply sounded grievously wounded, but the hurt soon dissolved into bare anger. “Are you so certain that he ever lived as you remember him? As an impotent companion to your exploits -- a ubiquitous sycophant who was tolerated but never welcome? Or do you think perhaps that I have been here all along, smiling to your face but shortling at you behind your back?” He suddenly rose from his sitting position, staring down at his brother with a threatening expression which seemed molded from a foreign flesh, his eyes flashing with wicked spite. The resulting facade was shocking even to Thor who knew him so well: he looked wild and cruel, ready to rain murderous wrath upon any who dared to lay hands upon him, and his chest heaved with desperate breaths. “Should I tell you of all the nights I lay awake, made restless from
the thought of how insignificant I was whenever I was beside you -- the Mighty Thor?” He crept
closer to the blonde man who was still sitting, mesmerized by the change in the other man. “How I
didn’t even exist when you were around -- to mother, to father, to anyone?” His hands formed
trembling claws as he drew them to his chest, his neck extending towards Thor so that every sinew
was clearly visible. “How I prayed for your death because I did not have the strength to bring about
my own?” This confession seemed to surprise Loki himself, and he suddenly drew back somewhat
in quiet consideration of what he had just divulged. He turned his back to the other man slowly,
shaking his head as he moved. “But none of this matters any longer,” he sighed, all trace of anger
diffusing as he did so.

Thor found himself rigid, unable to respond in any form to the startling display he had just
witnessed: Loki had gone from a bizarre, enraged caricature of himself back to a more reserved,
almost pitiful figure in the course of a few moments. The blonde man weighed this eerie
manifestation in his mind for a short time before responding. “Forgive me, brother,” he said softly,
his tone firm. “I did not know that you had struggled so.” He had made every effort to not sound
judgmental, but in doing so, he may have bordered on patronizing.

Again, Loki shook his head plaintively. “It matters not,” he whispered drily. “You have already
made it clear that I am dead to you.” This sentiment sounded ominously flat. “I surmise that I can
hardly blame you for your verdict.”

“Do you think me so unfeeling?” the Thunder god replied. “That I would see you suffer beneath
the weight of your own self-loathing as repayment for my own grievances?”

There was no reaction.

“I would have you be well again . . . or at least reasonable!” Thor pleaded in an attempt to fill the
wounding silence. “I would have you work with those on Midgard who might be able to help you
sort out your misguided thoughts and live as you once did . . . “ He suddenly trailed off, his
features bending into a look of abject horror at what he had revealed.

“What did you say?”

The elder sibling tried to cover his disclosure. “I was merely saying that I am resigned to your fate,
but that I wish things had turned out better for you . . . “

Loki had twisted towards him again, his face a guise of sated ridicule. “I might have known!” he
hissed, his lips curving in a prescient smirk. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Thor tried to make his face expressionless in a vain attempt to deflect his brother’s attention.

“The ‘rehabilitation’ plan? You put that senseless mortal up to it, didn’t you?”

The blonde man shrugged helplessly.

Loki curled his index finger alongside his mouth and grinned wickedly. "So you haven’t fully
given up on me, then, have you?”

Before Thor could address this accusation, the overhead lights brightened abruptly to full
illumination, nearly blinding the pair of Asgardians and causing them to shield their eyes hastily.
There was some scrabbling and shuffling outside the ingress to Loki’s chambers, and then the door
opened awkwardly. The bulkier man stood protectively in front of his brother in a centuries-old
reflex, while a pale, slender figure entered, the brilliant light nearly camouflaging the newcomer.
He stepped forward stiffly, and a second individual followed, this one dressed in a contrasting
black suit. When Thor recognized the second man, he began to beam, but his enthusiasm quickly faded when he saw the hefty weapon that was prodding the pallid man in the back. The elder Asgardian could sense that Loki was trying to move out from behind the shelter of his bulky frame, and he used an arm to nudge his curious sibling back into the lee of his form. Thor then heard the sound of a resentful huff coming from behind him, but he chose to ignore it for the moment.

“My friend, what is the meaning of this intrusion?” the larger man boomed.

“I’m sorry, Thor, but I need to test a hunch, and it needs to be done immediately,” Phil Coulson responded, never wavering in his intimidation of the hostage with the barrel of the tremendous gun. “I need you to step aside for just a moment.”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that, Son of Coul,” the warrior answered with conviction.

At the sound of this name, Loki made a decisive lunge to move around Thor’s left shoulder, but he found himself once again shoved roughly back to his original position. “That is impossible,” he heard his brother murmur into his ear. “I killed Coulson myself.”

“Or so you believed, Thor muttered back. “For a time, we both believed it.” Then, he spoke insistently back at the agent, “I cannot stand aside and allow you to threaten my brother with a weapon. He is your prisoner, and there are principles which must be adhered to in such situations.”

“The gun is not for him, I promise you,” Coulson answered candidly. “It’s to keep this one in line. He is not here of his own free will.” He motioned to Blackout, who was glaring at his captor with obvious malice.

“Do I have your word on this? You know that I would be forced to defend my brother if you do not honor your vow, and I would not be able to guarantee your safety under those circumstances,” the Thunder god challenged.


Thor still hesitated, bound by a natural inclination to protect his kin; this sense was not eased when he looked over the strange, colorless creature that the agent had compelled to enter. He had sharp, silverish spikes implanted in his fingertips and unnerving eyes which were as red as flame. As Thor surveyed him, the pale man grinned coldly, revealing that his teeth were as pointed and metallic as his claws. Despite his instincts, the blonde man knew he had every reason to trust a man as level-headed as Coulson had proven himself to be, and so, begrudgingly, he nodded his consent.

Phil poked the barrel into the prisoner’s back. “When my friend here moves away, I need you to tell me if this man is the envoy you spoke with at the Raft -- the one that the Masters sent to you.” He felt acid rising in his throat, and his hands slipped wetly around the weapon he held. This risk just had to be fruitful -- he was running out of options, out of time, and out of the patience to process all of the above.

And, therefore, he was not all prepared to handle what happened next.

The bulky Asgardian stepped aside, revealing the being at his back in what felt like slow-motion. There stood Loki as predicted, his bearing poised and tranquil, still dressed in his grim prison uniform and with a crown of stringy, ebony locks enwreathing his sallow visage. However, when the eyes of the two captives locked, the tension in the room increased exponentially. Blackout instantly hunched down into a defensive stance, his face painted with naked contempt and baring his teeth at the other man in a natural display of aggression. He then made a resounding noise not unlike a hiss, although it ended in what was more like a savage growl, and every muscle contracted
as if he would spring for the other man’s throat at any moment. Oddly, Loki merely stood with crossed arms, calmly assessing the situation that was unfolding before him as if it were beyond his care. Although the agent did note that he was resting on the balls of his feet in case he had to move swiftly, presumably in case of attack.

“So, you recognize him, then?” Phil asserted, digging the gun into the Lilin’s back to remind him that he was still under surveillance. “This is the envoy?” Loki’s eyes looked completely black in the brilliant lights of the cell, and he smiled at the question as if he knew how infuriated the answer would be.

“The envoy?” Blackout scoffed. “This is not the one the Masters sent to me, you imbecile! How long have you held him here, just feet from my door? Did you not have the nerve to tell me that you had captured this fiend?”

Thor interjected, though obviously confused. “What do you mean? How do you know Loki?”

The younger god’s grin widened at these words, but he remained silent.

“I do not know any ‘Loki,’ the demon spat. “To me, that monster bears another name!” He pointed to the raven-haired man with recrimination. “That is Kaal!”

This proclamation nearly caused Coulson to drop the sizeable weapon entirely. “Say again?” he requested carefully, his features numb with disbelief.

“He is Kaal!” the Lilin reiterated, the volume of his voice rising with his ire.

“What do you mean? How do you know Loki?”

The younger god’s grin widened at these words, but he remained silent.

“I do not know any ‘Loki,’ the demon spat. “To me, that monster bears another name!” He pointed to the raven-haired man with recrimination. “That is Kaal!”

This proclamation nearly caused Coulson to drop the sizeable weapon entirely. “Say again?” he requested carefully, his features numb with disbelief.

“He is Kaal!” the Lilin reiterated, the volume of his voice rising with his ire.

Are you sure about that?” Phil asked weakly, his voice breaking slightly under the weight of this revelation.

“I know his face undeniably. I could not be more certain.”

Phil lowered the business end of the weapon and brought his hand to his jaw. He did not speak for several seconds as he stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I truly was not expecting this,” he murmured as if to himself. “I’m not quite sure what to do now, honestly.”

“I think you should return this . . . person to his cell,” Thor said, indicating the Lilin. “I imagine you have much to discuss with my brother.”

“Would you mind, Thor?” Coulson responded somewhat pleadingly. “Could you take him back for me? I just need a moment to process all of this.”

“You would have me leave you alone with Loki?” the god replied. He waited patiently for the agent to ponder the meaning of his words.

“No, I suppose not,” Phil chuckled half-heartedly. “That would be . . . weird, I guess. And possibly dangerous.” He placed a hand to his ear. “This is Coulson. I need two agents in here to escort Blackout back to the detention section immediately.” In mere seconds, two S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives entered and led the demon out, one clutching each bloodless arm.

“This is not over,” Blackout assured them all as he was dragged defiantly away. “I know that you are here, now, you murderous devil!” he called out to Loki as the agents forced him through the exit. “We shall meet again, I promise you that!”

“Oh, I do not doubt it,” Loki stated coldly. Throughout the confrontation, he had remained alert but unruffled, responding to the man’s accusations with neither words nor actions. Now that his
adversary had departed, he appeared almost amused with the whole encounter, his posture relaxed and a smirk dancing upon his distracted lips.

“Do you find this entertaining, brother?” Thor chastised him.

“Yes, actually, I do.”

“I do not pretend to understand the entirety of what just happened here,” the blonde man confessed, “but I realize enough to know that you are that creature’s enemy.” He glanced over to where Phil was leaning against the wall of the chamber, whispering idly to himself. “Coulson asked me if I had heard of ‘Kaal’ when all of this began, and he did not describe this person in the kindest of ways. ‘Crazy,’ I believe he called him -- and ‘deadly.’ And now that pale fellow has added -- ‘murderous,’ I believe it was.” He shook his head suddenly. “Actually, I suppose I should have guessed that it was you all along, shouldn’t I?”

This sentiment appeared to finally rile the younger god, who dealt his elder sibling a look of pure hatred. “You don’t know what I’ve suffered,” Loki shot back, his tone raw. “I will not have you judge me by the words of a traitorous worm! You cannot conceive of how he has betrayed me, and he has earned every penance that I will wring from the flesh of that merciless demon before I have finished with him!” Suddenly, he seemed to become acutely aware of how loud his voice had become in the limited space, and how his venomous timbre reflected the monster that he was alleged to be. “You don’t know, Thor,” he said more quietly. “You cannot ever know.” He knotted a hand in his disheveled hair and bowed his head, not in defeat but in prostration.

“They don’t want to know,” Thor gently entreated him. He approached the raven-haired man and attempted to rest a hand on his shoulder. Loki violently shrugged him off.

“That is not what I meant, Thor!” he seethed. He sat down roughly on his cot and turned his back on the remaining two men. “I mean that I would never have you know what has been done to me.” These words were soft but direct.

“He’s right, you know.”

Thor jumped somewhat at the sudden dialogue from the agent, who had been speaking only to himself for the past few minutes. He now turned to Coulson in deference to his opinion.

“You really don’t want to know,” Phil added sadly.
“Clint?” Natasha asked gently, nudging his shoulder lightly when he did not respond. “Can you hear me?” she asked, more firmly this time. The man rolled over subconsciously, but his eyes were very much closed and his breathing was slow and even; the sedative he had been given when he was placed in this diminutive detention cell was obviously doing more than its duty. She sighed heavily in frustration and wondered desperately what to do next.

Steve had delivered the sleeping aid to her as promised, but she had not taken it. She sat restlessly on the edge of the bed in Barton’s holding cell and turned the prescription bottle over and over again in her hand, considering it thoroughly. For the briefest of moments, she actually counted the number of pills it contained and wondered if it would be enough, should the Earth come under attack and there was no other option except surrender . . . ? It was a ludicrous line of thought. She could not abandon her friends -- let alone all the helpless others -- to spare herself whatever torments might inevitably surface. So she remained there, wasting precious minutes just handling the orange plastic container with the label that bore her name, and the name of the medication, and the name of the person who had prescribed it.

R. Bruce Banner.

Of course, this couldn’t be the same Bruce Banner whom she had roped into working for the Avengers Initiative, or could it? He had been a doctor, once -- a nuclear physicist -- and yet he had been working as an unlicensed physician in Calcutta when she was sent to extend S.H.I.E.L.D.’s invitation of employment to him, so perhaps the lack of a following ‘M.D.’ designation was telling. Was it even possible that they had offered him the opportunity to continue his off-the-books medical practice at the agency? He was a brilliant mind who could likely practice any profession he set himself to, regardless of a formal degree, and it wouldn’t make much sense for the organization to allow him to take his talents elsewhere. Such an arrangement might not fulfill his philanthropic needs, but then who knows what kind of medical skills might be needed for some of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s more clandestine ventures?

Still, it probably didn’t make sense for her to hunt down someone else when so much remained in the balance. She should be spending time with the ones with whom she wasclosest and whose presence meant the most to her. However, there was really only one person who fit that description, and he was currently sleeping off a rather sizeable tranquilizer. Surely she could steal away for a few moments to exchange a few sentiments with a friend? If that is what she could truly call a man who conveyed such gentle wisdom and yet had wrecked the belly of a military-style aircraft trying to get his ridiculously enormous hands on her. And what if he had succeeded? Natasha paused as she was preparing to turn the knob on the exit door, shivering with the idea of what it would feel like to be pressed between those mammoth fingers.

A sharp rapping sound roused her from her imaginings. Through the 8” x 8” observation window in the doorframe, Romanov could see the unassuming salt-and-pepper curls of the man she had just decided it was too risky to seek out. There was a moment where she considered trying to pretend that she was not present, but the point was made moot when she heard him gently speak her name from the other side of the door.

“Natasha?” he inquired almost meekly as he tapped gently again at the entrance.
She opened the entryway partition carefully so as not to surprise him with the movement. “Yes, Bruce?” she replied. It was no use pretending she wasn’t here; he obviously already knew that she had come to see Barton.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” he professed, his manner sheepish. “It’s just . . . I knew you were here.” He indicated the medication bottle still balanced in her fingertips. “I suppose you’ve already noticed that, huh?”

Natasha nodded without reply.

“How is he?” He nodded to indicate Barton, and his compassionate tone made her easily fall into a more trusting demeanor. Truly, it was impossible to not like Bruce and his modest, everyman style of conversation. What the female agent responded even more strongly to, however, was his biting wit -- he had a quick tongue that was a product of both his infallible intellect and the emotional aftermath of the cruel turns his life had taken. It was a combination she could appreciate on both an observational and a personal level.

“He is currently tranqued to within an inch of his life.”

“And how are you?” the scientist delicately challenged her.

“I am envious of him, Bruce. Really, really envious.”

His reactive chuckle was genial. “So I gather you didn’t take what I prescribed for you?”

She shook her head, this small gesture weighing heavily on her remaining stamina.

“Steve said you had mentioned not wanting to spend the last few hours the Earth had remaining being asleep. I take it that has something to do with the urgent summons I received asking me to come down to the main strategy room in about twenty minutes?” Banner raised his eyebrows as a cue for her to give him a preview of what would be inevitably revealed to him, but Natasha simply shook her head again in defeat.

“I’m sorry, Bruce, but I’m just too tired to even discuss it. Wait -- I haven’t received any summons,” she grumbled, insulted.

“I’m sure you will. They’re probably just trying to respect your time with Barton,” Bruce surmised.

She stepped out into the hallway to test this theory; almost instantly, a voice in her earpiece asked her to be present in ‘Strategy Room A at 1100’. Dr. Banner gave her a knowing look and a menial smile.

“Walk and talk?” he suggested.

She indicated a vague, weary agreement and began to head off towards the conference area.

“So, no hints about what I might be walking into?” Banner prodded.

The act of moving her fatigued muscles was actually causing her limbs to rejuvenate somewhat. “I have no doubt that it will be the details of an interplanetary ‘hail Mary,’” she conceded. “That’s about as much as I can manage with the brain capacity I have left.” Natasha surveyed Banner’s face carefully and determined that he was handling the news of an extraterrestrial threat rather admirably. She then stopped briefly at a nearby water station to fill a cone-shaped cup that she half-sipped and then splashed the remaining half onto her numb cheeks. “So, Bruce,” she asked
after a yawn that she was certain she felt all the way down to her toes, “Are you like the employee health nurse here now?” It wasn’t the least bit eloquent, but she was quickly losing the battle with her body’s sleep requirement.

“Not exactly,” he replied, slightly reticent. “I was offered a position practicing medicine for the agency, and they made it worth my while compensation-wise. I’m allowed to use the company’s facilities to do research, and I receive all the downtime I could ever ask for.”

“And you do -- what, exactly?” she pressed further. The fact that he seemed reluctant to discuss it was only increasing her fractious mood; she really did not feel like prying information out of people right now.

“I, uh . . . “ Bruce rubbed the back of his neck apprehensively. “I am charged with maintaining the health of the agency’s . . . incarcerated acquisitions.”

“Prisoners,” she stated, folding her arms with amusement. “You do physicals for prisoners?” Suddenly, this admission made absolute sense even to her overtaxed mind. “You work at the Vault, don’t you?”

“And the Raft,” he shrugged. “At least until recently.”

Of course, she realized: not just any medical professional would be able to go into a place like that and expect to come out alive. With his reputation for spontaneous mayhem and destruction, no one was going to cross Bruce Banner, especially not in such a confined space.

Yet, though the logic of the arrangement made a great deal of sense from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s perspective, it did not fully compute from the other end. “And whose idea was this exactly?” she probed, the fatigue in every nerve-ending overriding her already meager social skills.

“Well, it was S.H.I.E.L.D.’s, initially,” he admitted, “But . . .” Banner’s eyes flitted amongst their surroundings, looking everywhere except at her. It was a good thing that he had such an intimidating alter-ego, Natasha thought, because he would not last long among those who wanted to take advantage of his openly readable personality.

“But . . . ?” she prompted him, her tone sounding more than a little vexed.

He looked at her from under his eyebrows hesitantly. “Stark was the one who really encouraged me to take it,” he finished with a conciliatory shrug.

She grinned back at him slyly. “So you are Stark’s inside man,” she goaded. “And I suppose he convinced you to plant the camera at the Raft?”

Bruce did not answer, but he looked up and away with a telling bob of his head.

They began walking again, knowing that they still had several minutes journey to reach their destination. “It’s really not like you’re probably thinking,” he continued after they had travelled dozens of feet in silence.

“You don’t have to justify anything to me, Bruce, believe me,” she sighed. “I certainly don’t ask others to validate my actions.”

“No, it’s not validation that I want,” he responded thoughtfully. “It’s just . . . I think someone should know why. Because it started off as a favor to Stark, but it became so much more than that.” His voice trailed off, and the look in his eyes said that mentally he was very much in another place, likely reliving some of the moments he was about to confess to her. “It’s not that I am really
attached to the prisoners. At least, not most of them, although there are one or two who I would nearly count as friends at this point.” He laughed at the ridiculous nature of this fact. “But in reality, it was more about discovery for me. So many of these -- beings, I suppose I should call them, because many of them are not human -- are really in emotional pain. Most of them have spent their lives serving the will of others, and they have been manipulated and mistreated. Hell, the majority of them have been tortured into doing what they’re told when they’re told. So many of them are just -- broken, I guess you would say. Lost, maybe is a better word.”

“And you’ve been trying to fix them?” Natasha asked.

He shook his head balefully. “No,” he replied softly, still not meeting her eyes. “These creatures truly are monsters, and there is no bringing them back in most cases. But I feel like they still deserve some sympathy, as well as proper medical treatment while they are in custody. We should at least treat them better than the ones who made them what they are.”

“Oh, Bruce,” she chuckled. “You are such a softie. Leave it to you to be nice to the worst type of people.”

He looked at his shoes diffidently. “I just know what it’s like to be a monster,” he breathed. “I guess I find it difficult to condemn others for the ugly parts of themselves. I just can’t seem to damn them totally.”

This sentiment made Natasha stop in her tracks. Maybe it was the sheer exhaustion, but she had never wanted to hug someone as much as she did Bruce Banner at that very moment. They were likely only hours away from a horrendous war they would almost certainly lose, and she was moved nearly to tears by this simple conviction, that even those who are beyond redemption are worthy of love. Why was the truth always so simple, and yet it always became complicated by a thousand other intricacies, born of one’s own pride and grief?

*Oh, what the hell.*

She threw her arms around his neck, squeezing abruptly, and then releasing him just as swiftly. Bruce seemed taken aback, but the lines around his eyes softened with quiet affection.

“So it’s that bad, huh?”

“What?” she said, hoping that he had not seen the glassy wetness of her eyes.

“You don’t expect to survive this, do you?” he inquired. He produced a handkerchief from his back pocket and extended it towards her.

She declined the offer with a shake of her head. “I really don’t know, Bruce,” she conceded. “I really don’t know.”

*****

The briefing began promptly at eleven according to the clock in the strategy room. There were over fifty agents in attendance, and approximately two-thirds of these were from S.W.O.R.D., judging by their mode of dress. Nevertheless, the briefing was taking place in a S.H.I.E.L.D. facility -- their logo was, in fact, displayed prominently on the large screen at the head of the room -- and so it was obvious that Coulson still intended them to be very much involved in what was to come. Agent Henry Gyrich was present at the head of the room along with two other severe-looking S.W.O.R.D. operatives, dressed in their requisite sleek blue uniforms with close-cropped
military-style haircuts. He thanked them all for being present today, and then began the
information session with little prelude.

Just as the pictures of several alien-looking beings were projected onto the screen, Tony Stark
drifted in with a laughably oversized mug of coffee and made his way down the aisle to the third
row, sucking loudly on the thin wooden stirrer he was using to mix his beverage. He sat next to
Natasha and nodded amiably to Bruce. He was dressed in a silver-grey suit with a white button-
down shirt and tie. Typically, he had on a pair of ostentatious dark sunglasses, as well.

“What did I miss?” he said too loudly. “Did Greenwich take attendance?”

Romanov rolled her heavy eyes in his direction. “Where’s Coulson?” she asked, ignoring his
sarcasm.

Tony shrugged. “I was told that he was working on processing some last minute intel. I guess he’s
not going to make it.” When he realized that Agent Gyrich had stopped the briefing to glare at him,
Stark sat up straighter and produced a notepad and pen from his breast pocket, handing his
pretentiously sized coffee to Banner to hold as he did so. “Please go on, Henry,” he said with a
mocking affectation. “This is really fascinating stuff.”

“As I was saying,” Gyrich continued haughtily, “we have an asset in custody who is providing us
with intelligence regarding who our intergalactic enemies might be. Unfortunately, the information
is nearly impossible to cross-check, and the asset is not exactly the kind of guy whose words you
trust at face value.” Less than a dozen people in the room chuckled at this remark, betraying that
precious few of those present truly knew the identity of the captive informant. “If he is being
truthful with us, then this is what we are all about to confront.” He motioned to the images which
were almost disturbingly vast on the wall behind his head.

Henry clicked a button on the control device in his hand, and one of the pictures on the screen was
brought forward. It showed a 3D computer rendering of a severe-looking, square-jawed alien
being whose mauve face was lined with deep, vertical grooves. “Thanos of Titan,” Gyrich stated
coldly. “This is the general of the forces with which we will be faced. He has soldiers who keep
his prisons, mainly the Badoons.” Another picture came to the fore, this time of a long-limbed,
reptilian creature. “And then there are also those who make up the majority of his standing armies
and who man his outposts, the Skrulls.” This image was more rudimentary, showing that it was
probably rushed in order to be finished in time for the briefing. It showed a green, pointy-eared
creature with a grooved chin, again with reptilian features. “Besides being formidable fighters, the
Skrulls have the ability to shapeshift, and they can move among the enemy without detection.”

It was difficult to ignore how quiet and somber the room had become. “As if that were not
enough,” the senior agent went on, “Thanos has spent years gathering warriors from many other
alien races, breaking their bodies and their minds until they are nothing but deranged, bloodthirsty
killing machines. Therefore, they could have any number of abilities that we cannot prepare for in
the time frame that we have been provided.”

The absolute stillness of the crowd was palpable.

“Within the next 36 hours, S.W.O.R.D. intends to send a landing party composed of our most elite
operatives to Titan in order to meet this overwhelming threat head on.” As Gyrich spoke these
words, the crowd began to murmur amongst themselves, but the general gist of the babbling was
difficult to discern through the sheer volume of conversation.

“This is unbelievable,” Stark infused into the melee. “S.W.O.R.D. is planning on launching an
offensive which will encompass at least one extraterrestrial world, and they’re not even inviting
us!” He reclaimed his beverage from the physicist to his right and proceeded to chug a mouthful of it indignantly. “We saved this little blue ball once, and I would bet my fortune we could do it again!”

Tony nudged Natasha when he noticed that she had not responded to any of Gyrich’s revelations. She was snoring softly.

“Perhaps we should let her rest,” Banner offered. “She seems completely done in.”

“Normally, I would agree with you, my angry green friend, but there is way too much at stake for her to catch some beauty sleep here.” Stark pressed roughly at her shoulder again.

*Deep within her slumber, Agent Romanov was dreaming of a dark, ominous planet, and Barton was standing there before her. “Don’t you see?” he exclaimed desperately. “Can’t you see what he has shown me?” The frenzied tone of his voice gutted her from the inside out. “These horrors are all I can see!” Her eyes followed his fingers to where they were directing her. Before she could discern what he was trying to point out to her, a gnarled hand grasped her arm, and she turned to her assailant only to find a faceless shadow that hissed in her ear, “You should not be here!”*

“Natasha!” Clint screamed, his face twisting in agony. “Wake up!”

“Natasha!” she heard again, this time in a hoarse whisper. “Wake up!” She could still feel the pressure of a grasp upon her upper arm; she tried to shrug it off, but it held firm, shaking her somewhat ungently. As her eyelids parted, she was met first with the harsh glow of fluorescent lights and then the smirking profile of Tony Stark. “Hey sleepyhead,” he murmured. “I’m sorry to have to wake you, but you’re missing the presentation, and I need someone to share my resentment at not having been invited to storm the moon of a distant planet with five of my closest frenemies, because Banner, here, is just not living up to my expectations.”

Romanov glanced drowsily from one man to the other as she tried to regain full consciousness. “Wha--” she trailed off indolently.

“He’s lying, of course,” Bruce said with an impish smile. “I’m being righteously indignant, and he knows it.”

The noise of dozens of voices around her in frenetic conversation washed over Natasha as she took in her surroundings. The melee continued for about another minute before Gyrich could be heard, straining to be understood above the cacophony: “Please! Please! Let’s stay on task!” This instruction caused the banter to slowly subside. When the talk was down to a manageable level, he spoke again. “Those in this room have been chosen to be qualified for various parts of this mission. Volunteers to lead the landing party will be accepted following the meeting, and screening will commence immediately thereafter. Those who will be needed for specialized tasks during the operation will be contacted with specific instructions within the next six hours. Thank you for your attention.” The agent then strode stiffly through the back exit to the room.

“That was it?” Banner asked with confusion.

“You should have let me sleep,” the female agent groused sluggishly.

Stark sat silently for several seconds, massaging his chin in deep thought. “Not acceptable,” he said finally.

“How so?” Bruce asked. His question seemed innocently curious and not a challenge.
“We as a species do not even possess a current reliable means of interplanetary travel. I have no expectation that we are going to master this skill in the next 24 to 48 hours,” Tony said quickly, with a tone that was all business.

“What’s your plan?” Natasha asked as she rubbed her temples absently.

“Do either of you know where I can find Thor?” Stark retorted.

Neither of his companions responded.

“Well, then I’m going to find him,” Tony stated confidently. He stood up dauntlessly and downed the last of his coffee, finishing with an overdone “Aaaaah!” He then descended the stairs to the front of the lecture hall and paused before the display screen, which still exhibited the faces of the alien threat they were going to oppose. “Hmmph,” he exclaimed loud enough for the remaining occupants of the chamber to easily hear. He then strutted purposefully out the door immediately opposite that through which Agent Gyrich had just disappeared.

“Heaven help the enemy,” Bruce quipped. “What do you think he’s up to?” he asked as a follow-up question.

That was the moment when Natasha received a dire request in her earpiece: “Agent Romanov, we need you to return to the detention area right away,” urged a female voice.

“What’s going on?” Natasha asked in response, still too groggy to process the request.

“Agent Barton is awake now,” said the woman into her ear with hesitation. “He’s . . . well, he’s freaking out, ma’am.”

“I’m on my way!”

Black Widow stood up and rushed out of the rear exit before Bruce could ask for any details. He followed the fast-moving shock of red hair, nearly increasing his gait to a run at times just to catch up with her and then keep pace.

“Natasha, what’s happening?” Bruce asked breathlessly as they hurried down the halls and around corners. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“It’s Clint,” she replied, her speed never wavering. “He’s woken up, and he’s agitated.”

“That happens sometimes when people are sedated,” Bruce replied. “When they come out, they get a little confused and sometimes even violent. It’s normal, if that’s any consolation.” As they rounded the next bend, he nearly collided with a tall slender male agent who was carrying a stack of file folders. “Sorry . . . so sorry,” he said quickly as he continued to move at an accelerated speed to keep up with his companion.

“Natasha, wait!” he finally called out as she was reaching for the keypad to the holding area, catching her hand just an inch from the controls. “There’s something else you need to know before you go in there.” The female agent raised her eyebrow but said nothing.

“I’ve been assigned to evaluate Barton since the incident in Manhattan,” he confessed. “Since Loki took control of him,” Banner clarified.

Natasha crooked an eyebrow but did not speak.
“And he has been unstable,” he continued.

The red-haired agent nodded but remained mute.

“He sees things.”

“What kinds of things?” she finally vocalized.

Bruce ran a hand back through his curls absently. “Horrible things,” he revealed to her. “Physical torments, as if people -- well, things really -- are torturing him in the most grisly ways imaginable.” Banner smiled uncomfortably. “The images always show him a dark place . . . some other world, he says. The pain in his eyes when it happens -- it’s just pure anguish, Natasha! And it’s becoming more frequent.” The distress on his face showed that he had clearly shared some of that suffering by just having to watch Clint endure these mental persecutions.

(‘Don’t you see?’ she recalled with a shudder.)

“Why is he seeing these things?” she asked indignantly. “Is it Loki? Is he not finished with him yet?” She could feel the rage and the instinct to protect someone she loved so fiercely begin to well in her gut.

“I don’t know,” Banner admitted with a weak shake of his head. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

Suddenly, she could hear Clint’s voice crying out from behind the door: “Stop it! Get away from me! Please, I’m begging you! Leave me alone!” The words sounded progressively more desperate.

“What are they doing to him?” Natasha exclaimed, tears of empathy and exhaustion welling in her eyes.

“Look,” Bruce urged her. He pointed at the observation window.

Cautiously, she peeked through the transparent pane. She could see the contorted figure of Agent Barton perched on his bunk, pressing his body frantically into the corner. “Stop!” he screamed, clutching his chest in agony. “Please, stop!”

There was no one else in the room.

Her hands flew up to cover her mouth. “Oh my god,” she said finally. “What is happening to him?”

“It’s getting worse,” Bruce whispered. “Just like I told you.”
Thor was surprisingly composed regarding the details which had been presented to him. Coulson had played him the video of Blackout’s narrative from the planet of Algorant -- unedited, because the Asgardian had insisted -- and it had taken close to five hours to show it in its entirety. During this time, Phil was in-and-out of the private viewing room, and he was even able to catch a well-needed nap at one point. Thor did not speak during the footage (and had, in fact, hardly moved), while one of his large fingers rested thoughtfully on the crook of his chin. Phil had made an attempt to end the playback at the point where Blackout stopped speaking about the prison planet and was reeled back into more typical interrogation by Romanov, but Thor had held up a hand in silent protest. He sat attentively through the remainder of the conversation, during which the demon withdrew his cooperation when it was revealed to him that Kaal had escaped. As the recording ended, Thor continued to sit absolutely motionless, the changing of the screen from darkness at the end of the video to the fading in of the generic S.H.I.E.L.D. computer desktop reflected in his clouded and yet expertly-focused eyes.

A full three minutes later, when Thor had still not spoken, Phil opted to break the silence in order to be certain that the other man was still capable of meaningful thought. “So . . . that’s what we know about ‘Kaal,’” he said generically. He then waited awkwardly for the blonde man to stand. Or speak. Or move. Or do anything. “Uh, Thor?” No response. “I’m going to need you to vacate the viewing area, please -- busy day and all that. Lots of important planet-saving stuff going on.”

Still nothing.

Don’t make me do this, Phil subconsciously begged. ‘Touchy-feely’ Director Coulson is still in beta-testing. The much smaller man knelt just behind Thor’s theater-style seat and placed his hand on the warrior’s impossibly broad shoulder. “I realize that this is all a bit much right now -- believe me, I really, really do -- but I have to get back to work. In fact,” Coulson added with as much grace as he could manage in his overtaxed state, “I missed a rather important briefing about an hour ago, I now realize. I really can’t afford to be absent when so much depends upon so few resources. You understand, right?”

Silence. And possibly a twitch of that finger resting beneath his lower lip.

Just as the senior agent was mentally preparing to have to turn on the ‘extensive empathy mixed with further comforting-but-tasteful gestures of physical contact’ strategy, the Asgardian finally spoke:

“I wish to see it again.”
What followed may have been the longest sigh of Phil Coulson’s life. “Look . . .” he replied, all of his manners and formal etiquette dying with the last of his patience, “I can appreciate what you must be feeling . . .”

“Can you?” came Thor’s reply, his manner chillingly flat. He still had moved nothing other than his lips in response to the agent’s verbal prodding.

“Well, actually, no . . . I really have no idea whatsoever.” Phil leaned against the seat at his back, covering his face with his palm in exasperation. “But I can’t simply leave you in here with a piece of intel that relates to the fate of the planet . . .” As his words trailed off, Coulson’s features suddenly reflected a polar shift in his thinking. “Actually, why the hell not?” he conceded rhetorically. “It’s not like all the protocols didn’t technically go out the window when I declared a Level Nine. Thor, my friend,” he said, tapping the muscular being on his shoulder with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, “Let me leave you to it.” He crossed over to the control console and restarted the footage.

“I met Kaal on the prison planet of Algorant . . .” came Blackout’s voice from the audio track as Coulson closed the door firmly in his wake. He then pressed his back to its surface and exhaled sharply. “Okay, Director, what’s next?” he challenged himself aloud, “S.W.O.R.D. is launching their prototype spacecraft with an outnumbered, outgunned landing party in less than 36 hours. How can we help them succeed against impossible odds?” he muttered.

The agency director swiftly ran through the weak points in the current strategy in order to assess where S.H.I.E.L.D. might be able to lend support, but he became clinically depressed long before the part where the operatives actually landed on the distant moon. Would the craft make it to light speed the way it had been designed to (but never tested)? Where would they land? Surely the enemy must have the technology to detect their approach from a significant distance, perhaps even the moment the ship emerged from the planet’s atmosphere. They would obviously be shot down before they could get anywhere near the moon itself.

This plan was unworkable. A disaster, even.

There had to be a better way to approach this threat, there simply had to be. Yet this option meant that he had to come up with another, better plan in even less time, and he was working on about thirty percent of his normal brain capacity. He needed to procure a viable (and virtually undetectable) method of interplanetary travel plus a team of extraordinary human (and/or superhuman) warriors to infiltrate Titan’s defenses, engage Thanos’ forces in a tactically feasible manner, and do so within a span of about twenty-four hours. So, pretty much impossible at this point.

“Phil?” The voice of Melinda May interrupted his fatalistic train of thought. “I’m going to need you in the detention section as soon as possible.”

“I can’t possibly manage another issue right now, Melinda,” he fired back cynically. “There must be someone else who can handle this.”

“Agent Barton is having a psychotic meltdown,” the female agent stated decisively, “And Romanov is too close to this to be able to deal with the situation effectively.”

“So there’s no one else around to supervise?” Coulson asked.

“Well, Banner is here . . .”

“I’m on my way.” Phil ended the transmission and headed toward the holding cells at an
accelerated pace.

*****

‘I recall one day when they had brought in a Kree. He was hulking, fearless, and maniacal, as those of that race who lose their reason often are,’ continued the recorded voice of the Lilin.

Thor heard the door behind him open swiftly and then close again with an abrupt click. He then perceived footsteps approaching, clipped and confident, followed by the weight of a much slighter being situating itself into the seat at his elbow, the hinge mechanism creaking softly as the newcomer settled in.

‘Of course, he thought he was exceedingly lucky to be sharing a cell with only two other beings: one who was thick-headed and too dumb to cause any trouble, and the other who was so delicate and pale . . . and sleeping.’ Blackout’s unsettling chortle filled the enclosed space with a stifling lilt.

“That guy has some serious issues,” Tony jested, smirking gently at his own wit. “You shouldn’t be watching this, you know,” he added without prejudice.

“Hmpf,” Thor responded, otherwise unmoving.

“That is a solid counterargument, my flamboyantly large comrade. However,” Stark challenged him, “Have you considered how repeated viewing of tales in which your brother is tortured, used, and otherwise twisted into an unparalleled minion of evil could be hazardous to your mental health?”

“Mmm,” the Asgardian answered with a small nod.

“I think I can offer you a better use of your time,” Tony proposed.

‘. . . ripped out his throat with his teeth, and when they threw him into solitary, he still had blood and sinew visible between them. By the next revolution of the planet, the whole prison knew that Kaal had claimed another.’

“I need to make contact with a civilization which has mastered interplanetary travel, and I understand that you come from a world that fits those specifications,” the billionaire wheedled him. “Plus, this arrangement allows for you to exact brutal retaliation on the goddamned monster who masterminded all of this suffering.” Tony waved his fingers at the screen to indicate that he was referring to the unpleasant business it was displaying.

“The idea is appealing, I cannot deny it,” Thor confessed, finally releasing the tension in his muscles with a protracted sigh. “Although the priority must be the preservation of your world,” he added, his tone remaining unemotional. Was he trying to convince himself? Tony was unsure, but he was satisfied that the Asgardian was already on board with the plan.

‘One of the most common methods of torment which was used by the guards was simply referred to as “breaking,” so-called because it typically ended in the ripping of tendons and the breaking of bones. The prisoner’s own body weight was used to achieve this.’

When Stark visibly shuddered at the description that the Lilin was relating with such nonchalance,
Thor turned to him with a compassionate stare. “My apologies,” the warrior murmured. “I know this is distressing subject matter.” He finally stood and moved stiffly over to the laptop which was producing the video, and his weary blue eyes surveyed the multitude of lights, keys, and inputs with an inquisitive glance before he jerked the power cord from the side of the machine. When this did not end the playback, he merely closed the lid with one broad finger, the result causing him to grin amusingly with self-satisfaction.

“Come, Tony Stark,” the Asgardian said, his deep voice rough with fatigue. “Let us determine how to save your realm.”

Stark was now standing as well, his smile filling the lower half of his face with uncharacteristic delight. “Agreed, my huge, Thundering friend -- but let’s do this in my quarters. There’s a fully stocked minibar . . . well, overstocked, really. You know, in case we need some additional inspiration.” He then stopped short, his features twisting into a mischievous smirk. “Hmmm . . .” he considered aloud. “This is starting to sound like some misguided college hookup.”

*** *** ***

“Clint! You need to calm down! You’re going to hurt yourself!”

Phil could hear the distraught voice of Natasha Romanov as he rounded the last corner to the detention area. “Please!” she added, her tone turning desperately high at the end. Several loud thuds followed Natasha’s pleas, and Coulson’s gut cramped as he remembered that Banner was present at this unpredictable scene. As he approached Barton’s cell at an urgent jog, he could mercifully see that his concerns were unfounded: Bruce was standing awkwardly outside the enclosure, pacing anxiously but otherwise looking . . . well, human, which was comforting.

“How can I help?” Coulson asked breathlessly as he neared the edgy scientist.

Bruce shrugged. “Natasha and Agent May have him physically contained, but mentally he’s still pretty volatile.” He looked down at his worn leather shoes helplessly, obviously struggling with his need to be useful balanced against his desire not to transform into his terrifying counterpart.

“Okay,” Phil huffed, “I’m going in.”

Banner stepped timidly aside, his countenance still screwed up into a conflicted guise. “Be careful,” he said ominously to the agent as he passed within inches of him.

“Noted,” Phil acknowledged.

He took a deep, grounding breath and then entered the chamber beyond, immediately stepping into complete pandemonium. May was standing behind Agent Barton, pinning his arms at his back, one leg balanced between his to leverage her weight in keeping him restrained. Natasha was in front, gripping his shoulders and shaking him frantically at irregular intervals, begging him to hear her and to come back to his senses. Clint, however, was staring at her wildly, eyes wide and teeth gritted in a pained grimace as he thrashed about like a caged beast, focusing on a point somewhere beyond her and yelling accusingly at whatever he saw there.

“Let me go!” he wailed. “Don’t -- please don’t! I can’t take it anymore! Pleaaase!”

With all the commotion in the room, neither woman was aware that Phil was standing so near, and he reached out in a calculated movement with both arms, framing Barton’s face solidly with his hands. “Agent Barton,” he said, his words resolute but not loud. “Listen to me.”
“Please!” Clint yelled. “Stop! You’re killing me!”

“Agent Barton, what you’re seeing . . . it’s not real,” Coulson continued, his face so close to the other man’s that their foreheads nearly touched. At this distance, Barton had no choice but to focus on the man before him -- and his voice. “You are seeing things which are not happening to you. You are having hallucinations.”

All three of the persons restraining the man could feel his muscles stiffen abruptly.

“I need to know what it is that you see,” Phil went on, his tone just as placid but intent as it had been. “Tell me what you see, Clint.”

The bound man jerked again suddenly, causing Natasha to lose her grip, and she stepped back to regain her nerve. Barton then let out an ungodly howl which filled the confined space completely, the volume and the horror of it seeming to come back to the others from every corner of the narrow room.

“Tell me what you see!” Coulson demanded again, this time more forcefully. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you. Natasha is here,” he said as he reached back for her hand. She slipped it gently into Phil’s grasp, and he guided it to rest on the captive man’s upper arm. As she made contact with him, Clint’s arms went slack in Agent May’s grip. Phil nodded at her from over the heaving man’s shoulder, and she released that arm, which then tenuously sought out Natasha’s hand, the fingers interlacing and tightening until the digits of both were white with tension. “You know she would never let anyone hurt you,” Phil assured him.

Barton’s lip quivered with the need to sob, born of both fear and relief.

“Just tell me, “ Phil said even more softly. “What are you seeing right now?”

“Darkness . . . it’s so dim here I can hardly see ,” Clint choked, his eyes still round and distant. “But they are lurking all around me, creatures . . . they look like lizards. Their arms are long and scaly, and they’re laughing at me as they close in.” The panic began to rise in his voice and his muscles tensed again. “They grab me -- I fight them off for a while, but there are too many -- they overpower me. They’re holding me down! They pry my jaw open so wide that it cracks, and the pain is unbearable!”

“Listen to me, Clint,” Phil tried again, sensing the man’s impending hysteria. “It’s not real . . . it’s not. You are here with Natasha and I, and you are safe, understand? Safe.” His grip on the struggling man’s cheeks hardened slightly. “Keep going. Tell me what they are doing now.”

“They are forcing something down my throat -- something foul -- but I have to drink it or I’ll choke . . . I feel like I’m going to drown. They won’t stop to let me breathe! My lungs hurt so badly -- there’s so much pain! It burns and I’m dying -- I’m dying!”

“You’re not,” Coulson murmured. “You are here with us.”

“They’re stopping,” Barton continued between desperate breaths. “They’re letting me go.” His voice conveyed a decrease in his anxiety, but he still sounded utterly broken. Then, without warning, his jaw went slack and his brow creased in bewilderment.

“What is it?” Phil coaxed him. “What is happening now?”

“Laughing . . . “ Clint wheezed in disbelief. “I’m laughing! I stare them down and laugh at them . . . and I just can’t stop!”
Director Coulson and Agent May exchanged a puzzled look as they watched the once unflappable agent dissolve into a raving imbecile. “Bruce?” Phil asked loudly, his eyes still locked on May’s. “I’m going to need another dose of sedative in here ASAP!”

“They’re speaking to me,” Clint muttered weakly, his lips bending into a macabre sneer. “You are such a crazy bastard, Kaal!” he choked out, his voice mutating into a much deeper, animalistic register. “It’s almost a shame to have to kill you.” The strange inflection then faded out, and Barton began to laugh, his chest convulsing with each deranged shriek. Tears formed in his eyes and ran freely down his cheeks, and he sobbed in a cruel combination of laughter and despair.

“Did he say ‘Kaal?’” Natasha gasped from behind Coulson.

At this moment, Bruce Banner rushed in with a syringe full of translucent yellow liquid, which he jammed roughly into Barton’s thigh. Clint stiffened but continued his unsettling laughter for several minutes before his motions began to grow sluggish and his limbs relaxed.

Natasha untangled her fingers from Barton’s and massaged the circulation back into her aching digits. “Kaal,” she repeated, seeking out her boss’s eyes with an accusatory glower.

“It’s what I was afraid of,” Phil sighed. “He’s seeing someone else’s memories.”

Agent May eased Barton’s slackening form back onto the bunk, and glared at Phil sharply -- a look which demanded an explanation. However, it was Romanov who offered the solution. “You mean Kaal’s memories? From Algorant?” she asked directly.

“I’m afraid so.”

“But how?” the two women asked in near unison.

“Well, that is a much stranger story than you might think,” Coulson admitted.

“I doubt it could be stranger than what we just witnessed,” May reminded him.

Natasha had settled at Barton’s bedside and was gently stroking his dampened brow, but he was no longer responding. “Why do I feel like this involves Loki somehow?” she huffed.

*Score one for female intuition*, Coulson thought. “You’re right,” he replied, “but it’s even weirder than you might imagine.”

“How so?” the redhead shot back testily. “Are Kaal and Loki conspiring with one another?” Her words were tinged with the vengeance she was already plotting against the pair of villains -- all she needed was the confirmation.

“In a manner of speaking,” the senior agent answered cryptically.

“Just tell me what you mean,” Natasha growled, her hands forming subconsciously into fists, “so I can start working on killing them both.”

“I think that if you give me a minute to explain,” he boasted, “I can reduce your workload by half.”

**.***.**
As a member of a dominant, intergalactic race, Loki rarely felt insignificant. Yet here, with the lucent points of a million stars laid out before him and accompanied by such an ancient, overwhelming being, it was difficult not to feel at least a bit daunted. True, he and this sizeable creature did share a similar backstory -- abandoned by their native races, left alone to die, and then rescued by unlikely deliverers-- but this unsettling leviathan had four millennia on him. Plus he stood a good head-and-a-half taller, as well. It was enough to make someone like him feel . . . well, small, actually, which was unnerving.

And young, too. Which was somewhat refreshing.

It was also an undeniable boost to his ego to have someone this powerful looking to him for direction, Loki acknowledged silently. Whatever he had done to convince this impressively powerful being to follow him on such a fool’s errand, it must have been remarkable. He only hoped that when the culmination of all of his efforts came, he could replicate all that persuasive charm; he would need every ounce of enchantment in his already eroding frame to see all of this through to fruition. This line of thinking brought to mind an amusing memory, and he chuckled softly with the faint mirth that it brought him.

“Why are you laughing, sorcerer?” The sound of the age-old entity’s voice was oppressive, the tone so deep and intrusive that it rumbled outwards from his body like a wave. It had taken several conversations before the Asgardian had grown somewhat accustomed to the effect.

“I was remembering something that my brother and I had once seen on Midgard,” he smirked. “It was in the town of Venezia during a festival called ‘Carnevale.’ It was maybe mid 1600s if my memory serves me.” He shook his head wistfully. “There was a man there who could spin plates atop the ends of poles, some on the ground, some balanced on different parts of his body -- he could do ten or more at one time.”

“That sounds tedious,” the older being stated. He continued to gaze out at the star-dappled view before them, the great looming orb of Saturn dominating the heavens and the hazy outline of Jupiter suspended beyond it.

“It was fascinating, actually. The trick was that the plates had to stay in constant motion or they would topple from the poles. He had to be perpetually in motion to make it work -- it seemed that if he stopped to think even for a second that the trick would fail.”

The larger being remained unimpressed. “And why do you find this humorous, Asgardian?”

Loki raised a finger to his pursed lips, an impish glint still dancing in his eyes. “It’s not so much the trick,” he mused, “as it is the association.”

The hulking man crooked a leery eyebrow but said nothing.

The pair sustained their surveillance of the sky surrounding this moon (on which only one of them truly stood), each momentarily absorbed in his own doubts. After a long moment, the slighter man proceeded with his line of thought. “The real trick, of course, would be if he had made the audience believe that there were plates -- when in fact he had been spinning cups all along,” Loki pondered aloud.

“I grow weary of your riddles, sorcerer,” the large man said with force but no malice. “Tell me what you require of me.”

The raven-haired man considered the request, his features smooth. “Well, Nur,” he replied at last, “I require time.”
“Time?” the mutant defied him. “I have the gift of manipulating many of the forces of the universe, my friend, but time is not one of those.”

“You misunderstand me, Nur,” Loki teased him. “The humans are not yet prepared to mount an offensive, which means that we need to postpone the Titan’s efforts for a while longer.”

The ghost of a smile hovered upon Nur’s blue lips, and the line of similarly colored tissue that extended from his mouth to nearly his ears flexed cruelly with the gesture, making it all the more disturbing. Loki’s mettle wavered for a fleeting instant -- but only just.

“I will buy you time, Asgardian,” the ancient one agreed with a spiteful grin. “So long as there are no more tedious missions to high security prisons in my future.”

“You will have to forgive the necessity of sending you on such base errands,” Loki said placatingly. “Had I gone myself, I would have been instantly detected by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s facial recognition capabilities due to my earlier . . . involvements. I hope you understand.” This admission wounded the sorcerer, but he managed to keep the emotional damage mostly confined. It was a fact that his last mission for Thanos had not been a success, and the result left him humiliatingly subdued by the enemy -- and later by his own ‘family,’ such as they were. Well, some were more family than others, but one serious mental trauma at a time, please.

“Aye,” Nur assented. “And yet I still question the wisdom of risking so much to smoke out one minor offender when others have damaged you far more grievously.”

Loki’s lips twisted into a playful smirk. “All shall be revealed in time, En Sabah Nur,” he teased. “What I need from you now is your patience and your resolve.”

“And you shall have both in abundance,” the mutant rumbled, “so long as you honor our agreement.”

“Hmmm,” Loki hummed non-specifically. He directed his gaze back out over the vast space beyond them, feeling even smaller than he already had. “First, I must honor my word to the Mad Titan,” he asserted.

“And what promises have you made to him that you intend to keep?” Nur asked incredulously.

“There were several, actually. First, that I would deliver him the Tesseract. Secondly, that I would eliminate his competitors, leaving him the undisputed power in the known universe. And finally, that I would deliver to him those who might secretly oppose him so that they might be eliminated as well.”

Nur’s rolling laughter could be heard resounding off of every surface of the room. “Those are some elaborate promises, my little mage!” he chuckled vociferously.

“Yes, they are,” Loki concurred with an idle grin. “And I intend to deliver on each and every one.”
Part V: Acceptance Ch 1

--- Part V: ---

Acceptance

Familiarity with evil breeds not contempt but acceptance.

-- Roy Hattersley

---

“If you’re wondering why I’m here, it’s because I came to kill you.”

Loki sat cross-legged in the center of his sparse cell, his features a mask of perfect concentration. He was facing away from her, but Natasha could still see his placid reflection very clearly upon the barrier which separated them from the control area, the image made more discernible by the difference in light levels between the two chambers. His upper lip curled at one corner to indicate some passing amusement, but he was otherwise utterly still as he continued to focus upon whatever intense ruminations were occupying his cunning mind. “If that is true, Agent Romanov, then I have to wonder why you would lead off this conversation by warning me,” he said eventually, as he unfolded his legs and stretched his arms above his head.

“Because I’ve changed my mind,” she stated haughtily. “I’ve opted to put the fate of the entire planet before my personal grudges.”

“And what ‘personal grudges’ are you holding against me now, Natasha?” Loki taunted her, although his thoughts seemed distracted by other matters. He sat down properly on the edge of his cot, his long legs splaying out before him like the forelimbs of an enormous spider. “I have hardly been at liberty to cause you offense,” he added while gesturing to his confining surroundings.

“You have done more than you know.” Natasha declared flatly. Her glare was pure calculated contempt, and she took the chair across from him with an affronted huff. “Or maybe you do know, and you are counting on your captors to protect you.”

The sorcerer laughed almost genially then, and he leaned forward with his hands resting tightly on his thighs. “Are you implying that I need protection from you?” he mocked, his eyes igniting with impetuous fire. “Let’s not border on the absurd, my dear Natasha,” he warned, his voice dropping into a sinister register. “Although, I am rather curious as to what precisely my transgression has been that has made you hate me so deeply.”

“What have you done to Agent Barton?” she seethed, the words tumbling out reflexively and with more enmity than she intended. Extremes in emotion only lead to vulnerability, she knew, and there were lives -- and minds -- on the line right now.
Curiously, Loki seemed intrigued by this accusation, and he sat silently, seeming to consider all the possible ramifications of her words with dizzying agility. At the end of his examination, he managed a peculiar smirk. “The last time you showed such obvious concern for Barton, you were placing the life of your confidante above those of your colleagues. Of course, most of that was merely for show -- but I feel as if you are more sincere with your intentions this time,” he teased, “based upon their spontaneity.”

“Wow,” she countered, shaking her head reprehensively, “you really are an arrogant prick, aren’t you? I didn’t come here to banter about my weaknesses, and I sure as hell didn’t come here to listen to you dazzle me with your fabulous vocabulary.” Loki remained unshaken during this attack, his face still showing the familiar signs of his physical atrophy but his demeanor staying serene. “I came here to find out why Agent Barton keeps seeing visions of the tortures you endured on Algorant!”

This revelation stopped the Asgardian cold, his face slackening with a blend of surprise and indignance. The change was fleeting --barely even a second, really -- but it was enough for the female agent to sense his weakness. In fact, for that transient moment, he looked deceptively young -- lost, perhaps -- but then the mask fitted back into place with practiced ease as the instant passed, his eyes glassy and unreadable once more. “Are you playing with me, Agent Romanov?” he murmured wickedly, his tone so very cold that she felt a twist in her stomach.

“He doesn’t know, her instincts told her. *He isn’t causing it . . . not purposely, anyway.*

“I am absolutely serious,” she countered quickly so that he had no room to doubt her.

Loki stood and turned away from her; he was obviously unnerved if he would turn his back on a potential enemy, she guessed. Still, this being was a master of deception, she vehemently reminded herself, and so she needed to remain vigilant. He pressed a long, slender finger to his lips in consideration, and she was once again struck by how slight he seemed now that he had been stripped of his layers of leather and metal. “You wish to know why he sees these things?” he said softly, as if he were posing the question to himself.

“Yes,” was her simple reply.

“The scepter . . . “ he began stiltedly, thinking through the answer aloud. “It allowed me to see into Barton’s mind, to take control of it -- but also to see his memories and gather information.” The finger began to rub absently at the line of his lips in a gesture of deep consideration. “When you see into one’s mind, it is never a one-sided action, so he could also, presumably, see into mine, however briefly. He has somehow been able to store what he found there . . . and it’s seeping back out in a manner which is beyond his control.” This solution seemed to satisfy him in some way, and yet he was still quite troubled judging by his mannerisms.

“Can you reverse it?” Natasha queried him, attempting to keep her bearing formal in light of his presumed cooperation.

“Perhaps,” Loki replied, and yet his tone was anything but hopeful.

There was a long pocket of silence between the pair of them, and each was enveloped by his or her own thoughts as the tension between them thickened. “What does he see exactly?” the taller being finally asked sanguinely.


“And his suffering was enough to cause you to confront me again?” he mused, his demeanor
undulating back to contempt. “You are quite courageous indeed to come into my chambers alone on such a selfless mission.” This statement seethed derision.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she retorted.

“Really? And why is that?”

“Because I have nothing to lose,” she proclaimed, defiant.

“Oh, I do not think that is true,” the Asgardian hummed threateningly. “If you did not fear for what you might lose, then you would not be here at all.”

She sat wordlessly, carefully considering the whole mass of this statement. It was useless to deny that she was here to save Clint -- if not just his life, then also his mind -- and it was all playing out in a mockery of that infamous scene from her past. She was bested, unable to deny the affection for the other man that was her weakness, and thereby losing whatever clandestine advantage she might have wielded when she came into this perilous encounter. Still, at this point she was too overwrought to even care. “It’s true,” she admitted wearily, her dominant hand running over her forehead and raking through her hair. “Once again, my entire civilization is facing extinction, and I am channeling all my energy toward trying to save Clint,” she chuckled darkly. This confession actually lightened the hostility in the room; for a brief instance, she could almost imagine the unlikely pair of them, Loki and the secret agent with the darkest of pasts, sharing a friendly drink and commiserating over their losses. “So, tell me then,” she said, “what is this going to do to him? I mean, he’s already on the verge of madness, but if you can’t stop it, then what?”

“I cannot say,” Loki replied, his eyes still dark with the endless thoughts that were churning behind them. At least he had the decency to display some level of condolence despite his preoccupation with whatever misdeeds were brewing in his damaged mind, she thought gruffly. She stood up with a growl, her limbs tensing with the need to hit or punch or choke something, anything . . . or anyone.

“I know what living these images has done to me,” he continued in a tone which was more stern than appeasing. “I cannot begin to extrapolate what it might do to such . . . “ He paused, presumably to search for a non-offensive adjective. “. . . delicate creatures as yourselves.” Well, it was a valiant effort, nevertheless. Although the failure did not seem to actually distress him in any way, she noted.

After letting her sit in silent anguish for a minute, he sighed as if giving in to her unspoken demand. “Would you like to know what torments him?” the raven-haired man offered, his exasperation obvious. “Would that satisfy you?”

She gave him a puzzled glare, but she did not reply.

“I could show you,” he clarified with an afflicted exhale. His tone clearly tacked on an inaudible, ‘if that is what it would take for you to leave me be.’

There were several more noiseless moments wherein Natasha turned the proposition over in her head: was he sincere? She had not truly considered sharing Clint’s suffering as an avenue to healing, and it seemed like a dubious solution. But she was so, so curious now that the offer had been extended. Still, this was hardly the best use of her time with so much at stake . . .

“Can you really do that?” she challenged him. “I’m pretty sure that S.H.I.E.L.D. has ways of keeping you from using your magic while you’re in our custody. If you were famous for telling the truth, then I might be taking you a whole lot more seriously right now,” she chided.
Loki’s glare was thoroughly unamused, but he managed a disparaged flick of his right wrist followed by a flourish of his fingers, the result of which left the female agent completely astounded. The transparent wall showing the control room further on was no longer visible, and instead she could see a much larger space, as if the walls of the building had dissolved into nothingness to reveal the land beyond it. The drop of her jaw was more than humiliating, but she was too amazed to contemplate her dignity. She turned to Loki with an impressed tilt of her head and a silent apology that she had doubted him. The Asgardian pressed a finger cheekily to his lips to indicate that she needed to keep this unscrupulous secret to herself.

_Damn, Natasha,_ she scolded herself, _you have stepped in it this time._ There was no graceful way to back out of the venture now, not when she had allowed herself to try and call the bluff of a thousand year old alien with a penchant for games. Well, not without losing some pride, which was perhaps a perfectly viable option in the face of what she was being goaded into doing. If she crossed the boundary between this world and what lay on the other side, would she truly find herself on the surface of Algorant? Had he created some sort of portal which could transport her across space? And, if so, how long would one human woman last in such a place? For all her bravado, she knew that was a deadly wager.

Loki shook his head with amusement. “It’s not real, Agent Romanov,” he told her. “It’s only a projection from the facsimiles in my own mind. However, I assure you that I can render it in a fashion that will seem to you to be reality.”

She knew she should be leaving right now and going straight to Coulson about Loki maintaining his ability to do magic despite their precautions. She cast a wary glance at the camera nearest her, which was projecting the image of everything that was occurring here back to the agents in the next room. If she did this, then she was complicit with his deceptions and could be disciplined as such. At best, it was conspiracy — at worst, treason.

“Let me allay your fears, my lady,” he purred. “My wardens are seeing nothing of what is actually occurring within this cell. They believe that you and I are engaged in an intense but generally civil conversation. There is no cause for them to think anything else.” He smiled at her knowingly from beneath half-lidded eyes.

Everything about this situation was devious. She fully anticipated stepping over the visible boundary between the two images and finding herself marooned on that filthy prison planet, or even in some other ghastly place. So then why was she standing, her limbs settling numbly beneath her, and moving toward the alien landscape? Maybe it was some further trick of Loki’s or just an impairment of her judgment brought on by her sleep deficiency. Yet it was happening, the slow drag of her dumbfounded extremities across the immaculately polished tile and toward the veiled scenery beyond, but before she spanned the division of the two, she heard the sorcerer’s low, resonant voice reassuring her:

“Nothing can harm you there, Natasha,” he murmured. “Just call for me when you are ready to return.”

And with that still uncomfroting sentiment, the world fell away.

---

Natasha tried to focus on anything at all in the dimness, moving her hand close her face and waving
it listlessly before her eyes. She could make out almost nothing of the appendage but its shape, and she could feel a small waft of wind from the movement; otherwise, it remained undetectable. After a couple minutes’ time, her eyes had adjusted as much as they were capable, and yet she could still see no detail. “Loki?” she whispered hopefully. “I don’t have the eyes of an Asgardian, apparently - - I can’t see a thing. I’m going to need more light or this is going to be a completely worthless exercise.”

Almost instantly, the acuity of her sight was increased by a substantial margin. The whole of the scenery remained indistinct, but she could see several feet into the gloom where she could previously see nothing at all. “Thank you,” she mouthed on the off-chance that he would perceive the gesture.

Now that she had at least some very limited vision, she gained her bearings more easily. She could see the tops of a few stone buildings on the edge of her sight line, but the walls were nearly invisible. As she approached the nearest of these, she could vaguely see why: they were positioned inside trenches dug into the ground so that the roofs were all that were visible until you entered the trench itself. The purpose for this design was not readily apparent to her, although it may have been to create a natural wind block since there was an incessant, strong breeze which tugged at her from what seemed like all directions. It was a fetid gale, feeling hot against the bare parts of her skin but at the same time causing a shiver to travel up the nerves of the areas it touched. It also seemed abrasive, as if miniscule grains of matter were being whipped along with it and scratching wherever it touched, and yet when she ran a hand over the surface where it contacted, there was nothing residual.

The agent further hypothesized that the gravity was somewhat greater here as her every movement and footfall, every casual swing of her limbs, felt leaden. However, what hit her full force when she reached the closest embankment was the smell: it was absolutely breathtaking, a physical onslaught of waste and rotting flesh with a hint of what might have been decaying vegetation. When the wind wafted this stench of offal and putrefaction fully in her direction, it began to sting her nostrils and the back of her throat, morphing into a taste which caused her to retch violently and then vomit, not once but twice, down the face of the trench at her feet. As she tried to regain her composure, the smell hit her again, and she put a hand to her mouth, the saliva building with the threat of another round of regurgitation.

‘If it helps,’ Loki’s voice whispered eerily in her head, ‘I can promise you that you will grow accustomed to it eventually.’ She was bent back over now, her hands on her thighs to steady her, and her mane of red locks blocking her view. ‘But only just,’ he tacked on vexingly.

“It doesn’t help at all,” she said aloud, her voice straining over the sound of the unrelenting wind. “But thanks!”

She proceeded to descend down the trench wall, but it was an ungraceful undertaking. She lost her footing several times along the declination, and her hands were scraped bloody trying to claw out a grip on the rough, rocky terrain. At the bottom, she surveyed the damage; it may not have been real, but the blood and ache from the abrasions certainly felt true enough. She paused for just a moment to pray again to whatever celestial beings might be able to hear her that this was only a simulation and that Loki had not brought her to the actual planet as some calculated deception.

The first building that she came to was a dark, low-built structure which was not surrounded by the same fencing that enclosed the approximately two-dozen others in this compound. It was probably a storehouse, or even a guards’ residence, and so she opted to avoid it. The next was more likely to have been for the housing of prisoners as it was surrounded by fencing and had no windows. Oddly, it seemed indistinct, the details almost wavering in the dusky light. Loki had not felt it
necessary to waste his energy fully rendering it, she realized, and so it was likely not important. She passed close to one wall as she skirted the exterior, and so she could vaguely hear the inhabitants within -- some general ruckus and a low, pained moaning coming from behind the barrier.

The next three buildings were much like the first, their edges blurred, signifying that she should pass them by. She did so, but she also made certain not to pass as closely to them as she had the first so as not to detect any of the unpleasantness occurring within. The next structure was clear -- or what passed for clear in all of this near-darkness -- and she approached it cautiously, still not convinced that she was fully protected by Loki’s magic. The aged and rusted gate which served as entry to the small prison yard swung open before she could even begin to ponder how to go about unlocking it. From there, it was less than a dozen steps to the door of the inner holding area itself, and she made it a point to linger in front of the entrance so that the door would not open of its own accord. She needed to ready herself for whatever she might find inside.

After several prolonged (but shallow, considering the ubiquitous stench) breaths, she reached for the door. This time, it did not open by itself, although presumably it should have been locked. She rotated the heavy iron-like handle, the whine of its unkept edges howling like the death throes of a wild animal. She had to lean heavily on the object with all of her weight in order to make the thick metal swing on its hinges, and, when it did, its surrender was so sudden that she all but fell into the interior. She immediately drew in a gasp at how close she was to the inmates surrounding her, with nothing but a line of thin but presumably sturdy bars between herself and the foul-looking creatures they housed. Then, just as suddenly, she deeply regretted the gasp as it drew in air which was nearly twice as putrid as what she could smell outside. This led to another bout of involuntary retching, gagging, and vomiting which lasted several minutes, a cacophony which was completely ignored by the prisoners existing just inches from where she stood.

“They can’t see me,” she stated as she wiped the remnants of her stomach contents from her lips. “Or hear me,” she added, although this had been implied.

‘I told you, Natasha,’ the disembodied voice responded, ‘you are not really there. You are quite safe.’

“Well, forgive me for not believing in you,” she reproached him. “You know, based upon your past behavior, and all.” Her words were muffled as she was smothering her nose in the crook of her elbow to keep the horrible stink at bay.

‘I am fully aware of my reputation, and, I assure you, it is well deserved,’ he replied. ‘Welcome to my former home. I apologize that I did not think to tidy up before you arrived.’

Even though she was convinced now that the others did not detect her presence, she could still feel the adrenaline singing in her veins, every nerve hyperaware of the movements around her and the eyes whose gazes passed through her. She forced herself to study them, though, since this was an opportunity not only to see what Clint had been suffering but also what Loki and Blackout had endured, and this information would make interrogations go more efficiently. The cells themselves were terribly small, with no beds or furniture and merely a hard, bare floor on which to stand or sleep. Each individual compartment contained from four to six prisoners, although not all of them were still moving and, therefore, presumably living. Some of these were in various states of decay, while a few had been chewed upon or possibly dissected for curiosity’s sake -- or perhaps even to pass the time. Who knew what horrible activities passed for entertainment in this place? Those creatures who still lived came from a wide variety of alien races -- some lizard-like, some swine-like, some humanoid, and others which were completely indescribable. They were all of them dishevelled, covered in filth (the nature of which she purposely did not dwell upon), along with an
array of sores, wounds, bruises, rashes, and blatant parasitic infections. Yet, although they were each unique in the pattern of their skin maladies, there was one characteristic which each of them shared: a hungry, desolate glare which both begged for and promised death.

“Can I ask you a serious question?” Romanov inquired, still speaking through the shield of her arm. She did not wait for an answer before she said, “How in the hell did you survive here? I mean, I know Asgardians are tougher and stronger than humans, but this place is beyond gruesome. How did you stand it mentally -- and emotionally?”

Loki’s voice sounded more subdued when she heard it next. ‘I had already endured much before I was banished to this place. I suppose I was already mentally damaged when I came through the door so that must have helped me. Otherwise, it must be attributable to self-preservation . . . the will to survive.’

“Okay, sure,” she conceded skeptically, as she watched two enormous gray aliens baring sharp teeth at one another through the bars; they were facing off for possession of a bodiless arm spotted with numerous cankers. “But how did you regain your sanity once they let you out?”

This question was met with a disdainful laugh. ‘Who says I ever did?’

She should have anticipated such an answer, she realized, but the sentiment still made her shiver -- after all, she was in the center of that madman’s psyche, placing herself at the whims of his poisoned mind. She should probably begin to wrap this up now. “Okay, Loki,” she called, “I think we should end this here for today.”

‘Oh, no -- not yet, my dear,’ he taunted her. ‘You have not even witnessed what you came here to see. Don’t you want to know what your dear friend Barton has been experiencing?’

The answer to that, of course, was yes and no. So very, very much no.

*.***.*

“How is the prisoner?” Agent Gyrich asked in a manner which was every inch a professional one. He had come down to the control room only briefly to check on the Asgardian.

“He’s being interrogated by Agent Romanov at the moment,” stated the female agent who was the ranking officer in the control room. “It appears that everything is going smoothly.”

Gyrich surveyed the wall of monitors which showed Loki’s holding cell from nearly every conceivable angle. He could see the two figures sitting across from one another; both looked strained and engaged in fervent conversation but neither appeared to be escalating the tension in any way. “Have you been monitoring the audio?” the senior agent asked flatly.

“Yes,” the ranking agent answered. “It’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

The two persons in the holding cell continued to speak, their postures mildly heated, but no intensification of the encounter was apparent. However, if anyone who was viewing the exchange at that moment had known Natasha Romanov personally, they would have seen her projected image twist a strand of hair between its fingers in a manner in which the real agent had never done.

Inside the cell, the real body of Agent Romanov was sitting completely motionless opposite the
mirrored posture of her centuries-old chaperon. The lack of movement was broken only occasionally by the moving of the woman’s lips or the smirk which played strangely upon those of the other.

\*\*\*\*\*

‘Just a bit further now,’ Loki urged her. ‘Then you will have the knowledge you seek, and this ordeal will be behind you.’

At the far end of the building, she could hear a door opening with the same tell-tale creak which had come from the one at the entryway. It was impossible to see it from this distance in the half-light, but she moved toward the sound as fast as she could manage against the pull of the higher gravity, emerging thankfully into a bleak and only slightly less smelly open space. She could sense some vague commotion at the center, and she moved toward it purposefully. ‘Let’s get this over with,’ she thought, ‘and then get back to the real world.’

As she approached, she began to discern four to five looming, reptilian beings, their arms slightly elongated. “Badoons,” she recognized. “Prison guards.” Their limbs were moving chaotically in all directions, and every now and then a flash of white was visible within the melee. When she was within a dozen yards, Natasha could hear the signature noises of a struggle, punctuated by an occasional wet choking sound, which was then followed by a desperate sputter.

“You can’t . . . keep . . . fighting like this . . . forever,” the largest Badoon grunted as he grappled with his unseen combatant. “Sooner or later . . .”

*Choke, cough, splutter.*

“. . . you are going to have to . . . start being a . . . good . . . boy . . . “

*Cough, cough, splutter, retch.*

“. . . and stop killing . . . the other prisoners . . . Kaal.”

The female agent was finally at a close enough distance that she could distinguish some of the details of what was occurring. The guards were holding down a pale, slender figure (obviously Loki), but he did not have the messy halo of hair that she had come to anticipate from previous descriptions -- instead, it was slicked back from his forehead, soaked with liquid. The guards were holding him as firmly as they were able, his back arched painfully backwards over a low, table-like structure, and he fought them fiercely as they almost continuously held his head under a stream of running water. His breaths were excruciatingly infrequent, and when he did draw in air, the resulting sound was hoarse and desperate, as if he was barely clinging to life, and yet his extremities continued to punch, kick, and flail like he was possessed by a demon spirit. After watching this torment for an agonizing length of time, the guards finally retracted him from beneath the flow, flipping him onto his front instead with a sickening thud. The lead Badoon then grasped his right arm and twisted it barbarously against the slighter man’s back.

“What is it gonna take, Kaal?” the reptilian beast spat. “How much pain do we have to give you before you learn to play the game, eh?” The Badoon increased the force on Loki’s arm, leaning forward with all of his weight until the bone plainly snapped. This act resulted in such an afflicted howl that Natasha almost rushed forward to the man’s aid before she remembered that it was only
an illusion. “When are you either going to accept either your place in the Titan’s army or your fate here in this prison?”

Loki circled his head around and spat squarely in the guard’s face. This action resulted in a further wrenching of his injured arm and a nauseating crack, followed by the exposure of a shard of bone that pierced through bloodied flesh. This time Loki’s scream was commensurate with his physical agony, but the cry immediately dissolved into deranged laughter. This unexpected result enraged the Badoon, who gripped both of the sorcerer’s wrists in one long-fingered hand and tossed his gaunt form over its shoulder like a sack of dried goods.

“I will break you yet, you filthy creature!” the guard cursed. “Let’s see if some time alone to think about it makes you any more receptive!” Natasha quickly moved to pursue them, but the Badoon’s much longer legs and the burst of energy caused by his anger made keeping pace with the guard and his hostage more difficult than she would have predicted. Thus, he reached his destination several moments before she did, and so -- not seeing the details of where he was being taken until she was practically upon it -- Natasha was unprepared for the cruelty of what she was about to witness.

Romanov saw the creature stop in front of a metallic structure which looked somewhat like a stockade. He swiftly swung his captive’s body around until it was vertical, his enormous hands under the man’s armpits until Loki was hanging limply in the air like a ragdoll, all fight seeming to have left him for the moment, and then the infuriated guard lifted him and brought him roughly down, pushing him back against the structure until his back was flush. This action resulted in a loud, full-mouthed shriek from the sorcerer, and it was instantly succeeded by several more raucous, broken screams which eventually subsided into wounded moans. As the guard moved aside, Natasha could see that the stockade had two pointed hooks protruding from the back, the points curved cruelly upwards like the horns of a bull, and each of these ghastly spikes was now extended through the Asgardian’s chest, emerging just inches below each shoulder. The purpose for this design was obvious: it would make pushing oneself off of the sharp impalements nearly impossible without anything to brace against, the victim’s legs hanging easily two feet from the ground and unable to obtain any traction. A badly broken arm was only likely to complicate matters.

“You can have all the time to yourself that you need, Kaal,” the reptilian beast growled. “We’ll come back for you when you’ve chosen to be more cooperative,” he sneered as he turned to leave.

Natasha stood frozen just a few feet in front of where Loki was dangling. He was completely slack now, his limbs sagging heavily so that the blood from his wounds ran downwards and trickled off his fingers to pool beneath his feet, and the droop of his head causing his inky mane to obscure his face. She took several steps closer, pausing when she was within arm’s reach of his abused body.

“How long did they leave you here?” she asked, her affect nearly emotionless in her disbelief.

‘It’s difficult to say. Time here on Algorant is not measured as it is on your realm, seeing as how there is neither truly a day nor a night. I estimate I remained hanging there for about four of your Earth days.’

Clint had been seeing this from the other side, she realized -- in all of its brutality and free of any context. Small wonder, then, that he was nearly mad. Natasha felt a drop of moisture against her upper lip, and she ran her tongue over it absently. It tasted salty. “And what then?” she prodded him flatly.

The passage of that time then occurred before her eyes, although the only true measure of it was the shifting of sand, the drying of the blood on the barren ground beneath them, and the changes in
Loki’s complexion. After days exposed to the unrelenting winds and with presumably no water, the exposed skin grew raw and abraded, and the flesh around his wounds began to fester.

Another drop of liquid travelled down her cheek, lingering on the line of her jaw briefly before it fell away to the parched soil below. “When they came back for you . . . “ she asked, her manner still unresponsive. “ . . . what happened then?”

‘They threw me into a dark, solitary cell. The largest one kicked me until I choked on my own blood. Then they left me there for more days than I would dare to count.’

Natasha wiped the troublesome wetness from her cheeks. “I want to go,” she whispered as she brushed a wet sniffle with her sleeve. “I want to go back now.” The words were barely audible.

***

The four walls of Loki’s holding cell bled back into focus.

Natasha wiped frantically at her cheeks, relieved to find that they were actually dry. She rubbed her arms reassuringly, the feel of the tight, synthetic material of her uniform helping to ground her back in reality. She allowed herself several slow, deep inhalations of the clean, processed air, almost worshipping its lack of offensive odor. Across from her, the raven-haired Asgardian finally stirred, unfolding his limbs smoothly as if he were completely unaffected by the scene he had just been forced to relive. Quietly, she did the same, standing and crossing over to the door without a word.

Before she signalled the control room that she was prepared to exit, however, she turned back to the sorcerer. “I have to ask you again . . . ” she started.

Loki inclined his head in assent.

“How did you survive it?” Her voice broke slightly at the end, and she cringed at her own vulnerability.

To her surprise, he began to chuckle cordially. “Have you not guessed?” he taunted her.

She barely shook her head.

“My dear Natasha,” he criticized. “I did not survive at all.”
I know it has been a while since I updated, but I needed a little writing hiatus. I hope you enjoy the next part as it starts to get into the more action-oriented part of the plot. I am still hoping to finish this by the time AOU comes out in May.

I noticed on FanFiction.net that my story is starting to get a following in Finland so "tervehdys" to all of you! (I hope that is right. If not, please blame Google translate, as I do not speak Finnish).

And thank you to those who have supported me with words as well as hits and kudos. I also appreciate those of you who read anonymously, as I used to be a 'lurker' myself.

The sound of fearless knocking on his office door woke Phil from a dreamless slumber. He jerked his head away from where it was plastered to his desk blotter with some perspiration and a line of his own drool, and then his eyes shot immediately over to the small decorative mirror (which, incidentally, had been a gift from "the cellist") to check his appearance. As he suspected, he looked haggard, but also surprisingly comical with his hair flattened along one side so that the ends rose straight in the air. “Can I help you?” he said too loudly towards the door.

“Director Coulson? Do you have a moment?” It was undoubtedly Steve Rogers; the enunciation was sincere and unemotional in the style of a military man. Well, at least he wouldn’t have to deal with Stark in his drowsy, fractious state, Phil thought with relief. He glanced back at his reflection once more, tightening the loop of his previously loosened tie and not bothering to smooth down his hair. “You sexy beast,” he chastised himself as he glared at his tousled jacket and wrinkled white dress shirt.

“I beg your pardon?” Rogers replied, his voice muffled through the closed door. Phil could only pray that his previous words had been more muted.

“I’ll be right there,” Coulson said, jumping up from his seat behind the desk clumsily, still in a half-waking state. He threw open the entrance with exaggerated enthusiasm, only to be met with the form of not just Steve Rogers, but also the hulking frame of the Mighty Thor. A wisp of stylishly mussed-up brunette hair was also visible between their intimidating bulk, and it moved to wiggle between them.

“Excuse me, guys, but I’m drowning in biceps over here,” Stark quipped as he emerged from between the two. “Phil, paisan, we need to speak to you.”

“I couldn’t stop you if I tried,” Phil sighed weakly, and he stepped aside so they could enter his office. The three Avengers crossed quickly over to fill the trio of seats in front of the Director’s desk. They were standard, generic office seats with bent-aluminum bases, and although Stark fit comfortably into his chair, Rogers and the Asgardian seemed almost pained by how closely the...
arms hugged them. In fact, Coulson was fairly certain that when Thor stood again, the chair would come with him. If it didn’t collapse first.

Steve opened his mouth to speak, but Phil waved a hand to pre-empt him. “If this is about the offensive on Titan then you are in the wrong place,” he sighed. “But I do have Agent Gyrich’s mobile number in my contact list, and he is the man with whom you should be speaking. I can likely have him on the line in just a few seconds.” He began to reach for his cell when Thor’s sizeable hand completely covered his own.

“I do not believe that is true,” his deep voice replied. “We have been conversing about the current strategy, and we have determined it to be less than ideal.”

“He means it blows,” Tony added unhelpfully.

Rogers nodded his head in silent agreement but added a shrug at the end to indicate that he would likely have used different words.

“I can’t disagree with that statement,” Phil responded. “I actually fell asleep here trying to come up with a better one.”

“And did you?” Steve asked politely.

“Yes -- several dozen of them, in fact. But all the alternatives that I have come up with, although better than S.W.O.R.D.’s current proposal, do still . . . well, blow.”

Tony grinned smugly at the use of his term. “I think we have managed to formulate a better idea. It may still get all of us killed, but it’s got more panache,” he stated with confidence, eyes gleaming with the prospect of both imminent danger and a slim chance of success.

“And what do you need from me?” Coulson asked in a monotone, betraying none of his own invested emotions.

Tony gave a sideways glance to Rogers, allowing him to take the lead. Phil guessed that it had been previously decided upon that the Captain would make the formal requests for aid from the agency. Hopefully, that had nothing to do with the fact that S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director had idolized him since childhood, because he was not about to let anything color his judgment when the lives of so many were on the line. “We just need a few items, but they aren’t insignificant,” Rogers confessed. “First, we need to know the exact timeline of S.W.O.R.D.’s attack plan. We intend to get to Titan before them and wear down the enemy so that they at least have a fighting chance.”

“Okay, that’s doable,” Phil said.

“Second, we need to borrow Natasha Romanov.”

“Done,” Phil replied. “As long as she agrees,” he tacked on pointedly.

“Third, we want to bring along three of your current detainees: Loki, Blackout, and Vermin. They have knowledge of either Thanos himself or other alien civilizations which we may encounter and therefore may have to engage in combat. We really have no idea what we’re getting into out there, and we will need all the counterintelligence we can get.”

Phil did not immediately agree to this last request, but instead sat silently, rubbing his chin in consideration. “Isn’t that risky, Captain Rogers? I mean, you would be taking our enemies with you into an unstable and hostile environment to confront an entirely different set of enemies. I’m not certain I can sign off on something that dicey.”
When Steve did not immediately answer, Tony began to cut in with a sanctimonious tirade. “Look, 
_Herr Kommissar_, I don’t really think that we can afford to be particular at a time like--”

Thor held a hand up to silence his testy companion. “I understand your hesitation, Director 
Coulson.” Phil let a smile cross his lips at the use of his correct name and title. “However, I have 
spent the last few hours watching your recorded video footage, and it has shown me what Thanos 
has done to twist a multitude of beings to his will. I cannot predict what horrors we will encounter 
once we arrive, but I can assure you that after what I have seen, my brother holds no love for 
Thanos. I cannot imagine that Blackout does either. I believe this is a risk which is worth taking.”

Phil considered the idea momentarily, bowing his head and interlacing his fingers at the nape of his 
neck in a harsh gesture of fatigue. “I would love to sit here and list out the hundreds of reasons 
why this is a truly awful idea . . .” he conceded, “but we are very short on time right now. 
However, I can make a forceful recommendation regarding taking these prisoners into enemy 
territory: take Loki and leave the others.”

Rogers’ brow creased with interest. “How do you mean?” he asked, his tone neutral and 
diplomatic.

“Loki presumably has inside knowledge of Thanos’ compound on Titan; in fact, he has probably 
even been there at sometime or another prior to the invasion of Manhattan. He knows many alien 
languages, as well as the basics of the major extraterrestrial races, plus whichever minor ones he 
may have encountered while on Algorant. That having been said, I would also consider him by far 
the most dangerous of the three who you are proposing to take with you so, in addition, he’s likely 
to be high-maintenance. Blackout and Vermin, however -- they may be of limited assistance. Either 
leave them here, or take them with you but leave them in whatever manner of ship you are 
intending to take to get there. If things go sour, you may be able to cut Loki loose without too 
much trouble, but if the three of them team up against you . . . well, you’ll have more than you’ll 
be able to handle already.” Coulson sat back formally in his oversized desk chair and folded his 
hands. “That is my advice,” he finished. “You can take it for whatever it’s worth.”

The three heroes sat in respectful contemplation for several moments. Thor seemed to be the most 
conflicted of the three, his fair eyebrows pressed into a tight line along his forehead and the eyes 
beneath them darkening into hints of stormy gray. The idea of his brother betraying him and 
needing to be abandoned in an enemy land was likely causing him additional distress, but he 
seemed to think on this for only a few extra moments before he nodded curtly. He looked to Steve 
again to continue the conversation.

“We respect your opinion, Phil,” the Captain stated solidly. “We will do our best to follow your 
guidance.” Tony seemed to want to add on a caveat to this pledge, but he managed to check himself 
before he spoiled the moment.

“So, now that we have that settled,” the Director segued deftly, “May I ask how exactly you are 
going to manage this terribly heroic but incredibly foolish pre-invasion invasion?”

“I thought you would never ask,” Stark boasted. “I have arranged with our godly Asgardian allies, 
via my Princely friend here,” he nodded to indicate Thor, who was still maintaining a reverential 
silence, “to have the Team transported via the Bifrost to Asgard, where we will be granted the use 
of one cozy but virtually undetectable spaceship.” Phil noticed that he had commandeered his desk 
stapler and was flying it through the air in front of them in demonstration. “From there we’ll 
Rainbow-Bridge it over to the Titan-adjacent moon of Hyperion. Unfortunately, Hyperion is 
abnormally shaped so it moves rather chaotically -- kind of tumbling through space in a wildly 
irregular dance with its much larger neighbor, which causes it to speed up and slow down at
various points in its orbit.” This movement was simulated with the assistance of Phil’s S.H.I.E.L.D.-issue coffee mug. “What it does have that works to our advantage is an array of deep impact craters on its surface in which we can hide until we can infiltrate Titan itself.” Tony looked comically at a loss when trying to figure out how the stapler was going to insert itself into a beverage cup which was the same approximate size. After an awkward moment, he reached for the staple remover instead, and this object fitted nicely within the mouth of the mug in its inverted position. “We then will have to wait for the appropriate moment to actually move over to Titan proper.” Events then took a turn for the absurd when Thor’s head began to double as for the presence of Titan, the objects approaching his head in a slow arc while Thor looked partially irritated and vaguely threatened. “This next section of the plan is a little more . . . vague.”

“Vague?” Coulson challenged with an arch of his right eyebrow.

“Okay, it’s more like -- spontaneous.”

“He means we don’t know how we’re going to manage the next part.” The men all turned toward the new voice which was coming from the doorway. “Sorry, but I was listening outside,” said Bruce Banner with a dismissive roll of his shoulders. “Tony wasn’t sure you would be a fan of me going along on the mission considering my, um . . . ‘unpredictability’, as it were.”

Phil motioned for Banner to enter, but there were no available seats for him to occupy. He moved over to the far wall which contained two oversized windows with large sills and managed to balance on the edge of one with his right thigh.

“So, theoretically,” Phil inquired, “how ‘vague’ are we talking?”

Stark cleared his throat. “Um, we are going with ‘spontaneous,’” he urged, his words muffled by the back of his hand.

The agent behind the desk rolled his eyes but did not comment.

“May I?” Bruce interjected calmly.

When Rogers nodded his agreement, Tony crossed the room dejectedly and extended his props for the physicist to employ; however, Bruce declined them with a polite shake of his hand.

“I’m good, thanks,” Banner smirked. “We have run into two significant stumbling blocks with the current plan,” he explained. “The first one Tony has already alluded to when describing Hyperion: since we cannot precisely predict its orbit or its revolution, we will have some difficulty navigating between the two moons. In our favor, they are currently just a few days past the section in their orbits when they are likely to be physically closest so we will have not only a decent visual to utilize during our approach, as well as almost the shortest possible distance to travel.”

Coulson pondered the difficult but not insurmountable nature of this initial problem. The second, then, would presumably be a doozy. “So what’s the other issue?”

“Well,” Bruce shrugged, “I’m guessing that it will be somewhat noticeable when we crash into Titan’s defensive shields and explode.”

“True,” Phil replied without missing a beat. “But how do you know that they have shields in place?”

“The Webb Telescope has had its eye trained on Titan since we determined the origin of the threat,” Stark blurted out, unable to contain his wealth of knowledge any longer. “In the past seventy-two hours, it has detected numerous instances of interstellar debris being deflected along
the perimeter of the moon.” As he said this, he bounced several paper-clips off of the head of the stand-in moon -- a.k.a. Thor’s head -- which caused the Asgardian to crook an eyebrow in disgraced indignance. “Ergo, defensive shields,” the billionaire concluded, ignoring the reaction from the blonde god.

“So, help me out here,” Phil responded as he moved his plastic cube of paper-clips further back on his desk, out of reach of certain others in the room. “What exactly is your proposal for penetrating these shields?”

“It’s funny that you should ask, my friend,” Tony deadpanned, “because we have absolutely no concrete idea how we are going to accomplish that. Although, the short answer is ‘Loki.’” Both the silence and the sharp looks around the room begged for a more thorough elucidation of the strategy, but Tony only shrugged in deference. “I’m sorry -- is he not dependable?”

***.**.**

All the lights in the Asgardian’s holding cell came on at the same moment, followed immediately by the sound of the entrance door being unsecured. The shadows of four looming figures fell over across Loki’s form as he struggled against the torpor of his disturbed sleep. He shielded his eyes half-heartedly, trying to make out the faces of whoever was intruding upon his rest this time. He had been constantly roused, harassed, and cajoled over the last 12 hours or so in such a relentless manner that he was beginning to grow dismissive of the constant interruptions, going so far as to threaten to lead another alien invasion on their dismal planet if he did not have an hour’s undivided privacy.

Unfortunately, the S.W.O.R.D. agents had taken his little bluff a whole lot more sincerely than the manner in which he had intended it. But they did give him his alone time, at least.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” came the familiar voice of one of his tormentors -- Stark, it would seem. “Up and at ‘em!” The dull thump of a load of heavy fabric, leather, and metal landed at his feet just as he was rising to a sitting position, and the faint smell of blood and earth alerted him that it was his armor long before he could actually focus upon it.

“Get dressed,” a second, less playful voice added bluntly. “You’re going on a mission.”

Captain Rogers. How delightfully unfortunate.

So that would make one of the other silhouettes his former brother. The fourth remained unobtrusively in the background, his feet shuffling nervously and his hands buried in the pockets of his well-worn denims -- unmistakably Dr. Banner, who was presumably there to ensure his undisputed cooperation. Well, that might have spooked him into compliance immediately following his last visit to Midgard, but it was hardly going to subdue him now. He had even larger, more menacing concerns to wrestle with at the moment. Furthermore, he had new ways of dealing with that great, green behemoth if need be.

Right now, however, events were going to plan rather nicely.
“Who am I to argue with the combined might of such daunting heroes?” Loki sighed sarcastically, making certain to lay on the ennui as thickly as he could dare. “However, I am going to have to ask that you turn your backs for a moment if you expect me to don these garments immediately. Grant me at least that much dignity, please.”

Not surprisingly, they all complied, suddenly overcome by nervousness at the thought of seeing the prisoner unclothed.

“You do realize, though,” said Steve tauntingly, “that everyone in the control room will still be able to see everything.”

“Of course they will, Captain Rogers,” Loki sneered. “And yet it is nothing to which they have not been subjected on numerous occasions since I have been in these quarters. They are all quite familiar with my form, I assure you. In fact, when I’ve been utterly bored, I have even let some of them draw me like this.” After letting the uneasy tension of that idea settle upon the others in the room, the sorcerer continued. “Of course, that is not the least bit true, my dear Captain, and yet it has caused your neck to flush an amusing shade of red.”

Many uneasy minutes passed, while the quartet of heroes listened to the various sounds of metal scraping metal and the groan of leather being pulled tautly around the Asgardian’s limbs. “You know,” Tony commented as he rocked awkwardly from foot to foot, “I wish we would have thought this through just a little more.”

Rogers eyes sought the ceiling as he nodded his agreement.

“He’s stalling,” Thor mumbled, annoyed. “This ordeal is taking far longer than it should.”

“Oh, do not be so dramatic, Odinson,” Loki snapped. “I am ready now.”

The men turned hesitantly back toward Loki, who was indeed standing fully dressed in his armor and leathers, but he was turned toward his reflection in the glass-like wall, smoothing down his sleep-ruffled hair with a few graceful sweeps. When he turned to face them again, the group was struck first by how transformed he looked by the layers of material which gave him bulk in places that his natural form did not allow, and second by the way his sallow skin clung more closely to his bone structure than when they had faced him before, his flesh seeming to have contracted inwards and darkened along the edges where it most tightly drawn. He appeared to be ailing, but abstractly so, his movements betraying none of the infirmity that was written upon his skin. However, he still appeared like a mere ghost of the warrior which they had confronted in Manhattan. “I assume that you will want to bind me in some manner now,” he stated haughtily.

“Yes, of course,” Thor muttered reluctantly, producing said restraints from beneath his armour as he approached. The set consisted of a pair of manacles, which adjusted to his wrist circumference automatically and obviously dampened his magic. The second part of his bindings did take him aback somewhat -- it was a collar fashioned from a similar metal, but it was not connected to any other part of his body or the cuffs on his wrists. Loki cocked his head and gave his brother a puzzled glare. “It’s manually operated,” Thor explained quietly.

“If we need to contain you, the collar will feed a large amount of electrical energy right through a set of tiny electrodes which are now buried deep in your skin. It will then travel rapidly through your central nervous system, incapacitating you instantly,” said Banner softly and without judgment.

“It will, in fact, cause you to lose all muscle control and drop you like a bitter, self-absorbed rock,” Tony added. “And before you even go there: yes, it has been tested on the suitably old and
“Godly.”

“I assure you it works,” Thor inflected sheepishly.

“Even the largest and most jovial of deities seem to lose control of nearly all bodily functions. It is quite effective, and very, very humiliating,” Stark tacked on with just a little too much satisfaction.

“Well, well,” Loki sighed, “Then it would seem that I am entirely at your mercy.” It was a complication, surely, but not insurmountable. “May I ask who has the trigger?”

“You may,” Tony answered with a grin. Almost in unison, all four Avengers exposed their wrists to reveal a band with a row of raised buttons. “There’s a code required so we don’t accidentally fry your neurons by scratching a random itch or something,” the billionaire assured him.

“And whose abhorrent creation is this little piece of technology?” the raven-haired being inquired with a raised eyebrow, making a vain attempt to modulate the annoyance in his tone. He fingered the loathsome object absently as he spoke.

“Mine,” Stark announced proudly. “But since I am an avid supporter of alien prisoner rights, I assure you that this little contraption is completely consistent with all of my previous mission statements. If any of us needs to use it, I have insisted that it be for the noblest of causes.”

“Such as?” Loki tested him.

“In the event of you fleeing, betraying, weaseling, or otherwise interfering with the completion of the mission,” Rogers specified flatly. “The fate of our planet and certainly numerous others are dependent upon your cooperation. We are not taking any chances.”

“Fair enough,” Loki agreed. “Now, if it’s not too brash, I would like to suggest that we move this little operation along, because I can scarcely wait to witness what manner of poorly thought-out scheme you have contrived in order to subdue one of the most powerful threats in the known universe.”

“That’s the thing, see,” Rogers smirked. “You don’t get to know.”

“Pardon?”

“What he means is this: we don’t trust you, Crazy Train,” Stark clarified. “So you don’t get to know anything beyond what we need you to know to do your part.”

The team began to file out of the chamber and into the hallway beyond, carefully keeping Loki situated between them. Thor even went so far as to grasp his brother’s upper arm, although it was furiously jerked away from his grip almost instantly.

“So, what is my ‘part,’ exactly?” the prisoner asked gruffly as he shot his sibling a scathing glare. The group then passed a pair of agents who eyed them uncertainly. This did not escape the notice of the shackled Asgardian, but he did not immediately comment.

“For now, it consists of one thing,” Rogers stated. He paused before the team rounded the next corner, placing an arm up to keep Loki from advancing, although he was still capable of extending his neck just far enough to see what was causing the hesitation: three S.W.O.R.D. agents were lingering in front of the high security checkpoint to the detention wing.

“And what is this ‘one thing,’ Captain Rogers?” Loki inquired teasingly, dropping the volume of his voice so it could not be heard by the agents around the bend.
Rogers and Stark exchanged a worried but determined glance before the Captain replied, “That is what you will find out when we get to Titan.” His words were a forceful whisper. “We need a distraction,” he then interjected with just a hint of desperation.

“Ah, I see . . .” Loki chided softly, “This little adventure has not exactly been sanctioned by Agent Gyrich, has it?”

“Decidedly not,” Stark derided him with an affectation which mocked the Asgardian’s proper intonation. “So, about that diversion,” heneedled. “Perhaps you could just drop trou and let them draw you.”

Before Loki could respond to this gibe, Banner stepped forward calmly. “I’ve got this,” he offered in a hush.

“Are you sure about this, Bruce?” Rogers challenged him.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Just let me do this,” he requested genially.

Stark and Rogers stepped aside with undisguised trepidation. Banner paused momentarily at the cusp of the corner for a calming inhale before he stepped into plain view of the agents, his hands stuffed casually in his front pockets. He recovered the cell phone from the back of his jeans and placed it to his ear without unlocking the home screen. Then he stepped out into the open space of the lobby, purporting to be speaking to someone on the other end. “Continue,” he grunted into the mobile. Banner then halted grumpily about twenty steps across the over-polished tile and tapped his foot with hyperbolized impatience. “Check account balance,” he huffed. “No! Ah, damnit! Menu,” he groused. Then, after another beat: “Menu!”

The three agents at the security checkpoint responded to his raised voice and were now watching him with wary glances. Bruce rolled his eyes as he continued to train his attention on the handheld device. “Representative!” he groaned, the volume of his words growing steadily louder. “No, I do not want to continue in Es-pan-yol!” He raked his hand back through his hair with raw irritation. “I just . . . want to talk . . . to a human being!” By the end of this sentence, his words were being spoken at the top of his lungs. which caused all three agents to jump back about two feet. “Customer service!” he roared, his voice beginning to grow distorted with rage, “NOW!” With this final proclamation, Banner heaved the phone sidelong across the room until it collided resoundingly with the glass behind the three men, the case shattering into dozens of airborne particles as he flexed the muscles along his back with a painful howl, the seams of his oxford tearing away like tissue paper.

The trio of sentries scattered in such a flurry that they nearly fell over one another in their haste, running behind closed doors or diving beneath sturdy pieces of furniture to shield themselves from the transformation that they assumed was about to occur. As soon as the space was cleared, Banner walked calmly back to his compatriots who were peering tentatively around the far wall.

“I guess it’s a good thing I wore a cheap shirt today,” Bruce said after he beckoned the group to cross to the exit.

“Yeah. And that was a cheap phone, too, I suppose?” Stark asked.

“No, that was yours,” the scientist quipped, the corner of his mouth curling in a self-satisfied grin. “I palmed it while you were looking the other way.” Before Tony could fully respond to the gravity of that statement, Banner held out a hand to stop them before they crossed through the checkpoint. “Get ready to run,” he instructed them. “There’s no way we are getting through that metal detector without tripping an alarm.”
Clint rolled over listlessly, his brow soaked in perspiration. He was still fully sedated, but his body seemed to fight the chemicals in his system with an unholy vigor. “Help . . .” he breathed out weakly, his words barely above a whisper. “Help me . . .” His head thrashed from side to side, and his left hand clenched and unclenched haltingly as he spoke.

The beginnings of tears were welling in Natasha’s eyes. They clouded her vision, but she held his right hand studiously in her grip, her thumb smoothing gently over his knuckles from time to time. She was not sure that this effort was making any difference whatsoever, but she persisted in her ministrations despite their possible futility. The wetness in her eyes gathered but never actually fell, which was appropriate; tears were wasted on this situation, anyway, she scolded herself. There was nothing she could do for Barton now.

Well, except to save the entire known universe.

She knew that it was likely a useless gesture, but she needed to say some sort of goodbye. “Clint?” she said, and the sound was so feeble that she wanted to kick herself for her weakness. “Clint?” she said again, louder and more steady this time. He turned his head toward her in a sudden jerk, but his eyes remained closed. Had he heard her say his name? Was he actually responding to her? There was no way to be certain, but she continued regardless. “I’m going to have to leave now,” she confessed, her voice maintaining its confidence. “And, just so you know, I probably won’t be coming back.”

“No,” Clint whispered. “Please, Natasha . . .”

His face had rolled on the pillow so that it was no longer towards her, and yet he had unmistakably said her name, so perhaps he was hearing her after all. Her chest ached with hope, but she remained cautious. “Look, I think this is going to be goodb-”

“Nothing can harm you there, Natasha,” Clint interrupted in a soft murmur, “Just call for me . . . when you are ready to return.”

This statement gave her pause -- it didn’t sound like something Clint would usually say in the least. “I hope you’re right,” she continued suspiciously, her face contorting into a heedful scowl. Something about those words didn’t feel quite right -- they were too fluid, too eloquent. And somehow very familiar.

“Natasha . . .” he implored her again through his unconsciousness. “Please don’t trust him. Don’t go in there.” His timbre grew more urgent as he continued to speak, but his inflection sounded more like the Clint she knew so well.

And then suddenly, it clicked.

“Clint? What are you seeing? Are you seeing me going through the portal to Algor-.” She corrected herself when she realized he likely did not know the proper name of the place. “To the dark planet?”

“Yes,” he nodded, breathless.

There was a demanding knock at the door then which caused her to sit up swiftly in surprise. “Yeah?”

“It’s time, Agent Romanov,” said a stern male voice. “We have to go.”

She squeezed Barton’s hand one more time and pressed a firm kiss to his moistened forehead. “Forget what I said,” she said hastily. “This is not goodbye.” She strode over to the exit, her mouth set in a determined frown. “I’m ready,” she told the man at the door. “Let’s go finish this.”

***.**.**

The alarm sounded prior to the group ever crossing the threshold of the security checkpoint, prompting the beginning of a brightly pulsing light and a raucous, audible signal to sound throughout the chamber. “Get ready to run,” Bruce said. “There’s no way we are getting through that metal detector without tripping an alarm. Well, actually, I should say ‘you’re not getting through there without tripping an alarm,’ since I’m meeting Romanov and the others at the rendezvous point,” Banner reminded them. “You guys get to keep S.W.O.R.D. occupied so the rest of us can complete the escape plan.” With a subtle wave to his comrades, the scientist moved swiftly to the nearest stairwell and disappeared up the steps.

“What about me?” Loki interjected. “I will only slow you down, will I not?”

“Not if you know what’s good for you,” Rogers warned. “Plus, the agents will go where you go since you are the asset.”

Both Thor and the Captain reached for one of the prisoner’s arms so he would be forced to stay with them, and the team charged through the security station with Stark leading the way. As he ran, Tony produced a wristband from the inner pocket of his jacket and fumbled gracelessly with the metal object as he moved. He snapped it onto the same wrist as the trigger for Loki’s collar.

“I hope you aren’t going to confuse those two objects,” Loki barked over the sound of the alarms. “It might be much more difficult for you to move quickly if I am unconscious!”

“Well, I had an app for this,” Stark shot back, “until someone destroyed my phone!”

They managed to dodge a couple of unsuspecting agents who emerged from the adjacent corridors before they had time to react to the situation. Tony was doing an admirable job of keeping ahead of the two Asgardian gods and the super-soldier, but his breath was becoming more ragged as time passed. He glanced back over one shoulder and immediately regretted the move as he could see about a dozen agents running along the hall about thirty paces behind them.

“Go on,” Tony shouted, waving them around him. “You’ll move faster without me!”

“No way,” Cap protested. “I’m not leaving anyone behind!”

“Don’t you get all ‘second World War’ on me, now, Rogers,” the billionaire responded. “Besides, it’s okay -- I’ll catch up!” Stark then came to a sudden stop, and the rest of the group skirted him sharply on the left. He placed his right thumb on the metal of the second band so it could read his fingerprint and then stood completely still, eyes closed and arms outstretched, still facing the oncoming wave of agency personnel.

“Is he prone to these fits of madness?” Loki inquired as he and the two remaining Avengers
continued their flight toward the exit.

“Yes,” said Steve, as Thor simultaneously replied, “Undoubtedly.”

Suddenly, the sound of distant propulsion jets could be heard, and the thrum grew steadily louder as the throng approached Tony’s position. There was a chaotic moment when all the oncomers began to dive to either side of the corridor in order to avoid the source of the commotion, and then a blur of red and gold enveloped Stark’s form, effectively hiding him from his pursuers as he seemed to dissolve into the air, a flash of yellow flame following in his wake. The smudge of fast-moving color then whipped around the runners on the right and emerged in the cavernous main lobby, hovering alongside and just above the crowd of about two-dozen agents which were waiting there to thwart their dramatic escape.

The pings of a few futile bullets could be heard being deflected off of Iron Man’s armor as he hung above the crowd. “Uh, I wouldn’t keep doing that if I were you,” Stark’s technologically transmitted voice scolded as the eerie, phosphorescent eyes of his helmet swept over the gathering. “I understand that Asgardians get really cranky when they have to pick bullets out of their fabulous hair. I wouldn’t want to be the one to test that theory.”

“Mr. Stark,” stated the operative at the head of the cluster, his gun drawn and aimed squarely at the armored figure lingering above. “Surrender the prisoner and allow yourself to be taken into custody, or we will utilize whatever force might be necessary to secure your cooperation.”

“Thor, Captain Rogers,” Tony said authoritatively, “Get ready to exit the building on my mark.”

“I will give you until the count of five to surrender,” continued the agent who was presumably in charge. “One--”

“Sorry, Agent Buzzkill, but I’m just not a patient man,” Stark retorted. He raised the right hand of his suit and pointed the palm -- and thus, the repulsor -- at a point seemingly on the other side of the man who was addressing him. Unwilling to call Iron Man’s bluff, the agent dropped to the floor, causing all of his colleagues to immediately follow suit just as the glass behind them exploded from the impact of the repulsor blast. “Aaaaannnd mark,” Tony said buoyantly. “That would be your cue, Hans and Franz,” he urged when his cohorts did not immediately move toward the exit.

When Thor, Loki, and the Captain began to make their way hastily over to the shattered wall of glass, the operative in charge spoke again. “You won’t make it very far, Mr. Stark,” he warned. “We can set up a perimeter for hundreds of miles around almost instantly if we have to, and we can track you with the most sophisticated radar system in existence. You can’t escape us, not by land or by air.”

“Oh, I beg to differ,” the billionaire stated confidently. “You see, it’s your agency’s superior technology that’s going to make that possible.”

The sound of a helicopter approaching could be heard, the rhythmic whipping of its spinning blades growing swiftly louder. All eyes turned to the parking lot where the escapees had paused to look up at the vehicle as it descended, their forms seeming to glow in its light and their hair and clothing fluttering violently in the breeze it created. The chopper was so dark in color that it was almost invisible upon the asphalt and against the inky canvas of the nearly starless sky, its lines sleek and military in its overall design. The agents watched passively as the two blonde Avengers and their former prisoner climbed into the interior of the waiting transport.

The lead agent laughed at the implication. “What makes you so sure that we can’t track one of our
own helicopters?” he mocked.

“Mainly because we’ve manually removed all of your conventional methods of tracking it. Plus, it is both undetectable by radar and equipped with advanced cloaking technology so you can’t track it visually. And, seeing how it’s your technology, you haven’t devised a way to circumvent those little design quirks, thinking that it would be unnecessary to trace your own equipment.”

The agent’s face creased in concentration as he turned over this concept in his mind, his features growing slack as he realized that he was bested.

“Well, it’s been real, but that’s my ride,” Stark revealed. He disappeared in a flash of metal and flame which shot out of the building and then paused next to the chopper lingering in wait for him. As the red and gold of his armor disappeared inside, the vehicle lifted off the ground steadily, its image rippling and dissolving into nothingness as it ascended.

***.***

“We’ve lost them, Henry,” the defeated agent’s voice admittedly raggedly through the earpiece of his headset. “He’s absolutely right: we have no way of tracking our own untraceable vehicles.”

“Do you have any idea where they might be heading?” Agent Gyrich responded, trying to keep the anger which betrayed his disappointment at bay.

“Oddly, he didn’t say,” sighed the other man sarcastically.

“Well, I think I might know someone who does,” Henry confided. He stormed out of the command center and down the main hall, his legs carrying him at a pace which was just short of a jog. When he arrived at the door he was seeking, he knocked sharply and rapidly, waiting only a second for an answer before he said, “Director Coulson?” No response. “Phil, it’s Henry Gyrich - - I need to speak with you. It’s urgent!” Another knock, more forceful this time, and still no answer. He jigged the doorknob angrily. “Damnit, Phil! Let me in! Your team of Avengers have run off with our asset, and I really don’t have the time or the patience to deal with this right now!” Finally, frustrated beyond all decorum, Gyrich kicked at the barrier just below the handle with all the strength he could muster, and the door gave way.

The interior was empty. Coulson was nowhere in sight.

The senior agent produced a cell phone and pulled Coulson up on his contact list, selecting his mobile number from the choices displayed. After a few seconds, he heard a faint buzzing noise coming from the upper drawer of Phil’s desk. He opened it carefully, the sound stopping just as he was being forwarded to voicemail. There sat Phil’s mobile, the screen still displaying the number from which he had just been calling. The S.H.I.E.L.D. director’s recorded voice then stated:

“Hello, you have reached Phil Coulson’s abandoned cell phone. I am currently out of the office for an unforeseen period of time, which may or may not become indefinite depending on the outcome of the completely ridiculous thing that I am off doing right now. If you need agency assistance, please call Agent Melinda May or Agent Maria Hill at one of the following numbers, respectively: 316- . . . .

Gyrich disconnected the call, growled with resentment, and then slammed the drawer shut ungently with his hip. “What in hell have you gotten yourself into this time, Phil?” he murmured to the empty desk. He then shook his head as if waking from an unpleasant dream. “Agent Deeds?” he spoke into his earpiece.
“Yes, sir?” came the voice of the ranking agent.

“I’m afraid we have a complication.”

“Complication?” Deeds replied without hesitation.

“It’s Coulson. He has... gone AWOL.”

“Should we pursue, sir?” asked the other agent matter-of-factly.

Gyrich turned this question over in his mind for a long moment. “No,” he declared finally. “Stay with the asset. He is our priority now.”

*** *** ***

Tony raised the shield of his helmet once he was safely inside the chopper. This vehicle had definitely begun its life in a military nature, he noted, as its interior lined with rows of seats with harnesses in order to ferry soldiers securely into perilous areas. He nestled into the closest empty space on the first bench, directly behind the pilot.

“Please tell me you didn’t kill anyone, Stark,” Natasha said from the pilot’s seat, her view fixed on the navigation console. “Those are still my co-workers, you know.”

“They are all just as hale and humorless as they were before I confronted them, Agent Romanov, I assure you.” Tony poked his elbow tauntingly into Rogers left bicep. “So when does the in-flight beverage service start? I could use a little pick-me-up after last night’s nefarious planning session, slash Asgardian drink-a-thon with the Thunder god over here.” He leaned over both Steve and Loki in order to give the blonde warrior a friendly slap on the forearm, and they each gave him an irritated sideways glance at the near-contact. “I also would like to emphasize that if there is going to be a movie on this flight that I refuse to watch Amèlie again. I can recite it at this point, and I don’t even speak French.”

“Well, I would like to say ‘no,’” Natasha teased, “but it is Bruce’s favorite.”

“Guilty,” Banner admitted from the co-pilot’s chair.

“Alright, then there’s gotta be a copy of SkyMall on this thing somewhere that I can look at while you’re watching it...” Stark turned around in his seat to feign looking for a copy of said magazine and then did an immediate double-take.

“Good evening, Mr. Stark,” Agent Coulson said flatly. “I’d offer you a handshake, but you can see that both of my hands are occupied.” He lifted his arms to show that each wrist was shackled to an unconscious detainee sitting on either side of him.

“Wow,” Tony coughed. “If I had known that we were having a ‘Weirdest Prisoner’ contest, I would have had mine wear his horns.” He shook his head quickly to clear his vision.

“Mr. Stark, please meet Blackout,” Phil insisted, raising one arm to simulate a wave from the limp being on his right, “...and Vermin,” he continued, repeating the gesture with the seemingly lifeless limb of the man on his left. “They are both chemically sedated until such time as we may need their services.”

“And you are here to, what? Weirdo-sit?”

“More or less,” Coulson replied as if it all this were the most normal thing in the world. “If you’re
going to leave them on the ship then someone has to keep an eye on them -- which, I suppose, means that I will be launching into outer space within the next few hours.” This idea seemed to disturb the Director, and he reached for the breast pocket of his suit jacket in order to retrieve a handkerchief but was forced to stop when the resistance from the restraints pulled at his hand. He was able to loosen his tie somewhat, however, which seemed to subdue him slightly even though he was visibly perspiring.

“Don’t worry, Phil,” Stark whispered over the seatback. “Either this will all be okay, or it will be over so fast you’ll hardly have time to regret it.”

“That’s . . . comforting, I guess?” Coulson said weakly in response.

“Well, it is bound to be preferable to whatever is going to happen to those who are left behind on this planet,” Loki remarked absently, still fondling the offensive collar around his neck as if probing every bit for weaknesses. “Those who do not survive the initial onslaught by Thanos and his armies will be the fortunate ones, after all. Once Mephisto and his minions swoop in to claim the remainder . . .” The Asgardian paused when he noticed that every eye in the hold was upon him, their faces ranging from vengeful to distraught. “Well, I suppose we should not be using this time to dwell upon unpleasant eventualities,” he concluded, although his manner was disdainful. “I surmise that we would all rather live in a cocoon of denial, then?” When there was no answer, he said, “Noted,” rather haughtily and then went back to exploring the surface of his collar.

After being so ungently reminded of the stakes involved in their endeavor, the group sat in mournful silence for several minutes. When conversation did resume, it was subdued and limited to those in the immediate vicinity.

“So, how is Clint?” Bruce asked the pilot gently.

Natasha fixed her eyes on the instruments before her since the night was too dark to do much visual navigation. “He’s about the same,” she replied, her words so devoid of emotion that they betrayed how deeply her emotional pain was actually rooted. “They still had him pretty medicated so he was sleeping and moaning, more or less.”

“That sounds like an improvement, actually,” Banner said hopefully.

“Except when he breaks down crying without warning. Oh, and he occasionally tries to claw his way through his own skin,” the redhead responded with a tilt of the head and a sharply crooked eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, Natasha,” Banner replied gently, his hands held upward in a gesture of submission. “I really am. If there was anything I could do to ease his suffering, you know I would do it without question.”

Her features softened in the face of his obvious sympathy. “I know,” she sighed. Then her eyes darkened and her lips pressed together in a harsh line. “Actually, Bruce,” she whispered, “I have a theory about how to release his brain from all of this . . .” She sought silently for the appropriate sentiment, and finally decided on, “Stress.”

“Is it something you could share?” the physicist responded, keeping his voice low to mimic her tone; it was apparent that she was speaking softly for a reason.

“When I was in Clint’s cell,” Natasha began, her words trembling with frustration, “he said things in his sleep. He talks about things that Loki has been thinking about now, not just memories of his torture on Algorant.”
“Oh?” Bruce probed. “What kinds of things?”

“I can’t really talk about it, but, trust me, Clint’s mind is linked to Loki’s via the power of the Tesseract right now, not just through distant memories that were planted there in the past. So that would mean that there are two possible ways to sever the link.”

“Destroy the Tesseract or destroy Loki,” finished Banner, picking up her train of thought effortlessly.

“Exactly. And since we don’t know where the Tesseract is right now, that really just leaves the one option.”

“I have to agree,” Bruce stated calmly. “Even if you knew the location of the Cube, Loki would still be the easiest to eliminate.”

“Presumably.” Romanov murmured. “Although he has already ‘died’ twice, and he just keeps coming back somehow.”

“True. Plus, we do need him right now.” The scientist rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “However, once he’s served his purpose . . . well, I suppose all bets would be off then.”

The woman merely nodded soberly in response.

“Are we sure this thing is invisible to radar?” Rogers suddenly interjected, leaning forward so Natasha could hear him more clearly. “I’m sure S.H.I.E.L.D. and S.W.O.R.D. will both be sending out some serious manpower to pursue us at any moment.”

The two confidantes at the controls shared a nervous glance before falling back into their normal personas. “Believe me, Steve, we’re free and clear,” Romanov assured him as she flipped a switch on the upper control panel. “But we’ll have plenty of time to test that since we still have a long way to go tonight.” Her voice had steadied again with admirable skill.

“Where exactly are we headed, may I ask?” Loki asked testily, his voice strained over the sound of the propellers above them.

“New Mexico,” she revealed. “To the Bifrost site next to that town you practically levelled a few years back.”

“The Bifrost?” Loki exclaimed, shooting his brother an accusing glare. “You are taking me back to Asgard?”

“Only briefly,” Thor deflected. He tried to rest a reassuring hand on Loki’s shoulder, but the gesture was vehemently rejected. “Truly, it is not how it seems, brother. They are simply providing us with conveyance to Titan.”

“Is that so?” the dark-haired sibling replied, indignant. “So they are aware that I am among the landing party, then? They know that I am coming?”

Thor shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Not exactly,” he mumbled.

“And they aren’t going to know,” Tony added confidently, settling back and adjusting his headrest.

“We’re planning to hide you from them,” Steve finished, although his tone betrayed that he wasn’t enthusiastically supporting the idea.
“You know, I could manage that part myself, if you would just allow me to use my magic,” Loki suggested.

“Not a chance,” Rogers declared.

“Yeah, nice try, Criss Angel. We aren’t going to be falling for any of your deceptions this time,” Stark confirmed, resting his head against the seatback and closing his eyes.

Loki allowed himself the tiniest of smiles before doing the same.
Part V: Acceptance Ch 4

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I am becoming the George R. R. Martin of fanfiction -- I know it has been a while since I posted an update. As this story progresses, I am beginning to feel Joss Whedon's pain. It is insane trying to balance so many characters in one scene while finding a plausible way to advance the plot. This chapter went through at least one solid re-working which took much longer than I expected. Plus, I am too much of a perfectionist not to proofread each chapter dozens of time before I post.

Apologies all around,
Praxidicae

--4--

“Be vigilant, my friends,” Thor advised them as they clustered together on the sands of the New Mexico desert. “When the Bifrost is opened, the bridge will remain accessible for only a few moments. We must remain in close proximity so that we can be transported simultaneously.”

This reminder was largely unnecessary, as they were already rather tightly amassed with the thickly robed form of the God of Mischief and the two now only mildly sedated prisoners confined to their center. They were huddled closely not just so that the prisoners were surrounded for security purposes, but also so that Loki was guarded from the keen eyes of Heimdall, the realm’s ever-vigilant watchman -- a ploy which would almost certainly be unsuccessful. In addition to this, the surprising crispness of the New Mexico night air troubled Phil, Bruce, and Natasha, causing them to gather near their unaffected counterparts and to tremble with the need for basic warmth. Were it not for the temperature-regulating abilities of his suit, Tony would have been in much the same situation.

Feeling the discomfort of his companions, Thor did not delay. “Heimdall!” his full voice boomed confidently across the desolate surroundings. “Open the Bifrost!” Almost instantaneously, the ground around the team was flooded in blinding, variously colored beams of light. Natasha felt an energy sparking along the delicate hairs of her arms, and she had barely begun to raise them to investigate the phenomenon before she felt her feet rise from the sand, and then . . .

Oh, and then her senses were being deluged with data that she could not even begin to process, the sights and sounds and sensations so overwhelming that she felt her heart begin to pound with such an insistence that she thought it might burst from her chest. She knew that she was moving at incredible speed, as if she were on the most thrilling and terrifying roller coaster in existence, and yet she was advancing generally in a straight-line trajectory with only the occasional dip or turn along her path, the beams of extraordinary light keeping pace with her exquisitely. She tried to focus on herself so that her eyes were not overwhelmed with impressions, and she noticed that the edges of her body were blurred as if the molecules which composed her were separating slightly along the fringes. In a weak moment, she glanced to each side, noting that there were several ill-defined figures hurtling alongside her, their fuzzed borders mirroring her own. She was able to identify two of them from the smears of color which comprised them: the gold and scarlet hues of
Tony’s suit and the patriotic tones of Steve Roger’s wardrobe disclosed who they were among the splashes of light that surrounded her. There were several other columns of illumination rocketing along with her in the darkness, but she could not distinguish any details among their hazy radiance.

Suddenly, her forward momentum ceased, and she stumbled nearly a dozen steps forward, her steps heavy and erratic, before she landed prone on her outstretched hands along a vast expanse of cool, even veneer polished to a mirror-like reflectivity. She lay there for a long moment, unashamed of her graceless landing but rather revelling in the still, cool surface against which she was pressing her cheek. When she was certain that the floor was not going to lurch beneath her, she rose shakily and took a tentative survey of her immediate surroundings. Surprisingly, nearly half of her companions had remained on their feet: the Asgardians were more than accustomed to the chaotic mode of travel, and Rogers had a surer foot than the average man by nature of his enhanced physiology. Bruce, however, had stayed upright almost by pure luck, and he now stood apart from the rest of the team, his face almost pressed against the glass of the tremendous observation window, his mouth open in a subconscious expression of awe. “There must be millions . . .” he murmured, and Natasha suspected that he was not even aware that he had spoken aloud. Beyond his silhouette, she could see the pinpoints of innumerable stars, clustered so heavily together in places that they looked like wisps of smoke. The colors of these celestial lights were varied, but most were painted in hues of rose and sepia which somehow further enhanced the ethereal nature of what they were seeing.

In the foreground lay the less fortunate Phil Coulson, sprawled out flat on his belly with his extremities entangled amongst the restraints of his semi-conscious travelling companions. Then beyond him (and faring little better) came Tony Stark, his metal-clad footfalls echoing shamelessly throughout the vast space into which he had been propelled. He halted breathtakingly close to a large, silent figure who remained stoic despite the near contact between himself and the robot-like figure which had nearly been hurled into his arms.

“Welcome to Asgard,” came a deep voice which filled the room and rumbled through the chests of the newly arrived team members. These words were spoken almost directly into Tony’s face -- give or take a foot or two of height, anyway -- and he flinched as the sizeable guardian removed his sword from its place in the center of the platform.

“This is Heimdall, the Gatekeeper of Asgard,” Thor said, his face widening in one of his characteristic smiles. “And one of my dearest friends.” The blonde warrior smiled even more generously as he rested a hand on the shoulder of the impassive watchman who continued to level a wary gaze at the Midgardian before him.

“Salutations, Heimdall,” Tony stated, the merest flicker of uncertainty in his voice. He extended a gauntleted hand in greeting to the watcher, but Heimdall simply looked at it with interest. “I am called . . .”

“I know who you are, Anthony Edward Stark, son of Howard,” the sentry interjected. “You are the so-called ‘Iron Man.’” The stress being placed on the second word made it sound unusually formal.

“My reputation precedes me, even in Asgard,” Tony boasted playfully. He paused in anticipation of some reaction, but there was none. “So, I know that Asgard is just a layover on this little journey,” he continued, “but I was hoping to get a feel for the culture in your . . . realm, I guess you would say.” Stark threw up his most charming, wide-mouthed grin, but there was still no measurable response from Heimdall. “And then I thought maybe I could have a cocktail in the first class lounge, pick up a novelty ‘My billionaire boyfriend went to Asgard, and all I got was this stupid t-shirt’ souvenir for Pepper . . . I don’t suppose this place has a Sbarro?” This flurry of
words came out of Tony with his usual frivolity, but it was strangely tempered with a hint of what was almost desperation. Meanwhile, Thor remained at his side, equally ill at ease, shifting the weight of his bulk from one booted foot to the other.

This ill-conceived exchange was meant to be the smokescreen during which Loki would move to the spacecraft without being recognized, but as it was, most of the group just stood gawking at the naked awkwardness that passed for Thor and Tony trying to have a casual conversation with a mythical demigod. Eventually, the Captain motioned to Director Coulson, sweeping two fingers in the direction of the starship which was waiting very nearby. Phil nodded wordlessly and began leading the chemically dazed Blackout and Vermin across the few dozen steps over to the waiting vessel, but the thickly hooded figure did not follow, seeming instead to be gleefully transfixed on the amusing communication between the guardian and his companions. It was only after Rogers impatiently tapped the black band encircling his wrist that the robed being nodded slightly and accompanied the other three, his footfalls barely resounding on the smooth surface beneath him.

Meanwhile, Thor was perhaps on the verge of disrupting the entire ruse by speaking several decibels too loudly and laughing somewhat nervously at every quip Tony was making. As the robed figure was ascending the entrance ramp to the starship, Heimdall’s amber eyes flicked keenly over Tony’s shoulder, and the billionaire had to run quick interference. “Wow!” he exclaimed with too much enthusiasm, “that is a massive, massive sword. May I?” The act of lunging for his weapon had fully captured the watchman’s attention once more, and Heimdall tightened his grip on the object while simultaneously withdrawing it from the Midgardian’s reach. “Hey, at ease, big guy,” Tony continued in a more sincere and soothing manner. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.” Despite the potentially absurd nature of this comment, Heimdall somehow managed to remain perfectly composed, his glossy, auburn eyes trained intently on the much smaller being.

“If I may, Heimdall, my friend,” Thor coaxed, reaching hesitantly for the other’s sword, “I had vowed to show Anthony the markings around the hilt . . .”

The watchman warily handed him the enormous blade, but his manner remained both skeptical and vigilant.

“These markings here, along the handle,,” Thor said casually, turning the weapon back and forth slightly to show the entirety of the design. “They are the words of a powerful enchantment, placed upon the sword by the Allfather -- my father -- Odin, son of Bor, and Lord of the Nine Realms. It makes this weapon nearly invulnerable.”

Tony gazed wide-eyed at the glinting metal, his expression nearly too entranced. “That is impressive,” he said to the sword’s owner with a lift of his eyebrows. “Truly, truly, incredible.”

“And here, along the cross-guard,” the blonde warrior continued, “Are the words of my grandfather, King Bor . . .”

As Thor was extemporizing about the engravings, Stark had peeked back over his shoulder to see if the others had made it onto the ship. All of the team had indeed boarded the vessel by this point, with the exception of Dr. Banner, who remained pressed against the observation window with the reverence of a child at a fireworks display.

“Mmmm,” Tony hummed, “Now, that is really interesting, and I would loooovve to hear more about it at some further point in time.” These words were stilted and overdramatized.

“However, I believe our flight is in the final stages of boarding, and we are on the clock,” he lectured, tapping the wrist of his suit as if it were a watch face. “I hear that Titan customs can be a bitch.”
“Understood.” Thor laughed anxiously and shoved the sword quickly back into Heimdall’s grasp.

Stark and the Asgardian shuffled quickly over to where Banner still stood transfixed by the scenery, their departure so swift and uncoordinated that it almost certainly seemed hasty. Tony clapped Bruce roughly on the shoulder, causing him to shake off his trance long enough to be led towards the starship, although he did stumble somewhat as he became accustomed to the frantic pace set for him by his escorts.

Just as they were stuffing the scientist unceremoniously into the entry hatch, Bruce managed to catch sight of the golden-clad guardian -- he was leaning on his sword, and his face was pinched in a troubled expression, but he did not move to hinder their retreat.

* * * * *

The ship itself was extremely compact, barely holding the five Avengers and Loki in the main compartment, which left Coulson and his wards relegated to the meager sleeping chamber.

“Shotgun!” said Tony enthusiastically, his armor causing him to slump heavily into the co-pilot’s seat. Since Thor had insisted on occupying the pilot’s chair (even though there would be little use for steering until the appropriate moment to navigate between the two moons arrived) this declaration forced the remaining passengers to huddle awkwardly in the back row of seating, which was closely connected at the sides like a row of theater chairs. It did not go unnoticed by Thor that his teammates had left an open seat next to his insidious brother, and they each leaned just slightly away from him in what was likely a subconscious motion. Loki, his hood now brushed back from his face, did not acknowledge the subtle slight, and instead sat placidly, studying the bindings around his wrists with casual disgust.

Without warning, the craft began to vibrate, and the sensation that they were hovering just inches from the ground was almost instantly replaced by the feeling of hurtling through space. Although the craft held them firmly in their seats, the pilot’s window displayed a familiar mosaic of light, the unsettling image of which lasted less than a minute, and then they were sitting peacefully -- and unbelievably -- on the deeply scarred and irregular face of Hyperion, with the eerily beautiful silhouette of its ringed parent-planet hovering silently on the horizon.

Thor surveyed the instruments and the navigation screen with an austere demeanor that lightened gradually into pride. “We are on the side of Hyperion which is furthest from Titan,” he announced happily. “It is likely that Thanos’ army has no knowledge that we are here.”

“Oh, Heimdall, you big beautiful bastard!” Tony exclaimed after he verified the truth of this statement with his own eyes.

The interior of the craft lurched slightly as Thor guided it into the nearest crater, bringing it to rest in a manner which was more than a little rough, and the jostle at the end earned the Asgardian a sharp look from his otherwise silent sibling. When the movement stopped, Stark crossed the few steps from the copilot’s chair to where the God of Mischief sat, his arms crossed partly in boredom, and partly in annoyance. “Well, Jafar,” Tony declared, slapping a heavy, metal-enshrouded hand down on the Asgardian’s shoulder, “Now comes the time when you make yourself useful.”

“I have been counting the hours,” Loki all but growled with derision.

Sensing that the prisoner was going to have a spate of uncooperativeness, Steve moved to stand at
Tony’s shoulder. “I bet you have,” Steve shot back incredulously. “But I think it’s time for you to earn your keep -- and by doing something honest for a change.”

“I am hardly in a position to argue,” Loki sighed, holding up his shackled wrists to indicate his helpless nature. The stern glares he received from Steve and Tony, however, showed that his pretense at being defenseless was not well-received. “What would you ask of me?” he relented.

“Thanos has defensive shields around Titan, doesn’t he?” Steve asked plainly.

“Indeed. Only a fool would not.”

“Well, you are in charge of making them go bye-bye,” Stark informed him. “And you have just a few precious hours to figure out how, Princess, so I suggest you get to work.”

“You must be joking,” the sorcerer huffed.

“I’m afraid not,” Rogers insisted. “It’s the one thing we haven’t been able to work out quite yet, and, since you like to pride yourself on being the smartest person in the room -- well, now you get to prove it.” Stark ruffled a little at the insinuation of Loki’s superior intelligence, but he did not interrupt.

“And if I do not succeed?” the sorcerer inquired, his left eyebrow crooked in a leering gesture. Neither man responded with words, but they both tapped conspicuously on the matching wristbands they still wore. “I should have deduced as much,” the prisoner replied with an obvious eye roll. “Very well,” he acquiesced, rising with some residual dignity. “I will need some privacy.”

“There are only two rooms on the ship,” Dr. Banner interjected softly, “and too many of us to gather everyone in either of them. I’m afraid you are going to have to make do.”

Loki’s jaw clenched with frustration, but he did not otherwise manifest any of his ill temper. “Fine,” he muttered haughtily before disappearing into the sleeping chamber.

When the cloaked figure was no longer visible, Natasha cleared her throat to gain the others’ attention. “What do we do if he fails?” she stated. “We have no way of knowing if those shields are truly down until we reach them and find out whether or not we explode. What if he betrays us?”

“Then we will all die.” Thor answered, one finger stroking his chin thoughtfully.

“Well, that’s comforting,” Tony replied. He sat down next to Bruce gracelessly, all grandeur forgotten as he let his limbs hang lifelessly around him.

“Although I am not without hope,” Thor continued, and yet his face did not look any less severe. “Oh?” Rogers challenged him.

“We do have one advantage, and it is a considerable one: Loki is with us.”

The significance of this statement was not immediately apparent to the group, as they continued to look from one to another of themselves indecisively. Finally, Banner broke the bewildered silence: “If he’s here with us, he will have to save us or else he dies himself. It’s like he said when he was at the Hub -- I’m going to have to paraphrase, but he mentioned it was fortunate for us that he was on our world because then he would be forced to help us save it.”

This revelation should have lifted their spirits at least a bit, but instead they all continued to stew in
an uncertain hush. “If that’s so,” Natasha mused eventually, “then why are none of us convinced?”

*** *** ***

Loki surveyed the sleeping quarters with a pleased smirk. Blackout, Vermin, and Director Coulson were lying unconscious and draped over the queen-sized mattress, limbs entangled and still very much shackled together. The two prisoners were probably thoroughly drugged again, but the agent was likely catching up on some much needed rest now that the bulk of the excitement had passed . . . at least for now. ‘Perfect,’ the Trickster thought to himself as he settled fastidiously into a chair by the foot of the bed. He sat motionlessly for a long moment, gathering enough strength from his hidden power source to tap into his restrained magic. He waved his dominant hand absently over the sleeping trio to ensure that they would remain in repose for the duration of his efforts and then cast a simple warding spell over the entrance so that no one could enter without him being forewarned.

When he was convinced that he would be undisturbed, Loki focused on the energy of the Tesseract, recalling it from its clandestine position until it lay resonating in his outspread hands. The proximity of so much raw strength was pleasing, to the extent that it became nearly addictive in these moments when there was nothing but himself and the bare energy pulsing against his skin, the warm intensity pooling along his nerve endings and making his flesh feel awakened somehow . . . more alive. Yet this sweet trickle of power which fed him came at a price, he had to remind himself, and it was a cost which he could not afford to pay for much longer.

Oh, but the things it can show you . . .

He shrugged off the tantalizing nature of this thought pragmatically, knowing that it was not worth what it would siphon from him as payment. There was nothing he needed to see at this moment other than the inside of that Titan outpost, and he drew all of his focus to bear upon that place, willing himself to project his form once more into the control room where that libidinous Inhuman was preening himself in front of his own reflection in the console glass, unaware that he was being observed.

“Maelstrom,” he murmured almost at the very ear of the being he had named, causing the other to jolt upright in his seat and spin toward the intruder. His face brightened into an immediate smile.

“Well, well,” Maelstrom replied, his voice dropping suddenly into a lower register. “I was wondering when I might see you again.”

“Well, well,” Maelstrom replied, his voice dropping suddenly into a lower register. “I was wondering when I might see you again.”

“And now you have,” the projected image purred, allowing its hand to linger just a hint too long on the shoulder of the man he addressed. “It is time for me to utilize you,” Loki continued, choosing his words so as to be blatantly suggestive. He punctuated this statement by taking the seat next to Malestrom, swiping the lengthy folds of his coat aside in order to extend his long legs and bring them to rest on the console, crossed brashly at the ankle. To his surprise, the Inhuman was less overt than he had been at their last meeting, making an obvious attempt not to assess his sudden visitor too closely. When he spoke, however, his tongue did cling a bit too long to his palate, betraying that his mouth had gone dry. “And what would you have me do?” Maelstrom whispered, his fingers running absently along the edge of the metallic surface before him.

“Exactly what I ask, when I ask . . . remember?”
His colleague nodded simply, his tongue skimming quickly over his lower lip.

The sorcerer used his index finger to draw a series of numbers in the air before him, the green-hued trail of his magic leaving the symbols visible for only a moment before they faded into the darkness. “At this precise moment, you will lower the defensive shields around Titan. You will leave them open for four Terran minutes and then close them again.”

The Inhuman’s features transformed into one of his signature tooth-revealing grins. “And how will I explain this to my . . . superiors?” he inquired without meeting the other man’s gaze. The final word stuck in his throat as if it were physically distasteful.

“You are quite clever, my friend,” Loki chuckled warmly. “Just fashion it to look like a power surge or some similar electrical incident. I am certain you can manage that.” The last statement ended in just a hint of a challenge.

Maelstrom never could resist a challenge.

“Of course,” the Inhuman replied with a soft smirk and a smooth flourish of his fingers. “And what will I receive in return?”

_Hmmmm . . . that was an interesting statement, considering there had been no direct compensation discussed in their initial encounter. Too bad._

“Loyalty is its own reward,” Loki said with a playful smile.

“As long as you are on the winning side,” Maelstrom responded with an equally impish grin.

“And you shall be,” replied the mage, as he stood and straightened the edges of his apparel where the leather had gathered when he had been seated -- or rather where it would have done so if he had actually been sitting there. “If you lower those shields for the time that I have indicated, you will have all the vengeance you desire,” Loki said confidently. “And more,” he promised, one eye closing in a taunting wink as his form dissolved from sight.

***.***

Back in the sleeping quarters of the Asgardian ship, Loki’s true form unfolded its limbs and stretched its neck. His features did not reflect any of the jesting nature of the interaction in which he had just participated, but rather a somber, more pensive mood. There were so many threads in his web of deception that it was leaving him stretched thin from all the simultaneous points of stress, and the burden left him both overwrought and vaguely annoyed.

Plus, there was another complication which needed his immediate attention.

The sorcerer’s fingers danced around the rim of the metal encircling his throat, imagining with a shudder the fibrous, finger-like electrodes which had bored so deeply into his skin. Daring to reach once more for a strand of the Cube’s seductive power, he guided it surreptitiously to the edge of the damnable collar, separating the energy into smaller sections and snaking them beneath the metal and into the channels where the foreign material had pierced his unwilling flesh. He then directed the thin bands of light to burrow under the fine ends of the electrodes, although the concentration required for such precise manipulations of the chaotic forces which he sought to control caused perspiration to bead on his forehead and above his upper lip. In painstaking succession, he was able
to wiggle them free from his subdermal tissue and loop them back upon themselves, the delicate points leading back into the metallic ring rather than his central nervous system. If the energy was released upon him now, it would likely scorch the outer layer of skin before the restraint tore itself apart, but it would not incapacitate him.

His arduous task completed, Loki let his back rest heavily against the wall behind him. He felt the drain of the magic that wielding the Cube had cost him, which was closely followed by the draw of something else -- something more vital -- from the ends of his extremities. Although this second force could not be detected, the Asgardian mourned its loss more acutely than that of his power, because it would not replenish, and its depletion would leave him weaker and more vulnerable than ever before. Catching sight of his image in the reflective surface of the window to his left confirmed what he already knew: he was more sallow, his skin more discolored, and his eyes perceptibly duller than just moments ago. Like a candle, the Tesseract was consuming a bit of its host each time it was employed.

The process was painfully slow, but it was definitely killing him.
“Look at me,” said the voice, its tone harsh and resonating. It was unfamiliar to him, but the malicious quality and deep register of the speaker’s words should have caused his already troubled heart to quicken with fear. Instead, all that was awakened in him was both a biting humiliation and a nauseating shame as he bent his knee to the enormous creature that leaned over him. Although he could not perceive more than its silhouette, he knew that it wore a supremely smug expression, and he could feel his throat tighten as he swallowed hard, biting on his lower lip ungently enough to draw blood as he attempted to gather the nerve to look his interrogator in the eye.

“I said look at me,” the voice repeated, and he felt two rough, thick fingers slip beneath his chin and press upward with a strength that forced him to comply. The face, too, was unidentifiable to him, but the strangeness and fearsome sharpness of the creature’s visage was enough to cause him to want to wriggle free from the grip of the supernatural hand which held him fast. Curiously, however, he did not attempt to look away, even though every limb in his body was screaming with the urgent need to flee from this overpowering presence. He merely gazed up at the severe-looking alien, his chin surprisingly steady in its mammoth hand.

“I know who you are, my Prince,” the mysterious behemoth spat, and his lips curled into an expression which was as pleased as it was enraged. “You can no longer hide behind the anonymity that life in my prison has afforded you. So sad . . . ” the voice rumbled without any of the pity his words portrayed. “And yet,” the unknown man continued, releasing his hold as he spoke, “this makes you useful, which is to your benefit.”

Clint Barton could feel the perspiration beading on the nape of his neck, and yet the depth of his fear should have been causing him much more agitation than his body was displaying. He could feel his heartbeat slow and steady in his chest, the only irregularity being the tense sensation which emanated from around his sternum, a feeling which was more like outrage than terror. His inability to control his own reactions was beginning to be almost more frightening to him than his confronter.

As the gigantic being retreated to sit on the smoothly-edged throne behind him, Clint’s eyes flicked...
over to the woman who was flanking the giant’s position, her eyes downcast as if in reverence. However, a closer glance revealed that her hands were tautly curled into fists and her perfect, pearly teeth were worrying her bottom lip as if she longed to unleash a barely-restrained rage. Like the behemoth, she was supernatural in her appearance: her skin was a deep, striking blue and her naked head as smooth as glass. Yet her eyes were the most startling aspect of her -- the orbs like polished onyx from their center to their edges -- and they were trained on him unwaveringly.

“I have a proposal for you, Asgardian,” the alien announced with an unnerving smile and then allowed the ramifications to linger silently as he sat back into his large, high-backed chair.

‘Asgardian’? Clint tried to part his lips to offer protest to this title, but his mouth remained clenched tightly shut despite his attempts. His eyes were still focused on the enormous being in the chair, and it allowed him to make out the finer details of his appearance whether he consciously chose to or not: his jaw was shockingly squared-off, and he had deep ridges that ran vertically along his countenance, like furrows cut into his dusky, lavender flesh. His eyes were so vividly pale blue that they emitted a faint phosphorescence in the dimly-lit room, and when he flashed a smile, the gesture was cruel and consuming, dominating the majority of his face in an expression which made Clint shudder -- at least inwardly. He still strangely did not seem to have any control over this body whatsoever.

“Your simulations with the Tesseract have been encouraging,” the colossus continued. “I believe that you may be able to utilize it to open a portal to the planet on which it resides. It is my command that you cross through this portal and return the Cube to my possession.”

Oddly, Barton could feel the beginnings of a laugh trembling in his chest. “That would require an army,” he chuckled, the words falling out despite him not having thought them.

“Granted,” the oversized alien stated unemotionally. The mammoth creature then sat flush against the back of the throne and pressed his fingers together with a satisfied hum. “Do we have an agreement?”

“Thanos,” Clint’s voice continued in spite of himself, and the foreign word fell easily from his unwilling tongue, “As much as I admire your unbridled enthusiasm, I have to point out that this request is pure madness.” As this forced declaration left his lips, Barton realized that the voice which issued from his mouth, though not his own, was all too familiar . . .

***...***

“Loki!” Agent Barton wheezed, his unconscious form grasping at the empty air around him.

Agent Melinda May had been assigned to watch over him as he lay in his medicated, half-waking state, and she looked up casually from the novel she was reading on her smartphone app to assess the cause of his latest restlessness. His brow was saturated with perspiration, and he appeared to be trying to sit up despite his medically-induced slumber. She laid a calming hand on his left shoulder but was completely prepared to use this soothing grip to force him down and hold him prone if the need arose. However, she made an attempt at avoiding this with a few mollifying words:

“It’s okay, Clint . . . you’re safe,” she whispered. “Loki is millions of miles from here by now, I promise you.”

***...***

“I cannot assure success, even with battalions of Chitauri at my command,” his traitorous tongue
went on. Knowing now that he was somehow confined inside the body of the God of Mischief made Barton desperate to move, to speak -- to somehow govern this shell that moved and spoke without his consent. He even struggled to cry out, but his mouth was numb and heavy, and his extremities were pinned in a paralytic torpor -- at least when he wanted them to obey him. Otherwise, they moved quite readily, just not at his own behest.

“I do not need you to achieve victory, exactly,” Thanos laughed. “I just need you to bring me the Tesseract. The means and the aftermath are really none of my concern.” He rested the long, blunt end of his chin upon the point formed by his entwined fingers.

“I would not reveal that strategy to the Other or to his Chitauri soldiers, if I were you,” Loki chided wickedly. “They might be less enthusiastic about the prospect of this invasion.”

“Once they have delivered the sceptre to you, I have no interest in what their fates may be,” the Titan confessed with gleeful indifference. “The Mind Gem is the key to achieving the Cube, and the Cube is the instrument with which I will demonstrate my superiority over those who would oppose me . . . or seek to compete with me.”

Clint’s eyes locked again with the hairless, blue woman who stood at the Titan’s elbow, and the look that passed between them was pregnant with unspoken meaning: a potent mix of mutual abhorrence for the being who controlled them, perhaps a trickle of fondness which softened her features for the briefest of instances, and then a further weakening of her steely countenance into something more tender, but sickeningly so. Was it . . . sympathy? The idea caused his heart to tense and sting with pure, black resentment. He felt the form that he inhabited dig its nails brutally into the flesh of his fists as he met the eyes of Thanos’ resolutely, even though every nerve in his body was singing with the desire to apply blunt force to that wicked murderer’s pompous grin . . . and to choke the life mercilessly from her for having the audacity to pity him when he would be the one to subjugate that pathetic race of mortals and then bring his power back to bear on Thanos, making him choke on his own blood, if necessary . . .

For a terrifying instant, Barton felt his desires converge with that of the body he ineptly haunted, sharing the fury and outrage of his host until it was indecipherable from his own will. He wrestled with the crushing urge to rush at both at them, to lash out at them with fists and blades and teeth until he could taste their blood, feel it seep between his fingers and mingle with the salty sweat on his skin -- his hate was visceral, a living entity with a need to subdue, to bruise, to tear, and to kill. If only he had his bow, he could plant a glistening, metal shaft through the centers of each of their heads, and then fall upon them again as they lay wounded and dying, to pierce them again and again and again until all that had been done to him was written upon their bodies in ugly, yawning wounds which would tell what he had seen, what he had done, what had been done to him . . .

***.*.*.*

Agent May was using all of her strength to keep Barton pinned to the mattress, but his constant flailing and writhing was making him impossible to contain. With one of her feet, she swiped furiously at the panic button located on the wall next to the bed as she continued to grapple with the rabid thrashing of her fellow agent, his power nearly supernatural in his adrenaline-fueled haze. Eventually, he began to overcome her, and she made one last valiant kick with the toe of her boot which just barely connected with the square white button that would alert her colleagues of her peril. This move came not a moment too soon as Clint managed to surround her throat with his hands and immediately began to press his thumbs against her windpipe, cutting off her airflow. She fought back fiercely, turning frantically in his grip in an attempt to gain any leverage at all, but all she managed was to slip an arm between them, and she pressed her elbow into his sternum where she knew that sharp pressure would also mean pain. This desperate act did result in a brief
slackening of the tension against her airway, but it came back almost immediately.

It was just as she was blacking out that she heard determined pounding on the door outside Barton’s cell . . .

***.**.***

Thor had spent the last several minutes entering data into the touch-screen navigation computer while the team sat anxiously around him, each of them trying to pretend that they were not secretly peeking at what he was doing in some vain attempt to double-check his work. It was a task that none of them could interpret -- well, none except for his hypercritical sibling, who stood over him at irregular intervals, occasionally making suggestions on the way that the information was submitted to the brain of their vessel. Although Thor did tense when his brother made these not-so-subtle recommendations, he always seemed to follow them, or at least as far as the others could conclude.

Eventually, Loki dropped gracefully into the co-pilot’s chair and scanned the control panel with an analytical eye. “It’s time, Thor,” he declared. “We have to go.” The sorcerer’s tone was insistent, even bordering on irritable. The elder sibling hastily typed in the last few data points while the younger stared him down with agitation. “Now, Thor!” he emphasized, reaching across the larger man’s personal space to activate the thrusters.

“I am going!” Thor insisted, slapping the other man’s hand away testily. “Must I remind you that this is the pilot’s seat?” He opened his hands to indicate the chair in which he was resting.

“No. Must I remind you that we are on a very rigid timetable?” Loki hissed caustically, crossing his arms in a churlish huff. “If you want us to die, then by all means, brother, please continue to fritter away the time until we burst into flames as we make contact with those shields at exactly the incorrect moment!” The mockery in his voice was anything but subtle.

Natasha rolled her eyes in impatient disgust. As she did so, she heard Bruce chuckle softly beside her, and she gave him a curious glance. “Sorry,” he shrugged. “I’ve just never really seen them as brothers until right now.” His eyes were still fixed on the feuding pair as if he were viewing a primetime sitcom, his irises glowing with amusement.

“I don’t get it, Bruce,” she chastised him, albeit gently. “How are you not completely terrified right now?”

Banner shrugged, but his lips were still curled in a playful smirk. “I’m not entirely sure,” he revealed. “I’m actually surprisingly relaxed, considering the circumstances.” He lay one hand on his knee while the other stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe its because I don’t have much to lose. I have no one in my life, and my prospects for companionship and domestic bliss are pretty limited. So, to me, this whole ordeal is more like an intergalactic field trip. I mean, when we land we’ll be standing on one of Saturn’s moons! It’s surreal.”

“As long as Loki’s done his job with the shields, you mean. Otherwise, we’ll be scattered all over one of Saturn’s moons,” Natasha quipped grimly.

“Still kind of surreal, though,” Bruce chuckled. “After all, did you ever think in a million years that your life would end that way?” Without further explanation, Banner excused himself to go check on the two prisoners in the sleeping quarters.

“Lucky bastard,” Tony declared as he sat down heavily next to Natasha, the components of his mechanical suit whirring softly as they negotiated the movement. “He gets to be in the back where
he can pretend none of this is happening. We, on the other hand get to watch the Asgardian Smothers Brothers argue over who Mom liked best.” In his right hand, Tony was holding a brown, glass bottle of what appeared to be beer. When he brought it to his lips, Romanov could clearly smell that her hunch was correct as the acrid, yeasty smell of the alcohol penetrated her nostrils. “I keep one of these in the suit for possible near-death scenarios. Want a nip?” he asked almost chivalrously as he wiggled the bottle between his first finger and his thumb.

She nodded wordlessly and then found the beverage being placed gently in her dominant hand. “Spasibo,” she thanked him in her native tongue.

“Pazhalusta,” Stark replied, his accent questionable. After a companionable silence, the billionaire asked, “So, how’re you holding up?” without making any eye contact.

“Passably,” she admitted, handing him back his drink. “Yourself?”

“On the exterior, I am zen incarnate.” He quickly drained the remainder of the beer. “On the inside, however -- well, I wish this getup had waste removal capabilities.” Natasha offered a minimal laugh, although nerves were still tempering her mirth. “What kind of odds are you giving that Asgard’s least popular son has actually disabled those shields?” Tony balanced the beer bottle on his knee and used both hands to ruffle his sweat-dampened hair.

The ship was continuing a slow reverse from the smaller moon, and the details of its deeply pock-marked surface filled the pilot’s viewing window. Thor was concentrating admirably on several different control panels, and the movement of the ship remained gentle. Then, without warning, several amber-colored floodlights began to glow within the darkened cockpit, and a sequence of pleasant but insistent tones began to play from an unseen audio source.

“What does that mean?” said Steve Rogers who was sitting just behind the pilot’s area. He looked as if he might be well and truly sick at any moment.

Thor turned his head to where he could see Rogers in the corner of his vision. “It means you all should restrain yourselves for maximum velocity.”

Ever the military man, Steve had already buckled himself into his seat, but Tony and Natasha scrambled to belt themselves in as quickly as they could. Meanwhile, Loki’s hands snaked over surreptitiously to address an area on the screen which was flashing softly. When Thor detected this, he gave his sibling a heated glare.

“I thought I told you that I have this under control!” he growled.

His brother held up his restrained hands in surrender and declined to respond for several empty seconds before replying, “I was merely activating the cloaking mechanism before we rounded the edge of this moon and revealed ourselves to the enemy right about . . . now.” He marked off the exact moment that would have been the end of their journey without his last-minute intervention, his face sporting a justified sneer.

“Oh,” the blonde man mumbled without offering any praise.

As they left the edge of Hyperion behind, the vessel suddenly burst forward at a dizzying pace, firmly pressing the passengers against the backs of their seats. Thor lay his hand just above the main control screen where a ghost-like image of a hand had appeared. This projection was directly related to controlling the bearing of the ship, Natasha guessed, and this supposition was confirmed as she watched Thor’s hand curve smoothly toward the image of Titan which was just appearing in their view, the ship following his motion precisely. When the craft had finished its arc, Thor
touched a series of lights on the console and proclaimed that he was starting the auto-navigation sequence.

Even at the incredible rate of speed that they must have been travelling, Natasha found herself growing almost bored as Titan grew steadily nearer for the better part of two hours. Oddly, the occupants of the ship did not interact much during this tedious approach but instead shifted restlessly in their seats as if they were watching some overlong and uninteresting motion picture. The closer the moon grew, however, the more focused the team became. Details of the atmosphere became clearer, the colors of the predominantly golden haze which enshrouded the surface became amplified, and changing bands of orange and green faded into view around the edges as the face they were approaching caught the rays of the impossibly distant sun. For a few moments, Natasha understood what Bruce had been trying to convey to her: to observe something so remote and ethereally beautiful this closely would nicely bookend a human life if it had to come to that.

Finally, when the dense atmosphere of the moon completely filled the main window, Loki leaned forward and studied the time readings on the co-pilot’s control screen, his features focused and deathly serious. Natasha guessed that this was likely a bad sign.

“Slow down, Thor,” he said earnestly. “We are early.”

“How is that possible? I followed your instructions precisely,” his brother protested, hastily reviewing the data on the navigation panel.

“Space navigation is different than navigation on the surface of a world. I am assuming that the instruments on this ship were calibrated to domestic travel,” Loki stated, a brief hint of tension in his voice. “We need only delay entry into Titan’s atmosphere by a few moments and all will be well.” The tight line of his lips, however, betrayed that he was not so certain of his own declaration.

Thor dropped the craft’s speed several-fold, causing the passengers to be jostled roughly in their seats. A well-defined thump followed by a pained cry from Coulson could be heard coming from the sleeping area.

“That is slowly enough,” Loki instructed, his eyes locked on the passage of time as it was displayed on the console. “When I tell you to descend, do so immediately,” he stated with authority.

Natasha looked around at her companions, and their body language conveyed that they shared her growing apprehension. Both Asgardians were gripping the arms of their chairs so tightly that their veins had become very prominent, and their eyes never left their respective consoles. Just behind them, Steve Rogers sat rigidly, his jaw clenched, and he was reflexively covering his abdomen with his hand as if he might yet throw up. Tony was pale and covered in perspiration from the neck up -- and likely the rest of the way down even though she couldn’t see it through his armour. They floated like this, approaching the moon at a tiresome crawl for what seemed like hours but was likely only a handful of minutes before Loki suddenly shouted, “Now, Thor! Go!”

The blonde warrior tipped his hand forward on the controls, and they were suddenly moving forward and slightly downwards quite rapidly. There was almost no time to consider when they were fully engulfed in the moon’s murky haze that they had passed through the shields unharmed since they immediately began a downward trajectory toward the surface of the moon at incredible speed. Although they still had no visual on the ground, Natasha could tell that they were falling far too fast by the force that was crushing her against the back of the chair.

“You can slow our descent now, Thor!” Loki exclaimed. “We have passed the defensive shields!”
To everyone’s relief, their downward plunge ended abruptly, although the Midgardians would likely bear bruises from the harnesses for some time to come. Then a second loud bump followed by Coulson spouting a short series of impolite phrases could be heard from behind the door to the other room. Loki shot an outraged glare at his sibling, and then sat back in his chair as if exhausted. Finally, to everyone’s relief, there was minimal retching and no sounds of actual vomiting from behind the pilots’ chairs.

“Where should I land?” Thor asked with more than a trace of satisfaction.

“Well, I would not choose the main landing area, if I were you,” Loki said.

“Can you be more specific?” his sibling coaxed sarcastically as the brotherly dynamic began to surface once more.

Loki did not immediately respond.

“I am going to need an answer, brother,” Thor said, his words becoming clipped and impatient.

“I am still considering, brother,” the dark-haired sibling shot back with identical inflection.

As they approached the terrain of the moon, their speed decreased to a point where the occupants of the vessel felt as if they could loosen or even detach their harnesses. The door to the back room opened, and Bruce stepped forward, instantly mesmerized by what he was seeing through the front window. “I’ll be damned,” he whispered.

“I need some direction, LOKI!” Thor proclaimed harshly.

“And I will give it to you if you would just see fit to SHUT UP for a single moment!”

Banner cautiously approached the front of the ship, unnoticed by the feuding brothers and quietly assessing the moon’s surface as it took shape between the thinning veil of its atmosphere. “There,” he said finally, his voice startling the bickering Asgardians into a brief silence. They looked down the physicist’s arm to the area that his pointing finger was indicating. Thor then used the pilot’s controls to enhance the view of the area on the main viewing screen.

“That is . . . quite sufficient, actually,” Loki conceded, his look nonjudgmental. “It is away from the main landing area and shielded behind a large enough structure to keep anyone from detecting whatever evidence of our landing that we cannot conceal. Plus, the building appears to be unguarded -- a possible storage facility of some sort, perhaps -- so there will be minimal foot traffic.” He used the controls in front of him to expand the image further, adjusting the main vantage point several times so that he could better survey the surroundings. “Ideally, it would be closer to the main compound, but it is a far better landing site than I had hoped for in most other respects.”

“I’m entering the approximate coordinates now,” Thor informed them. “The vessel’s automatic navigation program will take control from now on.” The blonde Asgardian then pushed himself away from the console. The velocity of the craft slowed gradually as the ground drew nearer, until they were deposited surprisingly gently onto the surface of the celestial body below. No one dared to breathe as the interior lighting brightened and the sound of the propulsion system softened and then ceased.

A few tense minutes later, Stark finally broke the silence: “Would now be the moment to ask if anyone bothered to figure out a way for us to breathe out there, or is it a bit late for that?”
“Are we still proceeding as planned?” asked Agent Deeds as he and Henry Gyrich surveyed what had been Clint Barton’s holding cell, the contents now scattered and parts of it damaged beyond repair. The unconscious but breathing body of Agent May had been removed and taken to the infirmary, but there was still plenty of evidence of the struggle that had just occurred. In the end, Barton had overpowered all three of the agents who had tried to contain him and then effectively vanished.

“Absolutely,” Gyrich answered immediately. “The fate of the planet is no less in the balance than it was twenty minutes ago, even if Agent Barton wasn’t out there somewhere and beyond our control. How have the tests been going?” He was referring to the testing of the propulsion system on the prototype -- now a functional test version -- starship, which would be carrying its payload of S.W.O.R.D. agents past escape velocity in less than twenty-four hours. It had been rather darkly nicknamed the ‘Titanic’, both in honor of its destination and in reference to the amount of faith that most of the agency personnel (including the flight crew) had in its ability to complete its mission.

“As well as can be expected, under the circumstances,” Deeds replied. He glanced anxiously at the time displayed on the face of his cell phone, his brow visibly beading with perspiration. “I just don’t think it’s going to be enough.”

“Well, it has to be,” Henry said stoically. He looked away down the hall, and Deeds detected that, for a mere instant, he seemed dreadfully unsure. “It just has to be,” he repeated more softly, as if to reassure himself of his own statement. “Any leads on Barton?”

Deeds indicated the negative. “We are continuing to sweep the compound, but there have been no confirmed sightings yet. We’ll keep at it.”

“You do that,” Agent Gyrich responded, his tone austere but not hostile. “And make sure to tell your men that they should look high and low -- but likely more high than low. The Hawk has a penchant for heights.”

“Understood,” the younger agent nodded. He was just turning to retreat back down the adjacent hall when the raucous buzzing and flashing lights of the alarm system began.

“Attention all S.H.I.E.L.D. and S.W.O.R.D. personnel,” came the electronically amplified voice of Assistant Director Maria Hill, “There is an emergency situation in B wing, Hangar 15. All available agents make your way to that location immediately -- B Wing, Hangar 15,” she repeated emphatically.

Deeds instantly spun on his heel and headed back to follow Gyrich down the opposite corridor. Their eyes met in a knowing yet helpless gaze. “Hanger 15,” Agent Deeds said gravely.

“That’s no coincidence,” Henry stated as he drew his handgun and let it dangle at his hip as they increased their speed. “Barton must be trying to hijack the ship.”
Blackout lunged forward, stretching the length of the chain that held him and nearly dragging Phil off the bed in the process. “You are not leaving us behind!” he growled.

“Hey, take it easy,” Banner urged him, holding up the syringe in his hand so that it was easily recognizable. “Because if you don’t calm down on your own, I will have to give you a little chemical assistance. So, let’s just do this the simple way, if at all possible.” It had been Bruce’s idea to allow Blackout and Vermin the opportunity to regain consciousness and be briefed on the situation. He had insisted that it was inhumane to leave them sedated on a ship which was surrounded by all manner of potential dangers without clueing them in at least somewhat as to what their situation was. Most of those on board were staunchly opposed to this suggestion, but when Steve Rogers threw his support behind Bruce, it naturally swayed the others -- if not to agree, then to at least withdraw any vocal opposition.

So far, however, the outcome of this request had been less than ideal.

While Blackout fumed and spat, yanking Phil to-and-fro like a marionette with twisted strings, Vermin was perched on the opposite side of the mattress, eying his own hands with almost no interest whatsoever. After listening to his comrade threaten and demean their captors for several minutes, the rodentine being slowly lifted his head and turned it toward the rather one-sided conversation. “This is fruitless, Blackout,” he sighed. The simple but soft clarity of his words seemed to stop his colleague’s tirade almost instantly. “We are in no position to make demands.” This remark calmed Blackout enough that he ceased to pull on his fetters and sat quietly, and yet a hatefully restrained look still crept across his features as he waited for his cohort to continue. “We may have been brought here without our consent, but it hardly makes any difference how we got here -- we’re here now, and we are in danger from all sides. I think we should make the best of this situation, such as it is.” The rolling, affectionate quality of his voice made him seem more like some fireside philosopher than a career criminal.

The sound of a throat being cleared came from the back of the room, and the company turned all heads toward it. “If I may . . .” Loki began. Rogers waved him forward, but he advanced leisurely, untroubled by the urgent press of time. He stopped just in front of the Lilin who was looking down and away with naked revulsion. The Asgardian knelt before the demon, and yet he was still tall enough that the pair nearly looked eye-to-eye; it did not go unnoticed, however, that he had settled far enough back that he would be further than an arm’s length from his enemy. “A little privacy, please?” he asked testily over his shoulder. The remaining passengers -- or at least the ones who were not shackled to Blackout -- took a few hesitant steps out into the cockpit area while still remaining within the immediate vicinity of the room, and Phil shifted to the furthest corner of the bed next to Vermin and faced away from the conversation.

“I know we have had our differences in the past,” Loki began in a whisper. The Lilin huffed in irritation at the obvious understatement. “And I know that you have no reason to place your trust in me,” he continued. “However, do not be such a fool that you would throw away the opportunity that has been given to you. I know what you have suffered at the hands of Thanos, and that even when you were attempting to cooperate with him he was unspeakably cruel. I know that he has made monstrous threats against those you love . . .” Blackout’s head snapped forward at this statement, and he was clearly startled by it. “And I also know that he has made good on those horrible promises at times to keep you under his control. Now we are both here, standing on the same moon upon which that fiend has concentrated his power, and we are surrounded by a team of those who would see his evil deeds undone. Can you not see far enough past your anger to grasp the value of this situation?”
Blackout’s face was still slack with astonishment at how much his adversary actually knew about him, but a glint of seething resentment did linger in his narrowed eyes.

“Here is our moment to end all of the suffering that Thanos has caused and all the anguish that has been born of his misdeeds,” Loki continued. When the pale man dropped his head to indicate that he was losing interest in this diatribe, the sorcerer closed a hand around his upper arm with painful force. The demon hissed and bared his spiked teeth, but Loki only moved his head right in front of that of the other, their noses nearly coming into contact from the proximity. “You have been given this one moment to save your family from the threat of whatever horrors the Titan would inflict upon them if you disobey him. Free them and free yourself,” the mage implored, his voice still a low whisper.

“Why should I trust you, Liesmith?” Blackout retorted, his words so tinged with rage that he was hardly murmuring anymore.

“It is not a matter of trusting me,” Loki responded flatly. “This is about not squandering the one possibility that you have been given to spare the ones you love. I shall not ask for your cooperation again.” The sorcerer then raised himself up to his full height so that he was looking squarely down on the demon’s bowed head, his shadow falling upon the hands of his enemy. The next words were not spoken aloud, but they were clearly audible inside the Lilin’s head. ‘You are only here because I wanted you here,’ said the ominous voice heard only in his brain.

Realizing that this action revealed that the mage’s powers were not completely restrained, Blackout smiled briefly but did not react to the possible implications of it. However, a knowing look did pass between the two supernatural beings, a look of truly understanding one another at least for this brief moment, and the demon eventually nodded.

“He has agreed to come with us,” Loki announced as he exited into the cockpit area.

“What about Vermin?” Rogers asked sternly.

“He will follow wherever Blackout goes,” the Asgardian assured them. He turned to look out of the pilot’s view screen, and he quietly surveyed the area around the ship.

“Well, then -- here goes nothing,” Tony said, locking eyes with Steve as if daring him to disagree. He crossed back into the sleeping quarters, producing a key from somewhere within his gauntlet as he did so.

“I don’t like this,” Coulson stated as his shackles were opened, separating him from his two wards.

“Your objection is noted and summarily ignored,” Stark declared as he ushered Phil out of the room.

“How are we going to keep them from running away if they aren’t chained to someone?” Phil asked, his voice business-like but tinged with his disagreement.

“Oh, they’ll still be on a leash. Just not with you at the end of it.”

“I don’t follow,” Phil replied.

“Don’t take offense, Director,” Tony continued. “It’s just that if Thing One and Thing Two are going to be frolicking around the surface of Titan, we need them to be tethered to someone who they can’t easily overpower. They do both possess superhuman strength, after all.” The billionaire then poked his head out where the others were waiting. “Um, Dr. Banner -- could you come here for a mo’?”
After the prisoners were securely bound to a somewhat hesitant Bruce Banner, the team began to make its way from the Asgardian ship to the nearest guard outpost. Even after Loki made assurances to Stark that most of the species in this galaxy lived on oxygen/carbon/nitrogen-based worlds and that Thanos used a sophisticated atmospheric simulation system to replicate air that was not unlike that on Midgard, it took some coaxing to get Stark to trust that he was not going to suffocate as soon as he left the spacecraft. When he finally did, the foul, pervasive stench of the methane nearly chased him back into the interior. From there, the going remained quite slow, not due to the number of sentries they had encountered (which had, in fact, been none) but owing to the fact that their number made concealing themselves behind the sparse structures a lengthy, involved ordeal. The group did eventually reach the outpost in a matter of about 30 minutes, but they found it surprisingly empty.

“Well, this place is probably as good as any to stop and reconnoiter,” Captain Rogers suggested. The others filed in obediently, their weapons still at the ready.

“The guards have not been gone long,” Loki observed as he made a quick sweep of the room. “The equipment is fully powered up and there are personal effects still in place around the consoles.” His brows were heavily creased, and he wore an obvious scowl.

“So why would they abandon the place so quickly?” Natasha inquired. “Do they know we’re here?”

“Not likely,” Loki replied, his features still reflecting that he was very troubled. “They would have simply remained here to deal with us. No, I fear that this may be an indication of something far worse.”

“They’re moving out,” Steve guessed, and Loki nodded. “They received a sudden order to prepare for deployment. But why now?”

Tony grabbed the back of the nearest chair and leaned hard over the back of it like he might be sick. “S.W.O.R.D. launched the ship,” he speculated. “Thanos is going to attack.”

“An army of that size does not move swiftly,” Thor said calmly. “We still have some time to engage them and keep them here to face us.” He was standing as a sentry, guarding the doorway to the room with Mjölnir gripped feverishly in his hand.

“We need a strategy,” said Natasha. “Cap, what have you got?”

“We split up,” Steve responded. “Tony, Thor, and I find a small squadron to engage and draw their attention toward us. In the meantime, the rest of you will stay here with Romanov and try to gather some intelligence from their computer network.”

“Um, Steve,” Natasha said hesitantly. “I can’t possibly hack this system. It’s literally alien -- language and technology included.”

“You aren’t going to hack it, Natasha,” Rogers clarified. “He is.” The Captain was pointing his non-shield-bearing hand toward the remaining Asgardian. “I assume you are familiar with the Titan’s network protocols?”

“I am,” Loki answered without hesitation.
“So get to work,” Steve commanded him before he disappeared through the exit, followed swiftly by the airborne forms of Iron Man and Thor.

The remaining persons glanced nervously around at each other, with the exception of Loki who had already commandeered a terminal and was tapping away fiercely at the series of keys, the confined state of his hands doing little to slow him. His eyes were deftly trained on his work as the sound of his fingers on the touch screen before him continued in a raucous flurry until a series of lights in front of the workstations began to blink to life, creating a three-dimensional model of the outpost in which they were now standing. Natasha gazed in wonder as the station replica grew smaller and a series of buildings dotted the air around it. Finally, a large structure was outlined at the center of the schematic, a compound which was as large as all the other buildings together.

“How is that Thanos’s compound?” she asked.

“Yes,” Loki replied, his gaze still fixed on his work. “That is our destination.”

“Destination?” Bruce challenged him. “I thought our job was to stay here and gather intelligence. I don’t think we’re authorized for a field trip.”

“You want to stop Thanos, do you not?” the Asgardian responded in a nonplussed tone. “Then we must go where he is.”

The first sounds of battle could be heard, some minor explosions crackling in the distance and a few faint flashes of light were visible through the windows of the station. “If we remain here then we are at the mercy of whichever battalion of the Titan’s army happens to come across us, and they are all undoubtedly heading in this general direction.” Loki stood and crossed over to the projected model of the base. A few swift sweeps of his hands, and the main bunker enlarged until it engulfed the other buildings and only it remained. “There is a service entrance here,” the sorcerer indicated, using hand motions to enhance the north side of the structure and focus on a door which was recessed slightly into the earth.

At that moment, the sounds of approaching soldiers could be heard outside the building, a squadron of alien creatures which marched loudly and shouted to one another in a guttural, extraterrestrial tongue. Natasha approached the window on the side along which they were passing, her back pressed tightly to the wall and a S.H.I.E.L.D. Phase 2 shoulder rifle cocked and prepared to be fired. She turned her head to peek stealthily out at the enemy combatants. “Skrulls,” she whispered forcefully. “About fifty of them headed due west.”

Coulson had sidled up alongside her, a similarly-styled handgun in his firm clutch. “They aren’t stopping,” he reported with relief. “Loki, I think we need to have a discussion before preparing an egress,” he continued austerely. “I’m not sure that being out in the open is really the best option right now.”

The whine of repulsors and a blur of gold and scarlet streaked past the window, followed closely by the lights and sounds of heavy fire.

“Well, I’m not going to just sit here and wait to become collateral damage,” Blackout grumbled, his bound hands subconsciously forming into claw-like fists. “As much as I hate to agree with . . . him,” the demon decreed, nodding towards Loki, “I think we need to move on before we are discovered. The fighting is growing too close.”

As if to illustrate his point, the sound of someone or something colliding with the back wall of the structure could be heard. All movement and speech within the room ceased, and the tension in each of their bodies was plain as they stood hunched, anticipating whatever would come next.
Just when everyone had begun to breathe more easily, another series of loud thuds was audible, and then the unmistakable drum of heavy footsteps -- several sets, in fact -- were heard approaching them from the back of the station.

Loki flattened his back against the far wall, anticipating the approach of their potential adversaries. “Agent Romanov,” he said, just above a whisper. “Remove Dr. Banner and the prisoners immediately.”

“What about you?” she shot back. “I’m supposed to just leave you here in shackles to fight off several enemies while we slink away?”

“We can rendezvous at the entrance to Thanos’ compound,” the sorcerer stated in a manner which did not invite dissent.

The first head emerged from around the corner behind where Loki was crouched -- and it was the rough, misshapen head of a Badoon. The creature barely had time to realize that there were intruders afoot before his throat was encircled from behind by the thin length of chain between Loki’s manacles. The reptilian being immediately began to struggle for breath, jerking chaotically and lifting his back in violent, heaving thrusts. During the fourth and largest of these, the jostled Asgardian used his prey’s upward momentum to catch the second guard with a seamless kick to the side of his head. It stood dazed for just long enough for him to wrap his long legs around the base of the second beast’s throat. He then caught both Badoons off guard by somersaulting forward, carrying both of the creatures forward along with him in a tumbling motion until the three of them crashed into the back row of workstations, levelling the equipment and sending chairs out in all directions.

Somehow Loki managed to free himself from the jumble of limbs and bodies, continuing the rolling motion until he emerged suddenly but gracefully just feet from Natasha. “Go!” he commanded her. He spun swiftly back upon his two adversaries, one of which had already drawn a thickly-bladed sword that it was levelling at the head of the raven-haired man. He launched himself back at the aggressor, baring his wrists to meet the fall of the sharpened edge so that it fell directly between his bound hands, severing the chain and allowing his hands to move more freely. Natasha directed the barrel of her rifle at the head of the offending beast, ending its existence with a sudden beam of light which split its skull into fragments. Meanwhile, the prisoners had begun to tug subconsciously at their restraints, and Vermin hunched over and emitted a low growl. It was obvious that it would not be long before they threw themselves into the fray.

Banner drew back slightly, pulling the chains that bound him to the others taut and then giving a tug to get their attention. “I think we should go,” he stated, both to those connected to him and to the rest of the team.

Another four guards entered the room: three Badoons and one Skrull. “You’re right,” the redhead responded, aiming the barrel of her weapon at the continued influx of combatants. She was able to get off one round before she turned to assist Bruce in guiding out the captives. It went wider than she had hoped when the intended target shifted left at the last minute, but Coulson was able to finish the job and then wound a second Badoon, thereby covering the others’ exit. Loki continued to spar with his enemies by dodging blows and occasionally using his vambraces or even the metal of his shackles to stop the fall of a blade. The Skrull, however, had a more sophisticated, gun-like weapon which he tried to discharge toward the sorcerer several times but was stymied by the position of his fellow guards. As Coulson was backing out of the doorway, he made a split-second decision to try to fire his weapon at the Skrull, but he only managed to graze its hand -- and call attention to himself in the process. His opponent then flashed a fiendish grin before reaching for a small control panel on the neighboring wall.
The door through which Phil was about to retreat suddenly closed, and he nearly collided with the metallic barrier.

Almost frantic as he realized that he was now trapped in the station with a number of attackers -- and Loki, who likely also counted as an enemy -- Phil spun quickly back to face the melee, pointing his weapon at where the Skrull had been. However, the space was now empty, and the Skrull was nowhere to be seen. The agent felt a large drop of perspiration cascade from his brow line, down his left cheek, and linger briefly on his chin before it fell. He looked quickly back over his shoulder, somehow expecting his missing foe to be standing behind him. He was relieved to see only the dull patina of the entryway at his back.

Turning again to where the Asgardian was battling the remaining Badoons, he could see that Loki’s eyes were now trained directly on him. The Asgardian disentangled himself from the sea of reptilian limbs, knocking two of the last three flat and then filching a thick, shortsword from the belt of the third. He then rushed headlong at Phil, his eyes narrowed with deadly focus and wielding the sword backhand and preparing to bring it down across the agent’s shoulders.

This cannot be happening, thought Coulson. I cannot be killed twice by the same snarky son-of-a-bitch! He raised up the gun in his hands to mount a defense, but it was kicked away with a speed which was, quite literally, supernatural.

“Get down!” the sorcerer screamed suddenly, pushing his head towards the ground with both hands and then planting a booted foot upon the arch of his back, pinning him helplessly to the smoothly tiled floor. Phil then felt the rush of wind from the sweeping of Loki’s blade upon the nape of his neck, and he glanced back just quickly enough to see the form of the Skrull emerging from the metallic surface of the door behind him, as if it were molded from the very material of the entryway. It reached a sharply-clawed hand out into the air where Phil’s throat had just been, only to find itself relieved of its head by the upstroke of the Asgardian’s swing. Loki smiled to himself, clearly amused both by his ability to spot the hidden threat and by the agent’s overreaction to his approach. While the sorcerer was basking in self-satisfaction, Phil swiftly drew his service weapon from beneath his suit jacket and rested it on the Asgardian’s shoulder, firing off three rounds in quick succession.

The body of the final guard fell two steps from Loki’s back, his long-handled spear dropping and rolling to rest against the sorcerer’s feet. He nodded to Coulson in deference, indicating that he was impressed by his actions, if not overtly thankful. The pair stood in silence, Loki panting with exertion and Phil breathing with distress until the sorcerer finally extended a hand and assisted the agent to a standing position.

“You know,” Phil remarked with a smirk, “if you hadn’t killed me before, we would probably be having a moment right now.” The door to the outside opened, and he stepped casually through it. As he turned back to add a comment to this, he saw the door close again before Loki could follow him. Rushing to the adjacent window, the agent surveyed the interior of the room he had just left, but there was no sign of the Asgardian.

“I guess the moment is gone,” Coulson sighed, defeated.
As soon as the world faded back in, Melinda May sat upright on the side of her bed and lunged for her jacket and sidearm.

“Whoa, easy there, Agent!” said the balding, nondescript man by her side who had been trying to take her pulse -- obviously a member of medical personnel. “You’ve suffered asphyxia with loss of consciousness and a couple of semi-serious blows to the head,” he reminded her. “You should lie back down and rest for a while.” He placed a hand on her shoulder and applied firm pressure in an attempt to force her back into a prone position; however, the severe look on her face made him abort the attempt prematurely. May then addressed Agent Fallon, who was watching by the door.

“I need to find Barton,” she insisted. The medic tried to grasp her wrist to continue taking her vitals, but she wrenched it away and glared at him. “And I need you to get out of my way.” She stood and crossed over to the doorway, but Fallon placed himself between her and the exit.

“I’m afraid I am under orders, Agent May,” the young agent said, although his words were slightly tremulous as if he was aware that he could not stop her if she insisted on leaving. “You are to remain here until they are certain that your concussion is not serious. Barton is no longer a concern.”

This statement caused her to ease herself back onto the mattress, and her shoulders relaxed. “So they found him,” she breathed with obvious relief.

The anxiety on the younger man’s face ratcheted up several degrees, and then he replied, “Let’s just say that . . . he is no longer a threat.” His eyes sought the floor.

She shot back up from her seat. “What does that mean, R.J.?” She stopped inches from the young man’s face, and her desperate tone caused the medic to scurry out the door, closing it ungently at his back. “What are you not telling me?”

“Sit down, Melinda,” said a voice calmly from the far corner of the room.

Nick Fury was sitting on an oversized plush chair, a copy of a gardening magazine perched in his hands. He carefully folded it shut and laid it across his lap. Melinda must have smirked even though she was not aware of it, because his eyebrow rose as he sat forward. The female agent snapped to attention, grasping her hands firmly at the level of her hips in an attempt to cover her potentially taunting look.

“Is there something amusing about this, Agent May?” he asked authoritatively.

“I just never pegged you for a gardener, sir,” she said with as much of a business-like manner as she had ever managed.

“Well, just so you know, I know next to nothing about gardening,” he responded with an air of lecturing. “And that is why I’m reading about it.” He gave her a brief smile, but it faded almost instantly. “I asked you to sit down, Melinda,” he said gently. “And I think you’re going to want to.”

The change in his tone caused her to predict the gravity of what he needed to say, and she perched
back on the edge of the mattress, her back straight and her hands balled tightly in her lap, bracing herself for whatever her former boss might need to reveal.

“Agent Fallon is correct when he says that Barton is no longer a problem,” Fury said. “After he escaped from your custody . . .” He paused while May flinched briefly, pricked by the humiliation of her failure. “. . . he reappeared in Hangar 15.”

Her eyes widened and her lips parted in disbelief. “What did he do?” she demanded, mentally preparing for the worst possible response, which she just happened to receive.

“He launched the starship,” Fury revealed, his patchless eye narrowing with sorrow. “It left the Earth’s atmosphere just like it was programmed to do. And then it burned up just seconds after reaching maximum velocity, as we all feared that it would.”

Melinda could only stare, dumbfounded, wildly attempting to process the details being told to her. “But why?” she inquired, her voice almost expertly concealing the despair that she was feeling behind an outpouring of exasperation. “Why would Barton want to destroy our only chance at defending ourselves? It was practically destined to fail, anyway . . . or I guess it was because it did, didn’t it?” She wrapped the palm of her hand around her forehead and willed herself to breathe evenly. “Could he have ejected?” she asked, her words suddenly devoid of any emotion.

Fury shook his head. “There were no life forms detected within a vicinity of twenty miles when the craft exploded,” he told her joylessly. “We have sent a short-range recon craft to retrieve the flight recorder, if it survived.”

Agent May clenched her right hand into a fist, which she willfully slammed against the face of the desk she was leaning against.

“Don’t blame yourself, Melinda,” Fury warned, as he looked out from beneath the brow of his one visible eye. “You could never have stopped him on your own,” he assured her.

“You’re right, I couldn’t have prevented him from escaping,” she admitted with a growl of frustration. “He was practically possessed by whatever had taken hold of him -- his strength was almost superhuman,” she reasoned. After a moment of silent contemplation, she raised her eyes back to Fury, and her brow was creased with determination. “But if I had known what he was planning to do, I wouldn’t have tried,” she said through clenched teeth. “I would have just killed him.”

**.***.***

When Steve, Tony, and Thor returned to where they had left their companions, they found an array of alien bodies and a fairly smashed-up pile of furniture and electronics. “I’m guessing that they were discovered,” Stark said as he stood rigidly, carefully working the right elbow of his suit where he had taken a particularly rough hit. The squadron they had chosen to ambush was initially taken unawares, but its members were able to reform and retaliate more swiftly than their shabby appearance had implied. A secondary unit was then sent in to aid the first, but, thankfully, they were no more polished or equipped than one they had previously engaged.

Although the fight had lasted more than an hour, the team had battled only about a hundred troops by Steve’s estimate; plus, no serious reinforcements had been deployed and no heavy artillery from
land or air had been encountered. It wasn’t until the smoke from their assault had subsided that they had bothered to look along the horizon beyond the troops they had been engaging, and the sight was gravely sobering. For as far as any of them could see, there were transports, some being boarded and others that were already in the process of ferrying their living cargo to the enormous ships which filled every inch of their sightline from one edge to the other.

“I do not understand,” Thor declared, his deep voice filling the mostly empty room. “It is obvious that Thanos knows we are here -- we have mounted an offensive against him, however small, and some of his men must have likewise stumbled upon the remainder of our number -- and yet he sends almost none of his army to face us. He could easily have crushed us by now.”

“Yes -- oh, darn,” Tony mocked, “I so wish that he had just gone ahead and killed us already.” The billionaire’s eyes were tracking Steve as he sifted among the debris for signs of the others. “Anything promising?” he asked, dropping the sarcasm for true concern.

Steve shook his head, the worried expression causing uncharacteristic lines to crease the boundaries of his face. He then turned over a chair and kicked a small pile of electronic rubble before he reached for something on the floor, just beyond the body of a fallen Badoon. “Oh no,” he breathed as he turned the object over in his hands.

“What did you find?” Tony asked, scrambling over to look at what Rogers had discovered. “Is that what I think it is?”

“One of Loki’s shackles,” Rogers revealed, throwing it back onto the pile as if the item repulsed him. He shook his head sadly as he crouched in the wreckage. “How could we have been so stupid?” he asked with a protracted sigh.

“‘We?’” Tony replied defensively. “I was just following orders!” Seeing how this accusation further sobered Rogers’ temperament, he continued in a more diplomatic vein. “However . . . I will admit that I should have realized that the only three people with the triggers to Loki’s collar were being sent away, leaving the others unprotected. I should have said something,” he finished with a softer tone.

“It’s not what you think,” said a voice from behind them.

“Phil!” Steve said, brightening somewhat as he turned to face the man who was addressing them. “Where are the others?” he asked hurriedly.

“They are in another building not far from here,” Coulson explained. “I offered to watch this outpost until you returned. As you can see, we had to abandon the original base because nothing in here is very functional anymore.”

Thor gave a small ‘humpf’ of agreement.

“And what about Loki?” Cap asked, rising up from his haunches and continuing to scrutinize the wreckage for further clues to what had occurred.

“He eloped,” the agent confirmed.

Rogers face was oddly blank at this statement, as if he were still trying to process what was before him and come to a conclusion before he was given the truth of it. Stark and Thor, however, looked immediately resigned to this outcome, as though they had expected no better from the dark-haired Asgardian in this instance.

“Don’t rush to judgment,” Phil warned them. “Well, not completely,” he tacked on, his face still
quite austere. “He didn’t attack us, if that’s what you’re thinking. We were discovered by some of
the natives, and he actually defended us -- practically single-handedly -- so that the rest of us could
escape.”

“So where is he now?” Steve pressed.

“He used the resulting chaos to slip away from the rest of the group.”

“And now we have no idea where he is,” Tony proclaimed, sitting down on a the remnants of a
work surface which had been reduced to the height of a small bench. He then took a moment to
arch his injured back, wincing in pain as he did so. “I knew we should have shackled him to the
‘Power of Greyskull’ over there,” he finished with irritation, nodding tersely at Thor.

“He’s up to something,” the blonde brother stated absently, his annoyance turning to mournful
rumination.

“Ya think so?” Tony retorted, his tone half-pain and half-ridicule.

“Well, we don’t have time to play his games,” Rogers stated. “We need to rendezvous with the
others and come up with a strategy.”

“In that case, you should follow me,” Phil said, levelling his oversized weapon and giving the
landscape a wary sweep before he led them out.

They walked in a line at first, Coulson leading and the other three falling into step behind him,
their heads bowed and limbs dangling limply due to a combination of exhaustion and despair. The
group criss-crossed from building to building, encountering almost no other singular beings,
although they came more than once within twenty feet of a squadron on the move that did not even
acknowledge their presence.

“I think it’s safe to say that Thanos doesn’t really see us as a threat,” Steve observed.

“Why should he?” Tony replied. It did not go unnoticed that he was breathing heavily, and the
discomfort he was trying desperately to hide occasionally flickered across his features. “Our best
source of intel -- and our alien linguist, I might add -- jumped ship, which was probably part of his
plan all along. He and Thanos are probably sharing a mimosa down at ‘Big Bastard Alien HQ’
right now, swapping recipes and picking out cafe curtains.”

“This is the one,” Coulson indicated as they approached a guard outpost that looked like all the
others save for its slightly enhanced size, perhaps a third larger than the one they had occupied
before.

The group was not entirely certain what they were expecting when they entered the new Avengers
base of operations, but whatever it had been, it was not this: the interior was a hub of activity, with
Bruce, Natasha, and the two prisoners hovering feverishly over monitors or manipulating scale
models of the various outbuildings around them, presumably looking for items that would aid their
cause. The redhead glanced up at them briefly as they entered but looked back down at her work
while she was addressing them.

“It’s about time you boys came back,” she teased. “We were starting to think you had joined Loki
on the AWOL list.”

Banner was flanking the Lilin, watching his movements and commenting on what he was seeing.
Sometimes he asked for closer views of a room or object, and Blackout obliged; however, the
demon appeared impatient as he waited for the scientist to allow him to continue his frenzied
inspection of the projections he was analyzing.

“How in the hell did you manage this?” Tony asked, stepping between the dizzying array of projected images that Blackout was sifting through with his fingers, his hands conspicuously unbound.

“Bruce and I are close observers and quick studies,” Natasha replied as her attention fell back to something on the screen before her. She nudged Vermin who was seated at her elbow, and she asked him a hurried question under her breath and then reacted to his whispered reply by performing some hand motions on the monitor. The result caused her first to smile and then to crease her brow in practiced concentration.

“We watched how Loki signed in to the network,” Bruce confided. “Together we were able to remember enough to let ourselves in. Blackout and Vermin are helping with the language barrier.” His words were clipped as he continued to focus on the movements of the Lilin.

“Well, this is all very impressive,” Tony continued, his vision trained on the building that Banner and Blackout were currently inspecting. He approached the pair cautiously from the side, eventually closing in until he could grasp Bruce firmly by the shoulder and lean in to his ear. “What exactly are you doing?” he hissed gruffly. “These two are supposed to be prisoners!”

“With Loki gone, they are our only source of information, and the only bargaining chip we had was their freedom,” the physicist stated calmly, as if he felt no remorse for having removed their restraints.

“Besides, what do you have to lose?” the demon said, his eyes never wavering from his work. “It’s not like you have great numbers or sophisticated technology with which to mount an assault. Come now, Mr. Stark – surely you can see that your options have dwindled? Particularly since you bet the house on that treasonous miscreant who deserted you.” It was impossible to miss the self-satisfied smugness in his response.

All eyes fell upon Thor, awaiting the Asgardian’s reply to this brazen report of his brother’s betrayal. Oddly, he had balanced himself upon the lip of the far window, Mjölnir dangling in his grip. He sat watching the activity with a look of quiet attention and his lips pressed tightly into an unemotional line. When he felt the gazes of his companions upon him, he raised his eyes to the room but said nothing, instead continuing to look at a point which was beyond all of them, observing a scene to which none of the others could bear witness.

“So . . . Thor has checked out,” Tony observed, wearing a look of clear distress. The group paused momentarily to give Thor an opportunity to acknowledge either Stark’s observation or the lingering silence, but the warrior sat mutely, two broad fingers encircling the curve of his softly whiskered chin and his lips slack as if he were about to fall into a much-needed slumber.

‘Ridiculous, Thor.’

*These words came to him from within his head, but they were so clear that he heard the reverberation of them echoing through an empty hall, followed by the clang of two blades connecting in the fury of combat.*

‘Your footwork is sloppy,’ the voice chided him again. *The tone and inflection of it were so like that of his father, and yet it also had a teasing quality, which was not like his father at all.*
He extended his arm again, landing another two hits on his opponent’s sword, but the other man maneuvered it quickly, changing from a defensive position to an offensive one with grace and ease. Thor had to expend far more energy than was typical for him in order to keep up --- he was mostly a blunt force fighter without much use for close weapon-to-weapon engagement--and he found himself struggling to fend off the close, quick sweeps of the other man’s strokes. This situation was unacceptable, Thor decided.

There was no way he was going to let Loki win.

The younger of the two princes had always been a master of games, but only of the one’s that suited him, and so it would be necessary to alter the nature of the contest in order to gain an advantage. The blonde man edged over toward the wall of available weaponry as they continued to spar, and the more nimble man followed, his swift blows varied and unceasing. When Thor was within an arm’s reach of the other various armaments, he withdrew his gaze from the battle for the briefest second, grasping a second shorter and broader blade in his non-dominant hand. Loki took his opportunity in the split-second lull to land a heavy hit close to the base of Thor’s sword that was too sudden for him to parry, and the blade was wrenched inelegantly from his grip, falling to the stone floor of the sparring room with a pronounced clatter. However, he was able to bring his recently-acquired brand across his chest and block the next blow before it grazed him. The unexpected nature of this move gave the older sibling the moment’s hesitation from his opponent that he required to switch the blade to his dominant hand and then grab a second sword of similar size and make from those adjacent him. A sword in each hand was sure to keep Loki busy -- and hopefully divide his concentration

“Well, well, my son,” Loki taunted, again imitating Odin’s voice nearly flawlessly. “We might make a fighter of you yet!” His eyes gleamed with wicked delight as each man stepped back to catch his breath.

“Do you surrender?” Thor asked through an obviously mocking grin.

“Odin All-Father does not lay down his arms, particularly when facing someone as unseasoned as the Golden Prince of Asgard!” his brother continued in the mock-Odin persona, punctuating his grandiose speech with a new flurry of attacks. He met Thor’s double-edged defense with admirable enthusiasm, but after several minutes of dodging his elder sibling’s forthright yet brutal strikes, it was clear that he was faltering slightly, the strain of tracking and repelling thrusts from both sides draining his mental acuity and taxing his physical endurance until the hollows of his cheeks were pink with exertion. Coupled with the sweaty, tousled state of his shoulder-length hair, he radiated the air of a Midgardian in the prime of his youth, even though he was centuries old by this time. Thor echoed the youthful vigor of his laughter as they continued to spar with increasingly forceful and incautious blows, until their careless roughhousing led them down the hall and into the conservatory next door.

As the enthusiasm of their exchange swelled, they found themselves practically racing along the pathways, recklessly slicing and hacking at one another with such ill-planned hits that several of the lower hanging plant life suffered loss of its limbs, and more than one ornamental stone statue endured the same fate, causing splinters of stone to spray out from the impact and pepper Loki’s raven locks with flecks of white. At one point, Thor had his brother cornered on the edge of an ornamental fountain, his back to the bubbling waters with no obvious means of escape other than to plunge into the pond itself. However, his guileful sibling merely leapt onto the narrow edge of the line of stone bricks that outlined the fountain, still moving backwards and continuing to engage his enemy with admirable skill. He was even able to land a couple of damaging blows as the blonde man watched his legs step almost impossibly quickly in reverse and along a surface that was barely wider than his foot. At the end of the line of stones, Loki was audacious enough to
backflip from the final ledge and land sprily on his feet, eyes dancing with pride but still panting somewhat from the effort.

“Impressive, brother,” Thor conceded. He used the momentary respite to suck at the blood that was beading on the knuckles of his right hand, where Loki’s blade had nicked him while he had been entranced with his move on the edge of the fountain.

“Thank you,” the dark-haired prince replied as he performed a low, sweeping bow.

“You are nearly worthy of the time I waste sparring with you,” Thor teased, his mouth widening in a genial but needling grin.

This jab caused Loki to raise his eyebrows playfully, his lips pressed tightly in a mischievous smile that informed his brother that his unspoken challenge had been accepted. He stepped back and lowered his arms, indicating that it was up to the elder man to land the first strike. Thor began a slow circle, which Loki echoed almost precisely except in mirror image across from him. They held their weapons low and at the ready, both nearly giddy with the adrenaline that sang within their blood. When the contest began again, it was undertaken with a renewed vigor that possibly surpassed what they had infused into their combat ever before.

After what felt like hours of bone-jarring exertion, Thor was finally able to tip his brother off-balance for an instant, and he used his power as the advantage it was to drive him back and then knock him to the ground, raising the blade in his dominant hand and letting it fall with a grunt of forceful intent. The stone tile beneath the other man cracked and chipped as the blow fell, and if Loki had not rolled deftly aside prior to the impact, he would have been seriously wounded. Shock sat plainly upon his features as he rotated cautiously to a sitting position, his sword hanging loosely in his grip and his chest heaving. The disbelief on Loki’s face radiated hotly like the accusation it was.

“You could have gravely wounded me, brother,” he stated coldly, his visage molding into a featureless mask, and his eyes growing lustreless with a seething indignation that Thor would not see again until their confrontation on the Bifröst.

Looking back on this scene now from the vantage of centuries, Thor knew he should have been fearful of the change in his brother, but all that he can recall is a satisfaction. The wounded look that flashed across his sibling’s countenance was gratifying, almost indulgently so, and the ambitious, coddled child that he had been was content to savor his brother’s outrage as a triumph -- to revel in the nearly serious harm he could have inflicted upon the other man as not just a victory but as a subjugation of the one true rival he had ever known. He had taken a friendly contest and used it as an opening to lessen Loki’s achievement, punctuating their engagement with a final threat of real harm. The possibilities were thrilling to him, and his heart thrummed with the sensation.

It had pleased him to see his brother brought low.

It had been a single moment in time, so brief and isolated that it had barely warranted a place in his memories. In hindsight, however, it was a clear illustration of the instant where it all went so terribly wrong. Thor had changed dramatically since then -- he was worthy now, reborn as a deserving friend, son, and confidante. He could not blame Loki for resenting him then; his duty was to himself alone. Yet he also could not forgive Loki for resenting him now. Could he not see how Thor had evolved -- how he cared about his brother’s fate and was making every effort to save him from the darkness that seemed to await him? Tears stood in his his weary eyes, and he brushed at the lingering moisture with the back of the hand that had been hovering by his throat.
“What do you mean to do, brother?” he murmured to all of the others and yet none of them in particular.

“I thought it would be obvious, brother,” Loki responded from the corner of the room where he had been standing soundlessly. He stepped forward into the ambient light of the screens and equipment, arms folded, his elbow nearly brushing Tony’s, and the billionaire jerked as if he thought he might catch fire if he was touched. “I mean to finish this,” the Asgardian concluded, his teeth showing in a threatening sneer. He swaggered confidently over to his sibling, who was glaring at him as if he were simply a vision which would fade suddenly and leave him heartbroken once more.

With a sideways glance at Blackout he said, “Treasonous miscreant reporting for duty,” and then finished with a bow.
“He’s not going to show,” Nebula hissed as she eyed the sharpened edge of her weapon. Inwardly, she was contemplating whether or not she should hone it further; as is, it would likely not be able to relieve Loki of his head in one stroke, but that was quickly becoming the less appealing option.

“He’ll come,” Maelstrom assured her. He sat with a much more relaxed posture, although his eyes flitted nervously to the window and his gaze scanned over the horizon every few moments, facts that a keen observer like Nebula was unlikely to miss.

Their small group was huddled inside of an abandoned starship hangar, a small structure once used for light-duty surface craft, that was located just inside of the planet’s atmospheric dome. Since it was no longer actively used, there was no electrical access, and so there was little to do other than huddle together in the semi-darkness and wait impatiently for the one who had invited them here.

And he was currently long overdue.

There were three other figures lingering in the mostly empty space, and none of them looked as if they would be very interesting conversationalists. The first was a sleek, black Symbiote with numerous elongated teeth who crouched low to the ground and rocked restlessly on his heels. He had not spoken since he had arrived. The second was an enormous mutated human who stood nearly twice the height of an average member of his race, his immeasurable biceps left bare as they were presumably too large to be contained by most commercially-available clothing. This behemoth had also been mute during their wait. The third, however, had spoken, and it was a sound that none of those present would willfully endure again, as the reverberation had filled the cavernous warehouse so completely that it seemed to remove some of the breathable air from the room. The sound caused even the enormous man to shudder slightly with aversion. The Symbiote, however, remained contained in its own world, whispering softly in unintelligible clicks and hums.

Finally, this loose gathering of unlikely allies heard the sounds of a distant skirmish, complete with the blast of repulsors and localized explosions. Nebula hastily crossed over to the window on the side of the disturbance, and Maelstrom trailed leisurely after her. The female surveyed the scene for several minutes while reflections of distant bursts of fire echoed eerily across her liquid-like eyes.

“What does this mean?” she asked the Inhuman with just a hint of rough desperation in her voice.

“What does this mean?” she asked the Inhuman with just a hint of rough desperation in her voice.

“Are Titan’s forces already under attack?”

Maelstrom shrugged lazily. “I cannot begin to presume,” he informed her. “I have been told so little about my purpose in this plot that I must have been delirious to agree to be here in the first place.” Although his demeanor portrayed that he was unconcerned, he kept his gaze fixed tightly upon the battle that was occurring not more than a hundred yards away. “So, why are you here, exactly?” he challenged her playfully. “Were you hoping to impress our mutual friend with your unquestioning obedience?”

This line of inquiry seemed to enrage Nebula, and her eyes narrowed in warning. “I am here to settle a debt,” she seethed, her hand resting threateningly on her bladed weapon.
“Indeed,” Maelstrom needled her with a knowing smirk. “And what precisely have you lost to the lovely Loki that you need to regain, hmmm?”

That question hit dangerously close to its mark, as was evidenced by the pain and humiliation that crossed her smooth, blue features. “It is not his debt,” she spat back, although her resolve had somewhat weakened. “I have come for what I am owed from my . . . my father.” She choked harshly on this last word.

“Thanos?” the Inhuman wheezed in honest surprise. “You intend to ask him for recompense?”

“No,” she smiled. “I intend to take it from him by force.”

“Then you are a bigger fool than I!” the man laughed, teetering on his heels with the force of his glee. He then shook his head as if disbelieving the ludicrous nature of both of their predicaments. “I merely came here to kill him,” he finished with a wry twist of his mouth.

“Then our aims are not at odds,” she confessed without emotion. This admission appeared to have been fatal to her ego, because she turned her eyes from him and out over the horizon to survey the combat once more. Her face went blank, and Maelstrom inferred that her attitude was less hostile toward him than it had previously been. When a few minutes had passed, her countenance suddenly twisted again into a mask of aggression. “Avengers!” she barked, her machine-like voice hoarse with enmity. “What are they doing here?”

Maelstrom looked closer at the haze of the distant fighting: sure enough, he could pick out the fleeting form of Thor, swiftly propelling himself among different areas in order to fight the Badoons who fell away almost as soon as they approached him. He could also discern the blur of Stark’s Iron Man suit blasting between rows of combatants, leaving small explosions in his wake. Closer to the surface, Captain America could be seen flinging his vibranium shield and scattering bodies with hasty blows. Maelstrom shook his head in disbelief. “Do you think they followed him here?” There was no need to clarify to whom he was referring, as there was only one of their number who had any connection to the team of heroes.

The Symbiote began to scratch suddenly at the ground beneath him, his motions almost frantic in their urgency. He sniffed loudly several times in succession and then extended his long, pointed tongue to the air as if he were tasting it. Eventually, a long line of spittle drained from the edge of his maw of grisly teeth, and he produced several low, trilling sounds not unlike the coos of Terran birds -- unmistakable noises of satisfaction. This disturbance was followed to everyone’s chagrin by the rolling grumble of the creature who had been lingering by the door as if keeping a protective eye over his wards. “He approaches,” the watching giant said deliberately, his arms crossed before him as if to dare any of the others to deny it.

“Kaaaaaal...” the Symbiote rasped as he continued to scrabble along the floor beneath himself raucously. The sound of this being’s husky voice was nearly as abhorrent as the larger mutant’s, Maelstrom surmised.

The Asgardian entered the room with immediate grace, his long strides carrying him to the center of their gathering in little time. “My apologies for the delay,” he spoke in a manner that betrayed he was slightly out of breath from exertion. “I was detained.” He offered no other explanation for his tardiness; rather, he stood elegantly in the middle of the room, absentely straightening the lapels of his leather overcoat.

Nebula noticed several unusual details almost immediately: the sorcerer’s face was leaner and his complexion more dusky than it had been when last she had seen him, and
he was wearing several thin but strong layers of metal closely around his throat -- a collar, which was conceivably a tool to control him. This object was almost certainly the companion piece to the manacles he had quite recently shed, as evidenced by the reddened flesh above his hands that he absently stroked as he prepared to speak. The knowledge that he had been recently restrained, along with the symbol of control that encircled his neck made her wary of her erstwhile ally.

“First, some introductions,” Loki announced, playing the gracious host. He pointed a thin, nimble finger at the enormous, bulky mutant with the naked biceps. “Cain Marko, a Terran mutant also known as ‘Juggernaut’.” The tall, slender man crossed over to where the woman and her Inhuman companion were standing. “Nebula, Daughter of Thanos,” he proclaimed, and she balked at the description. “And Maelstrom, an Inhuman in the employ of the aforesaid Titan.” Another few steps brought him to the Symbiote who sniffed the mage’s extended hand as if it were a lapdog. “And Venom, a Klytnar aberrant, rejected by his own race.” The Klytnar were a race of symbiotes who dominated and eventually destroyed the hosts whom they assimilated. The others had suspected as much, and therefore had kept Venom at a suitable distance during their vigil. “And, finally . . .” their leader revealed as he approached the enormous mutant with the disturbing voice, “En Sabah Nur, or, as you probably know him, ‘Apocalypse:’ a master of many abilities and an ancient harbinger of death in many Terran cultures.” He clapped an unusually brazen hand on the shoulder of the gigantic being, although he had to nearly perch on the toes of his boots in order to do so. “I am grateful beyond measure that you have heeded my invitation to be here today,” he finished with a deepening of his mellifluous timbre.

“Since you have opened that line of questioning,” Nebula said flatly, “why exactly are we here?”

“Oh, and while we are on the subject,” Maelstrom chimed in, “why are the Avengers here, as well?”

The Asgardian smiled -- a full, warm grin that did nothing to gain the trust of his interrogators since it seemed so sincere, a fact that was at odds with what they knew of his usual intentions. “The Avengers are merely a minor complication,” he informed them. “They managed to hold me in their custody for a time, and I was forced to improvise. However, I am here now, and the remainder of our mutual conspiracy can go brilliantly to plan.”

“Our conspiracy?” Maelstrom disputed, although the challenge was halfhearted at best; he was as far in to this little scheme as he could possibly get, he supposed. “I fail to recall being consulted about any part of this ‘fiendish plot.’” (His air quotes were melodramatic in their sarcasm). “. . . whatever it may actually be,” he concluded in an effort to punctuate that the he was aware the others were all as uninformed as he was.

Loki’s smile did not alter the slightest bit as he leaned against the far wall, his hands tucked into his folded arms and his legs crossed lithely at the ankle. “You wound me, my friend,” he said playfully. “It seems you have lost faith in what I am capable of.” He clicked his tongue in order to scoff at the notion.

“You have brought the enemy with you!” Nebula snapped. She pointed behind her emphatically as she advanced on him, her boots resounding loudly in the nearly empty space. “And while you claim to no longer be their prisoner, you come to us still wearing their restraint!” She extended her weapon with a forceful flick of her wrist, bringing the delicate tip of the blade to balance just beneath the metallic band that he still wore. “Forgive our sudden mistrust,” she snarled as she pushed up just slightly on the ring around his neck. It did not give way, which meant that it was somehow embedded into his skin.

The sorcerer locked eyes with her, meeting her unspoken challenge head on. He brushed away the
blade at his throat almost absently, unintimidated. “I am not holding you here;” he murmured, his words sharpening with menace. “You may leave whenever you like. However,” he said more loudly, now addressing the entire gathering, “if you choose to remain, then I vow to you that the Mad Titan’s reign will end by the next Terran sunrise.” Nebula and Maelstrom each silently did the math -- that was less than three hours away.

Impossible.

“You seem certain that this scheme of yours will be successful,” Juggernaut spoke. Until that moment, the others had nearly forgotten that he was even present. One meaty hand stroked his chin thoughtfully before he continued. “Yet I don’t see my friends here, as I was promised. Why should I believe anything else that you say?”

“Ah, but your companions are here,” Loki assured him. “You simply cannot see them from where you stand.”

“I did not come here for riddles, Asgardian!” the behemoth roared, and his fists tightened as if he might be considering an attack. This action caused Apocalypse to move forward several steps, preparing himself to come between the two of them if the situation required it. The still-grinning sorcerer held up a single hand to instruct the ancient being to stand down, which he did . . . albeit warily.

“It is not my intention to deceive you, Mr. Marko,” Loki appeased him. “I travelled alongside your companions to Titan, and they remain with my would-be captors, the Avengers.”

“Ah, yes . . . yet another unforeseen dilemma,” Maelstrom chided. “If you keep this up, I will be forced to doubt you.” The sentiment was light, but the tone was severe.

“Indeed, but look at this from another viewpoint: if you grow restless, you can always amuse yourself with them. They are more than outnumbered by their enemies here. You could always take advantage.” His voice grew soothing as he said this, and the attempt to guide them towards this plan of action was more than obvious.

“What do you mean, ‘if we grow restless?’” There were no air quotes from the Inhuman this time, only a scathing hint of mockery. “Are you intending to leave us here again while you go skulking around behind our backs?”

Loki chuckled so heartily that his full set of teeth were on display. “I do not feel the need to ‘skulk’ at this time,” he revealed. “However, I do require your patience for just a while longer. You see, I have another task I must complete before I require your collective assistance.”

“So, you are leaving?” Nebula exclaimed in a tone that caused it to fly from her lips like a curse. Her jaw was clenched so tightly that one of the veins in her neck stood out prominently against her deep blue skin.

“Regretfully so,” he teased with a quick bow of his head.

“And we -- what? Just wait here while you are off weaving your little deceptions?” Maelstrom interjected loudly enough that the sorcerer ceased in turning away from them.

Loki’s blue-green eyes darkened, and the lids narrowed in a clear gesture of warning. He folded his arms crisply at his chest, and one long, thin finger tapped impatiently against the crook of his elbow. Maelstrom -- wisely, for once -- did not comment further, although the Asgardian did not leave his previous inquiry unanswered. “I do not care how you bide your time while I am otherwise
engaged, my friend,” he stated in a soft but venomous manner. He leaned toward the Inhuman with a perilous glint playing in his eyes; the effect was likely meant to be threatening, but it only caused his opponent to shiver with a savage delight. When the sorcerer continued, it was unclear to all of them whether he was trying to intimidate Maelstrom or spur him on. “When I return, you will have all that you desire, and then you will never have to look upon this face again.” He let this threat/promise linger heavily in the ether while his long strides carried him proudly to the exit. As he passed the terrifying frame of the mutant that stood watch at the door, a cognizant look passed between them -- a nuance which only Maelstrom seemed to detect -- before the leviathan known as ‘Apocalypse’ followed the raven-haired magician out of the bunker.

‘Thank the gods!’ the Inhuman thought to himself. ‘He still has at least one unrevealed trick left to disclose before all of this reaches fruition.’ There was yet a faint hope that his retribution may still come to pass. And surely that was the reason why the flow of blood was humming in his veins. No other reason whatsoever.

Maelstrom absently licked the swell of his bottom lip.

***.***

“How long until you divulge the truth to these conspirators?” Apocalypse growled. Even in what must be considered his whispering tone, the syllables reverberated along Loki’s dominant muscle groups like faint electricity. He swallowed coarsely as he tried to endure the onslaught of this disturbance, his confident air weakening somewhat with the effort.

“I am not certain what you mean, Nur,” he replied, purposely not turning to face the mutant again. “You see, I have no intention of telling them.”

The sorcerer could feel the judgmental weight of those piercing red eyes upon him, and it caused him to pause in spite of himself. Yet he still did not turn back. Apocalypse had refrained from following him, but Loki knew without hesitation that the massive being was standing just steps behind him, his arms forming an iron line across his chest and those cobalt-encased lips gnarled into a hateful glower.

“You will not?” Nur asked. Although no louder than his previous words, the sound of this utterance was destructive, and Loki felt a moment’s crushing pressure around the sinews of his already weakening heart. It was the result of his disapproval, the gravity of his wrath made manifest, and it travelled with his words like a living thing, roosting at its cause and seeking repayment. The myriad sum of this terrible being’s powers were a constant cause of fascination for the Asgardian; however, it also made him infinitely more difficult to govern. In the end, he must surrender to a devastating reality: there was no deceiving this one. He could only be led and then appealed to at the proper time.

As much as it pained him, Loki met the judgmental gaze of the Ancient One.

“I will not have need to,” he sighed, exhausted with playing the relentless role of the Piper. “When the proper time comes, you will tell them,” he revealed almost dismissively as his image faded into the lingering mists of the moon’s surface.

***.***
When the Asgardian re-appeared, it was at the elbow of one of the most despised but undeniably practical creatures in all the universe. The demon was sipping from a highball glass full of something which clearly smoked and faintly sizzled, when he turned and nearly collided with the sorcerer who suddenly blocked his path. “Unholy Hell, Loki!” he spat from behind his perfect, pointed teeth. “Would it hurt you to warn a guy?”

“I am short on time, Mephisto. I did not have the time to plan my appearance properly.”

“Well, a ‘hello’ would have been nice, at least,” the ruddy-skinned being teased with a toothy grin.

“Hello,” the sorcerer said flatly, his face portraying a lack of enthusiasm.

“Excellent!” the devil replied heartily. “Now, how would you like a little something to take the edge off of all this?” He began to reach for the nearby decanter of whatever he was sipping but then decided against it. Instead he selected a libation that was so dark reddish in color that it was nearly black, and it clung thickly to the crystal flask as he began to pour. “Arimathean wine...” he began to explain as the goblet began to fill.

Loki waved off the offer with a weary hand. “I thought I was clear, you imbecile! I do not have time to linger here.”

Mephisto’s look was slightly hurt but still mainly undaunted. “Are you certain I can’t tempt you? This particular vintage was distilled from the Blood of the Innocents, which I wrung from that whole unfortunate business that landed me in front of the Living Tribunal. It’s been oak-aged since you were a toddler.” He extended a sinewed arm with the filled cup at the end of it, his eyes pleading with the Asgardian to accept the gesture.

“You never could take ‘no’ for an answer, could you?” Loki sighed.

The demon bared his teeth and shook his head with a chuckle.

“Well learn,” the raven-haired man spat as he brushed the offering aside forcefully. “I am not nearly stupid enough to accept anything that you will ever offer me.”

Mephisto shrugged and downed the cerise-colored liquid in one satisfied swallow.

“Is he ready for me?” the Asgardian asked as he traced his fingers uneasily along the engraved markings of his left vambrace. It was not nervous fiddling. It absolutely was not.

The sleek, double doors behind them opened suddenly, causing a rush of algid air to waft throughout the foyer that they were standing in. “I suppose that is my answer,” Loki breathed, and he tamped down the waver in his voice before it was detectable.

“Good luck,” the demon said, elevating his original beverage as if in posthumous tribute.

“Thank you,” the sorcerer answered testily. He then walked with as much pride and energy as he could still summon, up the rocky steps and down the dark, lengthy path to the foot of the Titan’s throne. He then waited nearly two excruciating minutes before the deep, resonating sound of Thanos’ voice crashed over him like a forceful wave.

“Tell me that you have succeeded or surrender to the bearers of my justice.”
The last syllable hung in the air for numerous heartbeats before it faded into the vast expanse of outer space that was visible behind his stone perch. Almost instantly, Loki could feel the presence of three to five shadow-like entities that drifted just beyond the reaches of his sight, their constant motion making it difficult to determine their true number. The flash of a metal blade was visible at intervals if he watched particularly closely, borne aloft by the incorporeal shapes of whatever life-form that danced just outside the limits of his sight, their limbs elongated and wreathed in a smoky darkness. In fact, if one traced the movement of these wisp-like wraiths with a keen eye, each one most likely carried several bladed weapons that intermittently reflected the meager light, and which fleetingly threatened a brutal and painful death before folding back into the core of the blackness that wielded it. Internally, the Asgardian shuddered at the thought of being set upon by this legion of unknown entities; outwardly, however, he was the perfect reflection of serenity.

Thank the gods that he had chosen not to appear here in his solid form.

(In fact, his true body was currently hunkered along the exterior wall of the Avengers’ new base of operations, and he was filtering out the most useful parts of the conversations therein, which he processed quickly alongside the images and dialogue that he was evaluating from inside the Titan’s throneroom. The effort was stressing his depleted energy reserves, but he was trying -- and very nearly failing at several turns -- not to tap into the power of the faintly pulsating cube that lingered just within the limit of his senses. The one that would carve another sliver off of his slowly waning life.)

“Do you have something for me?” Thanos asked with a hint of mockery. He folded his thick, violet fingers beneath his chin and stared expectantly at the image of Loki, which was now approaching him brazenly.

“I do, indeed,” the Asgardian hummed, his steps gaining conviction as he grew near to where the Titan was hovering in his place of authority.

“I’m pleased,” Thanos replied. “However, I would be more pleased if you were here with it now.”

Oh. So he did know that he was just an illusion.

“However, I will be greatly displeased if you do not have it to me by the time of the Assembly,” he continued, his mouth contorting into a threatening scowl. “And, as I am sure that you are aware, that will occur in just a few moments’ time.”

Loki’s image was unfazed. “I am -- and ergo, it is -- quite near, I assure you. It is all coming together, just as I had foreseen.” His eyes sparkled with the satisfaction of his own accomplishments. “They are all here, just as you requested.” Or rather demanded, but that was semantics.

“All of them?” The Titan’s demeanor turned quickly from scolding to cautiously impressed, and he sat forward on his throne then, his large hands gripping the arms of his chair with hopeful tension.

“All who might realistically oppose your forces on Midgard along with those who might have reason to oppose you from inside your own operations.” Loki’s wheedling smirk was large enough to allow the dimple on his right cheek to appear briefly. “Along with some others that I would just as soon be rid of -- for personal reasons. I am as efficient as I am clever.”

The Mad Titan’s laughter echoed off of the rock formations around him with a rare zeal. “You never fail to impress me, my Prince!” he cackled, slapping an armrest to emphasize his delight. “And they know nothing of your true allegiance?”
“You have my word,” the Asgardian gloated. “Plus, if you wait a few moments longer, the two groups will likely be engaging one another in battle. Afterwords, they will be quite easy to apprehend.”

This revelation caused the Titan’s mirth to increase, and he allowed his hearty chuckling to continue for several moments before he wiped away his joyful tears. “And then, after we deal with the Assembly, there will be none who can oppose me. The universe will be mine to rule!” His fist slammed along the edge of his stone perch with determination.

“And then I will have my payment?” Loki asked from between clenched teeth.

“All of Asgard at your command and your idiotic brother to lord it over? Oh, absolutely! You have more than earned your compensation.” Thanos then curled one fist up under his angular chin as if considering a new piece of information. “Although . . . “ he said, “you do realize that Thor is with the other Avengers? He risks being destroyed himself, and I cannot guarantee his safety.”

“Naturally, I have considered that,” the sorcerer replied. “And I have a strategy with which to separate him from the others, though it will take some additional time.”

“So you must return to them?”

Loki nodded somberly.

“Then be quick about it, Asgardian! The Assembly of our would-be allies has already begun, and you owe them a demonstration of the Tesseract in mere minutes.”

“I shall not fail you, my Lord,” Loki promised with a solemn bow. “Without you, I would never have seen the truth that suffering can offer. I have been given the opportunity to have my vengeance upon my erstwhile father and my undeserving brother. All that I have, I owe to you.”

With this oath upon his lips, the form of the sorcerer dissolved into the air.

He quickly shaded himself from view and crept into his chosen corner within the outpost, where the Avengers had regrouped. He listened briefly to the ridiculous chatter of his former captors as they laid their strategy out to him beautifully as he gazed unseen over their shoulders, even admirably managing to hold his tongue when Blackout had insulted him. The flash of pain across Thor’s face when the Lilin slandered him had then led to a marvelous chance to taunt his poor fool of a brother with a troublesome memory, which segued nicely into his reappearance and declaration of intent.

“I mean to finish this,” Loki had stated, and he had laid a pledge at Thor’s feet like the warriors of old. “Treasonous miscreant reporting for duty,” he said.

And, for once, he told the absolute truth.
Revenge is barren of itself: it is the dreadful food it feeds on; its delight is murder, and its end is despair.

--Johann Friedrich von Schiller

--1--

The plan upon which they had settled was simple: they would use the service entrance that Loki had identified earlier in order to enter Thanos’ main compound and then . . . well, die, probably. More specifically, their strategy was to force Thanos into what would almost certainly be (for them, anyway) a fatal confrontation, preferably by attacking him in a contained area so that they could limit the number of other enemies they would need to face at one time. With their small numbers, there was no way to engage the Titan one-on-one other than to catch him indoors, and that would mean accosting him before he could depart for Earth. First, however, they were forced to restlessly sit and wait for the blueprints of the compound to download into the memory of Tony’s suit so that they could reference them en route, all the while listening to the rumble and whine of various large and small transport aircraft as the enemy continued to prepare for deployment.

“What if Thanos is already gone?” Phil asked as he tapped his heel fitfully on the nearest stretch of wall. He also fiddled constantly with the safety of his weapon in an effort to release some of his mounting anxiety.

Blackout was perched on the windowsill facing the gathering of ships, and he shook his head emphatically. “He is still here,” the Lilin assured them. “His ship has not left the dock. At the very least, he could be onboard it, but he is certainly still somewhere on the surface.”

“Then we should strike now, while we are reasonably sure that Thanos is still on Titan. If he leaves, then we will have no chance of stopping him,” Natasha weighed in.

Stark motioned at the cable that reached from his suit to an input on the data console, where he and Bruce had rigged up a cursory input jack from the few items that Tony kept in his suit for impromptu repairs. “Well, Agent Romanov, I would love to get up and encourage the inevitable,
but I am still hooked into this computer until further notice,” he stated, his nervous energy coming off as irritability. “By the way, when do I get to be free from all this?”

Reminded of the download, Bruce crossed over to the main keyboard in order to check its status, and his look became concerned.

“What is it, buddy?” the billionaire asked casually.

“The data transfer --it’s taking longer than I thought it would,” Banner observed, his demeanor uneasy as he surveyed the readouts on the control panel. “It shouldn’t be taking more than a few minutes to download a file this size.”

Tony reviewed the progress indicator and frowned. “I’m going to have to agree,” he stated. “I think there is more than just the file we asked for in here.”

“Are you sure about this?” Rogers asked, the question directed only at Tony.

“Well, something’s not okay, because Bruce is right -- this is taking too damn long.”

“You said you were familiar with the network?” Steve was addressing Loki this time.

The Asgardian nodded just enough to indicate his agreement, although his look was generally disinterested.

“Can you fix this?”

Loki nodded again.

“Then do it.” The Captain’s words were stern, the way they became only in the most desperate of situations when he required an immediate response. To his surprise, he received one.

The sorcerer slid nimbly into the seat at the workstation, and his fingers flew across the keys at a superhuman pace. In approximately one minute, he disconnected the data cable and handed it to Stark listlessly. “Now, then, if that’s settled,” he said with uncharacteristic authority, “let’s move, shall we?”

Steve looked at Tony, who merely shrugged in response.

“Avengers,” Rogers commanded. “Let’s . . . move, I guess.”

At last, the team could file out of their base, weapons at the ready.

***.

“They’re leaving the outpost,” Nebula reported back to the others through her communications band. “Should I follow them?”

The team of villains had decided to do some surveillance in Loki’s absence, since it seemed pointless to sit around waiting fruitlessly for his return. Yet it seemed equally unwise to take his suggestion to wage war on the Avengers in their spare time, particularly since he had seemed so eager to make that happen. The building in which they had taken shelter had access to both the central network and the communications systems, so the remainder of the group had huddled
around a control panel, listening intently to whatever reconnaissance Nebula was relaying back to their position.

“Is Loki with them?” Maelstrom asked, although he was unsure he really wanted to hear the answer.

“I don’t see him . . .” she began to say, until she adjusted the magnification on her left eye. Her deep growl was all the answer the Inhuman needed.

“Follow them, but do it quietly,” he suggested.

He looked down to see Venom sniffing at the fabric of his cape. Before he could sweep it out of his reach, the Symbiote ran his tongue along the outside edge and then looked up at Maelstrom with a sly, greedy smile. The Inhuman shuddered at the sight of all of those long, curved teeth.

“What about Vermin and Blackout?” Juggernaut demanded. “The Asgardian said they were with the Avengers.”

“I have a visual on both the Lilin and the . . . Vermin,” she stated uncertainly.

“How many Avengers do you see?” Maelstrom inquired.

“I count five: Banner, Stark, Thor, Captain Rogers, and the female. Plus an unidentified human -- male, presumably a Terran. It appears Loki is leading them somewhere.” Nebula flattened herself against the wall of a nearby guard station in order to get a better look at her marks.

“Leading them?” Maelstrom replied. He paused briefly to pry the hem of his cape from Venom’s jaws, an action which he punctuated with an impatient eyeroll. “Where is he leading them, exactly?” The Inhuman then glanced up at Apocalypse, who was looking unconcernedly out the back entrance of the structure as if none of this involved him in any way.

“Too early to say for sure,” she retorted. “However, they are heading in the general direction of Thanos’ headquarters.” Nebula then went radio silent for a time as she sidled up as close as she dared to the position of those she was surveying. She watched closely as Captain Rogers peered around the corner ahead of them and into a good amount of open land, which they would need to cross if they were planning on bearing toward the main compound. When he turned back to the others, his face was pallid.

‘What do you see?’ The group could hear the voice of Tony Stark, muffled but intelligible over Nebula’s communicator.

‘An army,’ they heard Rogers reply, his tone breathless. ‘There is a wall of soldiers between us and Thanos.’

There were some muted sounds that indicated Nebula was moving away from the team of Avengers, and then she spoke in a whisper. “He’s not lying,” she said. “I see troops along the western edge of the main courtyard -- hundreds of them.” They could hear her voice wavering with the force of her footsteps as she moved quickly back towards where her companions were waiting.

“Maybe thousands,” she corrected herself.

“Loki led them into a trap?” Juggernaut wondered aloud.

“I have no idea,” Nebula murmured, increasing her speed. “But I am not remaining here to find out.”
“So, what now?” Natasha asked. Her words were determined; she had been trained to stay calm and unemotional under even the most dire of circumstances. Everyone gazed expectantly at Steve, but he was still in a quiet state of shock.

Banner stepped hesitantly forward and offered a proposal in his stead: “Regroup back at the outpost? It would give us some privacy at least to try to plan our next move.”

Thor then peered around the edge of the wall at what Rogers had seen, and he also looked a little wary. “I concur. This predicament is going to take some further consideration.”

“There is no time!” Loki whispered forcefully to his brother. “Thanos will certainly be gone by the time we conceive of another plan.”

“I don’t see what choice we have,” Steve said, already moving to withdraw. “We have no chance of getting through that line. Let’s fall back.” He sighed at the end of this statement, as if he held out little hope that there would be a better solution at the end of a retreat, either. Before he fully rounded the next bend, however, a shot exploded at his feet. “Take cover!” He instructed, placing himself between the live fire and Phil and Natasha.

A battalion of Skrulls appeared from around the corner, with laser rifles aimed at the line of Avengers. Immediately a wave of small missiles from the shoulder compartment of Tony’s suit flew towards them in retaliation, and they fell back just long enough for Thor and the Captain to land some valuable strikes on the enemy line.

“Phil!” Steve instructed from behind his shield as he deflected a volley of fire. “Take Natasha and go back to the outpost!”

Coulson stepped out from behind the cover of the super-soldier’s body and loosed three swift shots, two of which found their marks, before pulling back behind Steve again. “No offense, Captain, but you guys are going to need all the backup you can get.”

“That may be,” Rogers shouted over the din of the battle. “But someone needs to . . .  Wait,” he paused as another thought occurred to him. “Where’s Banner?”

A very noisy green blur ran through the center of the Skrull formation, parting them like waves against the bough of a ship, and then a resounding howl shook the surface of the moon around them. “I suppose that answers that question,” Steve shrugged. “Like I was saying, I need you to get back to the outpost and try to find some way to get a distress signal out of here -- to S.H.I.E.L.D., to Asgard, to wherever! Someone needs to know that Thanos’ army is heading for Earth. There is no way we are going to stop him in time!”

“Alright, Cap,” Natasha replied with far more conviction than she felt. “Come on, Director,” she said, grabbing Phil by the elbow. “You lead.”

“Why me?” Coulson protested, although he had turned back towards the outpost.

“Because you have the really big gun,” she stated, and she gave him a gentle shove in their intended direction. Before she followed, however, Natasha stepped carefully over to where Loki was holding his own against three of the enemy. “You, too,” she insisted. “I can’t navigate that
network without you."

The sorcerer nodded as he sent two small knives sailing toward a pair of his adversaries, piercing their necks and dropping them instantly. The third one Natasha quickly picked off with her handgun. The trio then disappeared down the path back to their former base of operations.

Moving with Phil at the head of the line and Loki bringing up the rear, they made excellent time, and they only needed to dispose of three stray Skrulls as they travelled. However, when they stepped back into the main room of the outpost, they were unpleasantly surprised by the presence of approximately twenty Badoons who were sweeping the place for intel, likely trying to determine what the invaders had been doing while inside the room. Natasha and Phil were the first two through the door, and the confusion of seeing the enemy caused them to stand utterly still in the entryway until Loki appeared between them. Natasha felt the Asgardian’s body stiffen, and he sucked in quite an audible breath, as if he were even more astonished than they were.

There was an excruciating silence during which neither side made sounds nor movements, and then Loki voice broke the stillness. “Well, well, boys . . . remember me?” There was a malevolent resonance to his words, the likes of which she had not heard since she had confronted him on the Helicarrier. He approached them slowly, his shoulders low as if he were stalking prey, but they merely stared back, unconcerned.

“Should we?” said the largest of the Badoons as he carefully reached for the large-bladed sword that hung at his waist.

As he continued to advance upon them in his aggressive stance, Loki’s mouth curved into as evil a grin as Natasha had ever seen on him. When he was within three steps of the first of the Badoons, the Asgardian’s image seemed to waver and then shift into one that was so filthy and emaciated that she hardly recognized him. “Remember me now?” he seethed with the same menacing tone, although now his voice was harsher and more breathy.

This change finally caused a reaction in the Badoons, and about half of their number took a frightened step backwards. For others, their faces went slack in disbelief. These were not just Badoons, Natasha realized -- they were guards from Algorant, and they each recognized the dishevelled visage of the deadly Kaal. As they responded in kind to the likeness of their former prisoner, the sorcerer unveiled a long-bladed knife in each hand and then allowed his appearance to drift back into its true form. The alteration seemed to soothe the trepidation of his opponents somewhat, and they returned to their battle-ready positions, looking more-or-less prepared to engage the Asgardian in combat.

“I don’t think we should stay here,” Phil whispered, his hand resting gently on Natasha’s shoulder.

“Go, if you think you need to,” she replied. “I’m staying.” And she meant it. She was emotionally invested in this showdown between Loki and his former tormentors, and God, she hoped he killed each and every one of them.

What happened next, however, was more than even she had bargained for.

***.***

As Tony swept over the breadth of the line of Skrulls, sizing up the number of soldiers and the types and totals of their weapons, he began to receive a worrying message from the control center
of his suit. It began as a tiny flash on his HUD -- no more than an annoyance at first -- and it was easily ignored at the time, especially since most of his capacity for distress was focused on the most badly injured parts of his back and shoulders. Then he took a few hits that sparked problematically off his elbow and midsection on the left side, and he maneuvered quickly back to where a scattering of low buildings would provide him some cover.

The flash soon began to be accompanied by an audio prompt that gently repeated, “Navigation system battery low,” at regularly spaced intervals. Tony knew he could try to divert some of the power away from the autopilot and do most of the flying manually in an attempt to save energy, but it was nearly impossible for him to do this while in the midst of a battle, when he had to be alert for anything at all times.

Damn, he missed J.A.R.V.I.S. right now.

He slipped into what turned out to be a neighboring troop bunker (which was empty, yay!) in order to give himself time to do a proper analysis. However, a quick systems check led him to another possible issue in the form of a red dot in the corner of his display that pulsed unobtrusively but relayed yet another warning: ‘Memory storage full.’ While not an emergent problem, it was still disturbing considering the vast data capacity of the suit’s hard drive. He must have downloaded hundreds of files from the Titan’s main computer network during the transfer, he realized, and they were slowing his processors to far below optimum levels. He quickly began to sift through the data to see if there was anything that could be safely deleted on the fly, and that was when he found the implanted files.

The ones he was not meant to find until long after the battle was over.

***.**.***

The second Loki locked eyes with the guards, everything in the periphery of his vision faded out. His entire existence was reduced to the group of creatures before him, and his eyes narrowed involuntarily with a singular need to attack, to wound . . . to kill. He was back on the surface of that fetid planet with the putrid wind that never ceased, and he was being tossed into the ring angrily, his restraints taken from him at the last minute before they cast him down into the dirt again.

‘Prepare to fight, you maggot!’ the one on the far left had told him before pressing a grimy boot to the back of his neck and pressing his face into the mud until he could barely breathe.

The third one from the right had then wrenched his head back violently by grasping a handful of his wild, filthy hair and hissed into his ear: ‘I have a week’s salary riding on this, Kaal! Don’t you dare lose this fight!’ Upon releasing him, the pair had kicked dirt into his eyes and then spat on him, chuckling as they walked away.

He had been almost too ill to stand, but he had willed himself to his feet regardless. He was so malnourished that the tips of his fingers were numb, and the nerves felt like they were on fire when he gripped the handle of the sword. ‘I have to live,’ he had told himself as he staggered toward the center of the arena. ‘I cannot die here. Thor will never know what became of me if I do. I have to live.’ He felt a wave of nausea grip him like a hard punch to the gut, and he steadied himself against the nearest stone wall, his hands protesting again as the burning pain travelled up the path of his famine-ravaged neurons. He tightened his grasp around the weapon, wincing but allowing that searing anguish to ground him in the cavernous space. He could hear the coarse breathing of the beast-like creatures around him, and he felt their warm expirations upon his skin as he hobbled past them to his appointed place.
There was a dull pain in his chest. It hurt to breathe.

‘I cannot die here, I cannot . . . I cannot.’

He looked around the fighting pit, and his vision was swimming with images that were only half-visible, the figures and faces blurred beyond recognition. When they faded back in clearly, however, he could see that he was not surrounded by fellow inmates looking to tear him apart but rather by the forms of Badoon guards, about twenty of them. His limbs felt leaden, like deadweight, and then suddenly he was standing outside of his own body, watching without command of any of his senses as he said to them, ‘Well, well, boys . . . remember me?’

‘Should we?’ asked the one who had left him to rot on those accursed spikes -- the incident he had shown to Natasha.

He watched, mesmerized, as his body dissolved and the shape of Kaal, his prison alter ego, emerged in its place. ‘Remember me now?’ said the raspy voice of that damaged, hideous creature. If he had possessed the physicality with which to shudder, he would have. Had he really looked so broken and sounded so vile?

Now he was back in his own frame again, the rage bubbling up as he drew the weapons at his sides, and he slithered seamlessly to the right side of the fray, where he knew the youngest and most inexperienced of the fighters were standing. The Badoon he encountered first raised his sword only to find it quickly countered by the blade in Loki’s left hand, while its throat was simultaneously sliced with the one on his right. Its body was knocked aside into the guard behind him, even as the sorcerer was already impaling the next Badoon on the weapon in his non-dominant hand and instantly cutting a deep slice into the throat of the third with the other.

Before either body dropped to the ground he had detected the approach of one of the more seasoned combatants who had tried to catch him unawares; Loki balanced nimbly on his left leg and leaned forward in order to wrap his right leg around its neck, the crook of his knee crushing against its windpipe, and the unfortunate beast fell dead at his feet. He then rotated to meet his next two opponents, one of which levelled a crossbow at his head. He knocked aside the sword in the first one’s hand with a forceful blow and then gripped its wrist, twisting its body around in front of him to take the hit from the projectile. The Asgardian still felt a small puncture wound below his ribs from where the arrow had emerged through the creature’s back, but it was a minor trauma that was easily ignored. He tossed the limp being in his arms aside and then launched himself at the bowman with both legs in front of himself, toppling it and two others behind it and removing them from play for a few moments.

Loki now stood at the center of approximately a dozen Badoons whom he had both wounded and been wounded by over the course of his incarceration on Algorant. They hesitated in their attack, and the sorcerer stood proudly at their center, turning slowly in a circle so that he would see any offensive as soon as it was attempted. Perhaps it was his hollow, savage smile that gave them pause, but there was no advance for the time being. As he gazed into their empty eyes, he felt the wrath burning the back of his throat, longing to taste blood. The tension from his ever-tightening hold on his weapons was sending pulses of white-hot current through his hands and funneling the excess energy up through his arms and into his shoulders, the pressure building until he knew he must strike at his enemies before they could come at him.

And, when he did, he positively erupted.

*** *** ***

Natasha watched with admiration as Loki finished off the first half-dozen of his opponents. The
speed with which he was able to dispatch them was almost dizzying, and he was indisputably light
and agile on his feet. However, the next phase of the battle began slowly, with Loki staring down
the alien beasts and daring them to come forward. In the end, it was the sorcerer who initiated the
fighting -- and it was a relatively brief but unbelievably horrible exchange to witness. The raven-
haired man burst toward the remainder of his adversaries, both knives working like a terrible
machine to cut down the others. His blows were merciless, exceeding both the amount of force
and the number of strokes that were necessary to bring down the enemy before him. He cleaved his
way through the group leaving a bloody trail of exsanguination along the floor of the outpost, and
he removed limbs and heads with brutal impunity. Throughout the slaughter, that macabre grin
remained draped across his mouth, and he even huffed out an awful laugh with some of the more
forcible blows.

With the last and largest opponent, he took extra time, gutting him completely before twisting the
blade relentlessly in his abdominal cavity, causing him to howl sickeningly with pain. It was the
one from her vision, the one who had impaled Loki on those gruesome, horn-like spikes. Natasha
would have felt it to be a well-deserved act of restitution for what he had endured, if only he had
stopped after a moment or two; however, the horrifying shrieks continued for what seemed like
endless minutes, and the creature begged and wept to be killed until he was hoarse with madness.
Only then did the Asgardian viciously split his skull.

When all of his enemies lay fallen at his feet, Loki remained on his knees, chest heaving and eyes
staring past all of the bodies as if he were not seeing them at all. His appearance was grisly: he was
dripping blood from head to toe but still smiling as if he were perfectly satisfied. Natasha began to
approach him, but then reconsidered when she saw that he was still clutching his knives
threateningly.

“Loki?” she inquired gently.

He cocked his head in her direction as though he had heard the word, but his features remained
slack from a lack of comprehension.

“Loki, it’s over now. You can put the knives down,” she said encouragingly. To her relief, he
began to rise, albeit mechanically. He turned toward her, his grin less prominent now but his eyes
still vacant, and he approached her slowly but purposely. To her bewilderment, he still held on
tightly to his twin blades.

“Loki,” she tried again, the word sounding more desperate now. “No one’s going to hurt you.
They’re all . . . gone.” She had started to say ‘dead’ but then had choked on the thought. He was
within steps of her now, and his demeanor had not altered. She reached behind her to see if Phil
had remained, but there was nothing but empty space. By the time she thought to reach for her
pistol, she could already feel the press of the blade at her throat and the heat of his breath on her
cheek. Her heart was racing, but she knew she had to continue to reach him.

“Please . . . you don’t have to do this,” she pleaded. “I am not your enemy.” The pressure of the
sharpened edge increased just enough that she felt a thin trickle of blood begin to seep down from
her neck and pool in the hollow of her left collarbone. She closed her eyes and braced for the fatal
incision that she knew would follow.

“Kaal,” said a deep male voice.

Her assailant hearkened to this name like he truly understood it, and his eyes appeared less clouded
as he sought out the source of the sound.

“Kaal,” it repeated. “Put the weapons down.”
It's Thor, she realized and felt a faint sliver of hope. Thor is trying to talk him down. However, her optimism faltered slightly when the knife did not retract even as his brother began to approach them with cautious steps.

“The contest has ended. We need to get you back to your cell.” The blonde warrior tried to sound harsh in impersonation of a prison guard, but his commands were tinged with sorrow in spite of his efforts. Fortunately, his instructions were still having some effect, because she could detect some weakening of the pressure at her throat.

Thor reached tentatively for the handle of the blade, and Natasha could sense the quickening of Loki’s inspirations as his brother’s fingers brushed his own. She held in a tense breath as she watched the sorcerer’s features, but they remained unchanged, his eyes still as dead and unseeing as they had been before.

“Let me have this, Loki,” Thor whispered. He boldly parted his sibling’s left fist, and the knife rolled into his waiting hand. “That is good,” he coaxed, his words soothing. “Now, the other one,” he whispered, reaching for the blade that threatened Natasha’s life. She felt the sorcerer’s hold stiffen slightly and then relax to relinquish the blade to his expectant brother. She could not suppress a relieved sigh as Loki crumpled limply, Thor catching his unconscious body before it could fall to the floor.
Thor kept watch at his brother’s side for nearly an hour. Loki did not stir during his dormancy, appearing to be in a state of heavy sedation, but the blonde man continued to speak to him regardless, whispering soothing encouragements from time to time, and once even singing softly to him. It was almost a touching scene -- if one could overlook the fact that the unconscious man had just recently been a homicidal killing machine.

Unable to maintain a base of operations in the outpost in the unholy aftermath of the slaughter, the team had moved on to yet another building in which to regroup. Stark was able to retrace his steps to the empty troop bunker in which he had been sheltering earlier, and the others had followed him half-heartedly. Some of their number were nursing wounds from the skirmish, including Steve, who had suffered two semi-serious burns to his upper body from a refracted laser blast, and Vermin, who had taken the blunt force of a boulder which had become dislodged during some physical combat between Thor and what appeared to be an exceedingly large Skrull that had assumed the form of a reptile-like beast about the size of a city bus. The resulting blow had broken Vermin’s leg just below the knee, and he had to ambulate with one arm around Blackout’s neck, thereby slowing the movement of the group considerably.

The elder Asgardian had carried Loki’s seemingly lifeless body with him, a labor that only seemed challenging due to his brother’s height, which made carrying his frame a little unwieldy. When they had first reached the bunker, Tony had brought out a worn mattress and some blankets from one of the nearby sleeping quarters so that they could make a soft place for Loki to lie upon. In fact, Stark seemed to look upon the younger sibling with what was almost pity, and, although his gesture with the bedding was kind, Thor was suspicious of the sudden sympathy that he was expressing.

“Has this happened before?” Tony asked calmly. The fact that he was also pressing a consoling hand to the Thunder god’s bicep did not go unnoticed.

“I am not certain to which phenomenon you are referring,” Thor replied, his lips creased tightly in his skepticism, “The murderous outburst or the prolonged state of unconsciousness?”

“Either. Both, really.” That look again . . . and, yes, it was some manner of compassion, even if it was not blatantly pity.

“I cannot recall him losing control so completely during battle before,” Thor confessed without further elaboration.

“How long do you think it will be before he’s conscious again?” Steve was less delicate with his inquiry.

As if harkening to the question, Loki turned slightly toward the teammates and emitted a soft, pained moan, his brow beaded with perspiration. Although he also grimaced in his sleep, he returned to his coma-like state almost immediately. The brevity of the action did not prevent his wary sibling from rushing to his side hastily, but when he realized that there would be no further signs of wakefulness, he looked deeply affected. “I cannot say,” Thor replied, searching Loki’s face for any recognition of his voice. “There is really no precedence for this in our history.”
“The others in the ranks say that you cannot be beaten,” spat the Badoon, “And they were willing to put up a lot of money to prove me wrong.” The guard pulled ungently on the chain that was attached to his shackles, and the force caused him to lurch forward roughly. “It is their poor luck that I am the one leading you into the Eye today,” his escort finished with an arrogant sneer. “I have something a little different in mind for today’s event.”

Even in his semi-lucid state, the prisoner felt a hollow ache in his chest at this suggestion. Encounters in the arena were exceedingly draining at the best of times, but a trouble-making prison guard was only likely to add further stress to the experience. However, there was no advantage to be gained by antagonizing the Badoon at this point, and so he allowed himself to be led violently down the corridor to the fighting pit.

When the immense portcullis was raised to allow them entry into the main ring, his eyes fell upon the variation to which the Badoon had been referring: a thick, stone pillar onto which a pair of manacles had been attached, the blood and tissue from its previous victims still clinging macabrely to its surface. He had not felt true fear in such a long time that the surprise caused him to pull back on his restraints briefly, before he bared his teeth and hissed at the reptilian creature that was trying to force him beyond the entrance. “Alright, Kaal,” the Badoon gloated as it overcame the inmate’s opposition with a hard yank on his lead, “Let’s see if you are really as clever as they say.”

He was now far enough out into the open ground that he was visible to all the members of the crowd, and he knew that the struggle was lost. He could hardly show open defiance now in front of his wardens and fellow inmates -- it would be interpreted as a sign of abject weakness. There was nothing left for him but to be led toward that horrible block of stone and its sinister restraints, and so he did it with as collected an exterior as he could manage.

When the crowd saw the identity of the one who was destined for the pillar this time, a triumphant cheer went up among the observers. The celebratory cry was then quickly followed by the familiar chant of his Name among the Nameless, until he wanted to clap his hands to his head to stop the raucous din of his identity against his oversensitized ears. However, he remained stoic, approaching his fate with the bearing his royal upbringing had afforded him. He was forced down by the shoulders until he was sitting flat on the earth with his legs splayed out gracelessly before him. His hands were held at the small of his back, and then each wrist was secured in a shackle, which was tightened until he had no slack with which to maneuver his bond. Each of these fetters was then secured to the stone block by a thick ring of metal that he knew his physical strength would not be able to break.

He looked around at the other combatants perfunctorily as he was chained. They were all imposing, perhaps not in height or bulk but in their severity and the way they all seemed to have a more intelligent glint in their eyes than the typical members of the chosen fighters -- but it was also peppered with a fair amount of crazy. That sick moment of panic came rushing back again, and he tamped it down swiftly, instead closing his eyes and focusing on the task that must be completed. There were six others here, and he knew three of the six from interactions within the prison. They were skilled warriors on the worlds from which they hailed, and so it was no coincidence that they had been selected to face him. This event was intended to be special, indeed.

Twenty-Seven stood up at a podium-like structure overlooking the main arena, a platform that had likely been constructed specifically for this occasion. Kaal pulled futilely at his wrist bindings,
gauging the amount of give that he had both at the shackle and at the connecting links of chain. The result was not encouraging. The Badoon then outstretched its arms and leered presciently at the prisoner who was restrained to the stake before howling out that the conflict should commence.

It may have been the reputation of the inmate who was fettered at the center of their gathering or even a certain degree of pity on his behalf, but none of his fellow prisoners moved to attack him outright; they each engaged the opponent closest to themselves instead. The fact that they were proficient fighters actually worked in Kaal’s favor, because the pairs of contestants kept one another occupied for longer than would be typical for a brawl in the Eye. In the time afforded him by this meager advantage, the mage immediately scrambled to free himself from his bonds.

He attempted first to stand, but the slack in his tether did not allow him the dignity of even this small range of motion. Therefore, he shuffled back towards the pillar while still sitting upright, groping furiously for the one item he knew was within his reach if he did so -- the recently severed arm of one of the previous occupants of his position. He could feel from his desperately quick evaluation of its surface with his fingertips that it bled freshly, and he held it tightly against his back, preparing to do what might be necessary to save his life. He purposely did not allow himself to think it through to any extent before he completed his work.

He squeezed the cleaved end of the limb just above the wound that had separated it from its former owner, allowing a nauseating flow of blood and a few flecks of tissue to seep down over his manacles. As he did so, he could see that the skirmish furthest from his position had ceased, and a wild-eyed Baluurian was approaching him with homicidal intentions. Kaal could feel the thick, lukewarm fluid running between his bonds and along his fingers, its consistency nearly grease-like as it began to congeal. He started to yank harder at the shackles, finding that the blood did give him a certain element of movement that he did not have before but that his hands were still woefully trapped. He pulled until the skin began to burn from severe abrasion, and yet the restraints still did not budge. The confrontation with the Baluurian would just have to play out as it may, he realized, and he resigned himself to finding a way to come to his own defense without using his upper extremities.

When his enemy was almost upon him, the sorcerer rolled backwards so that he could extend his lower body upward. Fortunately, the move was completed before the Baluurian could anticipate it, and he was able wrap his legs around the creature’s forearm, which was holding a bladed weapon. Kaal then quickly rolled to the side, using the sudden torsion of his body and the element of surprise to wrench the machete from his grip and then instantly flip back over to surround the beast’s throat with his ankles, pinching the sinew between them and snapping his neck in a move that was elegant yet merciless. He then sat back to begin working at his bonds with renewed intensity. He could see that the other two pairs had settled their competitions, and the victors were now both headed for his position. One -- a Prosilican with a keener look than its counterpart -- brazenly flung a small knife in an effort to wound the notoriously dangerous inmate and thereby increase its chances of victory. The mage barely avoided the blade, although it still managed to slice through his sleeve along his right bicep. Fortunately, it also landed near enough to him in the dirt that he was able to utilize it. Mounting a defense with so minimal a blade was not feasible, but he knew that he could free himself if he was swift enough. He gripped the handle and then began to make hasty work of the one item that was stubbornly obstructing his freedom: his own skin.

Any effort at tugging on his shackles in order to loosen them, even in their greased state, was stymied by the shifting of his famine-loosened hide, which bunched up along the opening and blocked him from pulling his hands out through them. With the sharp instrument he now possessed, however, he could solve that little conundrum with yet another life-saving action that he was not going to think about one iota before he performed it. He held the blade against the skin of
his forearm, pressing the tip beneath the surface until he could feel that he had drawn blood. The first of his two remaining opponents was within steps of where he sat, and so he swiftly turned the opposite arm on its axis like a lathe, cutting a deep incision around the circumference of half of his forearm, then quickly repeating the action along the other face of the limb.

With a quick, brutal yank on his right shackle, he was able to free his hand, the obstructive casing tearing off of the tissue beneath it and stripped away as if he were shedding a glove. The enemy before him had raised its cruel bludgeon above it to deliver a fatal blow to the mage’s skull, but instead the beast was shocked to see his opponent stand and quickly plunge a dagger into its throat with his crudely flayed fist. It fell to its knees, mortally wounded and clutching at the blade in its neck. Still leashed to the stake with the opposite manacle, Kaal then spun to face the Prosilican who held a much longer knife on its dominant side. The sorcerer purposely did not allow himself to stare at his seriously injured hand, and the shock was keeping him from completely feeling the agony of all the nerves that were exposed when the flesh had been skinned. It still throbbed with terrible pain, however, but he had no time to consider it further. The last combatant was lunging at him now, and he stepped aside to avoid the oncoming blade.

As he did so, he picked up the short length of chain that had just recently bound his bleeding hand and wrapped it nimbly around his enemy’s extended arm.

To Kaal’s surprise, he felt a length of metal enter into his thigh on the other half of his body, a breach made by a smaller dagger that he had not seen in his opponent’s other hand. He cried out first in misery and then in unbridled rage. He used the chain which encircled the arm of his enemy to jerk the Prosilican forcefully to the ground. Kaal then wound the short piece of chain that still restrained his other hand around the creature’s throat, and then used all of his strength to tighten it. He felt the blade in his leg withdraw and then re-enter his flesh on the upper left part of his back. The pain did not cause him to scream this time but to growl instead, like a wild animal biting at the neck of its struggling prey. This end would not be graceful, he knew -- it took much longer to chortle a beast than to break its neck -- and the sounds were unpleasant, the motions clumsy while the creature twisted and clawed at him for purchase. However, he had been left with very little choice in the matter. When his opponent finally lay still, its eyes open widely, its tongue lolling out among its hideously swollen lips and its face smeared degradingly with its killer’s blood, the delirious howls and cheers of the audience rushed over him in an abhorrent wave of sound, punctuated, of course, by the resounding mantra of his own name.

Two of the guards entered the arena, and then rushed over to separate him from the lifeless body beneath him. The younger one wrapped his hand carefully in a mostly clean cloth, and the raw tingle and burning of the contact made him cry out pitifully. Fortunately, no one but the guards could hear him over all the cacophony. He could feel his heart beating too rapidly in his chest as a result of shock from the blood loss, and when the pair of Badoons tried to right him, he buckled beneath the weight of his own frame. Oh, what humiliation it would be to triumph in this impossible battle only to die from his injuries! He laughed, but the resulting sound was barely more than a breathy exhale in his weakened state. He was fading out, his surroundings obscured by what was almost a veil before his eyes, and he could feel the tips of his boots trailing roughly across the ground as he was pulled toward the exit.

“That was impressive,” said the older Badoon, who was shouldering more of Kaal’s weight as they moved. “You know, I had you figured for dead that time.”

The other Badoon was nodding -- he could feel the motion ripple through his right shoulder-- and then he heard it plainly say, ‘Loki? Can you hear me?’

He attempted to lift his head, but could only turn it far enough towards the speaker to vaguely make out its lips moving as it repeated his name:
“Loki?”

The Asgardian showed some recognition as his head turned toward the sound, but he did not open his eyes at first. His arm moved sluggishly to rest across the line of his brow, and then he moaned softly.

“I think he is coming around.”

_The voice that was calling him was deep like that of a Badoon, but it was not nearly as rough. It seemed familiar, somehow, and yet he could feel the ridged hide of the alien beast as it rested its head near his ear to speak . . ._

“We will probably have to take off that hand. Otherwise, the infection may kill you.”

He suddenly sat up in terror, his eyelids opening widely, and he gasped frantically as he tried to anchor himself to the present, to where he was, to what threats were near him and with which weapons he could respond . . .

A hand pressed firmly on his shoulder, holding him against the mattress as he struggled with this overwhelming series of emotions. Details of the room faded in: a window that showed a hint of Saturn lingering above the horizon, a red-haired woman who was studying him with austere scrutiny, and the vast form of his brother in the foreground, pinning him to the spot with a force like iron. His location and purpose filled his consciousness, and the realization caused the persona that he wore in his most desperate moments to fit itself effortlessly upon his features. He bent his lips into a sour scowl and smacked away the hand that steadied him, although the force he had to use in order to do so was enough that the effort caused him some pain.

“Unhand me, you lout!” Loki barked as he stood haughtily. He took several fast steps away from where he had been, but halted before he could fully reach the exit.

“So, he’s awake, then?”

_The insufferable Stark. Of course._

“I am,” he spat back without turning to face the group. He worried his bottom lip with his foremost teeth as he desperately tried to hold in what he was feeling -- fear, confusion, rage, and, above all, vulnerability. It was a humiliating cocktail of weakness, and he had shown it to these . . . these simple Midgardians.

“How long was I without consciousness?” the sorcerer asked, his eyes searching the faraway horizon through the window frame.

“About ninety minutes,” said Natasha soberly.

“Having said that,” Steve added, “we are already well past the time where we should have mounted an offensive. I don’t mean to be pushy, but we need to prepare for some sort of response almost immediately.”

Thor had crossed the room to where his sibling was standing, and he brashly rested a hand upon the other’s back. “Are you well enough to come with us?”

The pity in Thor’s voice was disgusting in its sincerity, and he shrugged off his brother’s touch gruffly. “I am fine.”

“Truly, Loki, if you are not fully recovered then you should remain here . . . “
“I said that I was fine!” The sound of his own voice was too loud in his ears, and he swallowed in a metaphoric internalization of his own disgrace. “I am fine, Thor,” he repeated in a much more gentle and sincere manner.

This declaration was no lie: he was prepared to do what was required to bring this whole sordid episode to its proper conclusion, and his brush with that bloodthirsty loss of control could not dampen it. There were pawns in motion -- pieces that were poised for immediate action, and he had to advance them before the proper alignment was lost. Let the others believe that he could afford to press forward now because he would have opportunity to ruminate upon his unbridled mania at a future time.

He knew, of course, that this could never be.

*** *** ***

The team made their way back to the plain in front of Thanos’ compound in relative silence. The dire mood that weighed heavily upon them was apparent in the hunched, encumbered postures that they held as they moved sluggishly forward. They knew that in all the time that had passed that Thanos must have already launched his ships, and that even now his forces were moving steadily toward an indefensible Earth. What they would find on the actual plain was somewhat of a mystery, but that would also be shortly solved. In an oppressively short span of time they were back at the spot, unchallenged, with no Skrull battalion waiting to ambush them.

It was almost pointless to survey the expanse of land around the corner, although Captain Rogers found it complicit with his sense of duty to do so.

“I don’t believe it,” he said as he pulled back towards the others.

“What?” Stark replied brusquely. “Did they leave a crop circle that spells out ‘jk, we’re off to eliminate some other poor bastards’ planet’? Because I think that would be about the best case scenario at this point.”

“No, Tony, it’s actually weirder than that,” said Steve as if he could scarcely process what he had seen. “They are all still there.”

“That’s not possible,” stated Phil. “They wouldn’t just wait around for us to stop them.”

“See for yourself,” Rogers challenged him, although the words were still far more disbelief than derision.

Phil, Tony, and Natasha all craned their necks around just far enough to make out the scene around the corner: there were rows and rows of alien soldiers, some in regiments and formal uniforms, others bedraggled and carrying crude weapons. The latter type were more restless, and sometimes they even chose to attack others in their vicinity, presumably just to pass the time; these aggressors were almost certainly the members of Algorant’s army of the Nameless and insane, they realized in an unspoken consensus. After what they had seen Loki accomplish when his trigger was tripped, this fact was hardly going to increase morale.

“Is it possible that they are merely projections?” asked Thor. He was still hovering protectively at this brother’s elbow, although Loki looked less than pleased by this behavior.

“It’s possible,” Steve answered, glancing around the bend a second time to size up their opposition. “I don’t know that I’m willing to bet our lives on it.”
“How many opponents?” Loki asked calmly. He was still looking worse for wear, overall, but he seemed to have recovered admirably from his earlier episode.

Rogers surveyed the landscape, nodding his head occasionally as if silently counting. “I’m going to say six to eight-hundred, ballpark. That doesn’t count the ones that might be beyond the compound.”

“So what’s our strategy?” Phil inquired, his hand flicking nervously on and off the trigger of his rifle. Drops of perspiration were standing along his hairline, and his left foot jiggled in a fit of anxiety. His voice, however, was as smooth as the head of a security agency’s should be, even in extreme crisis.

“There is only one possible way to end this,” Loki interjected before anyone else could offer a proposal. “We must create a distraction so that a smaller team has the opportunity to cut a swathe through the middle and, against all rational odds, reach the compound.”

The others turned this suggestion over silently for a time. It would never work, each one concluded, but then neither would whatever plan each of them could formulate on his or her own. However, some follow-up inquiries did still need to be made.

“Who makes up this ‘smaller team’?” Banner inquired skeptically. “I mean, those guys would have to be crazier than the poor saps who get left behind.”

“That sounds like a job for you, my unstoppable green friend,” Tony replied. “You were practically born to barrel your way through things.”

“I would tend to agree,” Loki added. “However, he would be too unruly to be of any use once he would reach Thanos’ headquarters. It would be too risky. He could, however, prove to be invaluable in holding the line during the diversion attack.”

“Okay, Bruce stays here,” Rogers stated. “So, who goes?”

“Ideally, we need more than one individual with superhuman strength and speed, plus the ability to withstand unusual damage. Additionally, it would be beneficial if these persons had a working knowledge of each other’s fighting styles and abilities for oh, say, multiple centuries.” At the end of this description, Loki was staring keenly at his brother, who had not yet worked out the implications of his plan. Realization dawned just as the other team members were beginning to seek out his reaction, as well.

“You mean me?” Thor replied, his face solemn. “Myself -- and you, as well?”

“You know that I do,” the raven-haired man replied with all sincerity.

Thor looked from one of his allies to the next, seeking permission to take on such a foolhardy mission and to leave each of them behind. Internally, he knew that this idea was the closest to success that they were likely to come, and yet it was still the purest form of madness to do what was being proposed. He and Loki were the best prospects he supposed, and he saw the resignation in the faces of his team mates as he scanned their visages for the consent that confirmed his theory.

It was the only way. And it would still undoubtedly fail.

So this is how it would end. It had been such a futile undertaking from the start, and yet it was the unshakable optimism of his warrior temperament that had left Thor believing up until this desperate end that there was a chance, that they could somehow triumph over unspeakable evil if their
reasons were true. He gazed up at his brother, whom he had twice presumed dead, and saw in his eyes the same quiet renunciation: the best that they could hope for was to die fighting -- and to perhaps meet again beyond the gates of Valhalla.

It would be enough.

Thor nodded his unspoken assent, but Loki did not smile, instead glaring back at him with dull, determined eyes. “I always suspected that we would die beside one another in battle,” the blonde man said with a difficult smile.

“I think that would be true of half of Asgard,” the dark-haired man replied, one corner of his mouth allowing a reticent smirk to form at the last. The Thunder god could not resist clapping a familiar hand on the other’s shoulder, the gesture he had used throughout centuries to cement his brother’s place at his side before they had ridden to war. However, this time there was an inscrutable flicker in Loki’s stare that had never been present in all of those countless years, and it gave him pause. Yet it was surely a result of the hopelessness of their circumstances.

Surely.

“So -- what does that leave for the rest of us?” asked Tony as he clapped his metal-encased hands together loudly.

“Well,” said Natasha as she stepped away from the wall and into the center of the group, her arms crossed and her eyes alight with a will to meet death head-on, “I think that leaves us with this, boys: We get to blow up as many of those crazy alien bastards as we can until they overwhelm us, and then we die on a frozen rock where no one will live to tell of our noble deeds.”

“I can get on board with that,” Tony responded with an impish grin. “Just let me finish off the last of my secret stash of alcoholic contraband, and then I am all yours, my dear.”

“Then it’s settled,” Steve sighed, but ultimately even he could not resist joining in on the expression of a tight smile. “We will die on our feet.” He clasped Tony’s gauntlet in a sorrowful unity.

Bruce stepped toward the heart of his group of friends, ringing his hands absently, but otherwise staunchly resigned to the idea of a last stand, and stated, “A wise man once said, ‘For death is no more than a turning of us over from time to eternity.’” He scoured the faces of those present, choosing to cement his point with a reassuring stoicism. “We have nothing to fear if we die here today. Our cause is just, for we go to battle with the fortunes of an entire planet upon our shoulders. And should we die, then we will honor those that we have loved with our blood.”

“Did the wise man say that last part as well?” Steve asked gently. He had the beginnings of tears forming around his eyes, but they did not swell enough to fall.

Bruce shrugged timidly. “No . . . actually I just came up with that. I was trying to be inspiring.”

“Well, I was inspired,” Natasha proclaimed. She crossed over to Banner and gave him a firm hug. “I have looked Death in the face on more occasions than I can count,” she continued. “And I can honestly say that with all of you around me, I would consider it a privilege to meet my end on this ice-cold stinkball.”

This quip brought a round of muted laughter from the rest of the group.

“Okay,” Steve began with a deep breath. “On the count of three, everyone but Thor and Loki comes out with guns -- or whatever -- blazing. Concentrate on the path to the compound. We have
to weaken the center line in order to give the Asgardians the best chance at reaching Thanos, so try to drive the Titan’s forces to either side. Tony --”

Stark was swigging from his hip flask of hard liquor, and he gave the Captain a wave of his index finger to indicate that he was almost finished. “I promised myself that I would not die sober.”

“Tony,” Rogers repeated, “You draw the fire of the surface-to-air weapons. Natasha, you and Phil stay here and pick off anyone who advances past this point. Blackout . . . Vermin.” He addressed each of the former prisoners in turn. “What skills do you have?”

“I can blind at least one regiment at a time, leaving them vulnerable to your attack,” Blackout stated proudly. “I also have more than a passing talent with a rifle.”

“I can fight hand-to-hand,” Vermin offered. “Although I am hindered by my leg injury, I still have quicker than average reflexes and the ability to see in near darkness. It may not help much, but I am willing to do what I can,” he said with a forthright manner.

“Good,” Steve said. “Stick together and try to advance with us if Bruce and I are able.”

“That leaves Thor and myself,” Loki interjected, nodding at his brother.

“Right,” Rogers continued. “Thor and Loki, you go that way.” He used two fingers to indicate the compound. “Run until you either get killed or you hit something solid.”

“Agreed,” Loki responded.

“Agreed,” Thor also replied, but with less enthusiasm.

“Alright!” the Captain cried out in a volume that indicated he was no longer concerned with who else might hear: “Avengers . . . assemble!”
Maelstrom had nearly nodded off by the time the first salvoes were heard from along the distant plain. He snapped back to his conscious state and then rushed over to the window closest to the sounds of battle, one hand gripping the window sash with such force that he nearly dislodged it from its framing. “What’s happening now?” he demanded of Apocalypse, who was still standing apart from the rest of their number . . . and looking elsewhere. The Inhuman had no evidence that their silent watchman had any ulterior knowledge of the situation, but his exceptional intuition for deceit was flashing a constant warning behind his eyelids whenever he happened to glance in the mutant’s direction.

“The Avengers are mounting an attack,” Apocalypse stated without pretense. The fact that Maelstrom was able to answer this revelation almost immediately was proof that he was growing accustomed to the unsettling manner of the other’s speech.

“And what does that mean to us?” he demanded irritably. When the behemoth slowly pivoted his head to meet the Inhuman’s gaze, however, he could not help but soften both his demeanor and his tone. “If you know anything,” he continued with a deep, calming breath, “I think you should tell us.”

The mutant’s lips twisted into a cruel, blue-ringed smile, and his eyes began to burn faintly with what may have been smoldering anger. Maelstrom stuck out his chin with a courage that he did not entirely feel and met the glare of those glowing orbs head-on. There were several seconds of strained silence, and then Apocalypse began to make the most inhumane and disconcerting of sounds that he could probably manage.

He began to laugh.

“What I know is beyond anything that you could endure,” he chortled, and the rumbling of his merriment jarred painfully against the chests of all those within earshot. “However,” the colossus concluded, his mirth subsiding along with the force of his words, “I do indeed have a message that I must convey to all of you.”

Maelstrom felt the warmth of the female at his elbow. “Is this missive from our absent teammate, perhaps?” she practically spat at the giant.
“If you are referring to ‘Kaal,’ then, yes, it most certainly is.” The enormous mutant’s mood had oddly lightened. “When the proper moment came, I was to tell you the unfortunate truth about why you are really here.” His smile should have been reassuring, but it only caused Maelstrom’s stomach to clench with misgiving.

“And now is the proper moment?” the Inhuman asked. He had failed at not edging his response with the suspicion that was choking his subconscious.

“Indeed,” Apocalypse chuckled again. He studied each of their anxious faces in turn, and then sneered fiendishly as he made his declaration. “Kaal has brought the Avengers here as a favor to the Mad Titan himself, and he is leading them to their doom. As for all of you -- well, I’m afraid you are also here under false pretenses. Loki has asked you here not to help him to destroy Thanos but to be fodder for his armies as payment for his own debt.”

There was a profound silence in the following moments, while each of the members of the group waited for the mutant to declare this a harmless ruse. Instead, he stood with his bulky arms folded, that infuriating smirk playing upon his colorful lips.

Oddly, Venom was the first to respond, and he did so with a quiet moan that was nearly a whimper. As if this menial sound had unleashed an avalanche of sequential acceptance, each member of the party began to react with varying degrees of rage and disbelief. While Juggernaut was the most demonstrative with his anger, punching a nearby workstation with his oversized fist and sending it completely through the exterior wall, Nebula was the most vocal; she spouted at least seven different adjectival expletives in her native language, which were quickly followed by some vengeful oaths to her culture’s deities. Maelstrom, however, remained both mute and still, although he continued to shake his head at irregular intervals.

It couldn’t be. It simply could not be.

“Kaaaaaal,” Venom hissed as he gnashed his numerous teeth, fresh spittle oozing from the corner of his mouth as he growled in indignation. His claws dragged forcefully along the smooth surface of the floor beneath him, cutting jagged scratches into the otherwise unblemished facade.

After the others had concluded their individual rants, they focused on the Inhuman, who continued to stand in strangely uninterrupted thought. He then proceeded to hold a whispered conversation with himself, nodding and gesturing as if he were testing out several different possibilities for recourse. At the end of his personal turmoil, he seemed to realize that the others were carefully studying his behavior, and he looked up blankly at their expectant faces.

“Okay, then,” he said with almost no emotion.

Maelstrom drifted indiscriminately toward the sounds of battle, stopping only at the exit to the outpost when a firm arm blocked his path. He looked dazedly looked up into the angry, blue face of the one who hindered him. “Where do you think you’re going?” Nebula demanded, her teeth bared in his slackening face.

There was no retribution here: only betrayal. Thanos was not only going to endure, but he was poised to rule the known universe. This outcome was unacceptable.

“Maelstrom?” she demanded when he continued to glare at her with dull eyes. “What do you think you are going to do out there? We are surrounded by our enemies!”

“I know,” he said languidly. He applied resolute force to the limb that impeded him, however, and she removed it, albeit bitterly.
The ending may be inevitable, but they will not be rid of me so easily. Neither Loki nor Thanos will triumph without looking upon me one last time.

The Inhuman began to feel a faint crackle of the energy inside himself awakening along with his grief and rage. It rippled beneath the surface of his skin, at bay for the moment, but it was longing to be unleashed, racing along the flesh of his arms and causing every hair on his arms to lift with the sparks of restless power. Nebula watched enthralled as the flickers of luminous energy began to encircle the irises of each of his eyes, the rings lustrous in the half-light. Oh, he was infuriated, alright -- it was just taking a moment for him to reach his full potential.

“So, we go after him?” she asked with newborn enthusiasm.

“Not exactly,” Maelstrom responded with a wicked sneer.

“Then, what?” inquired the deep voice of the Juggernaut, who had appeared beside them.

“We choose a new side,” the Inhuman revealed. His eyes were now pulsing with the power that was surging within him. “My friends,” he stated to all of those present, “I believe the Avengers could use our assistance.”

***.***

Thor and Loki were back-to-back in the center of a seemingly unending wave of enemies, and each time that they were certain that they would be overrun, they received a respite from a blast of Iron Man’s aerial defenses. Additionally, they had both heard and felt the roar of the Hulk from somewhere behind them a few moments ago, and they knew it was imperative that they hold out until he could reach their position.

“How long do you think the others can repel them?” Thor shouted over the din of their combat.

“Hopefully long enough that we can reach the compound!” Loki yelled back. He was set upon by three Skrulls at that moment, and while he was roundly beating the first two opponents, the third was thrown backwards about a hundred feet by the force of Mjölnir, which also managed to take out a third of the line that was advancing behind him. Upon its return to its master’s hand, the mighty hammer was driven into the ground, its power rippling outwards along the moon’s surface and temporarily scattering the dozens more that were advancing upon their position.

From beyond the rows of prone bodies, the pair could see a large, angry smudge of green that was moving rapidly towards them now in leaps and bounds. It was clearing its path of Skrulls, Badoons, and anything else that might be unfortunate enough to be in its way in huge scooping handfuls. As it blazed past them, it let out a thunderous cry that echoed far across the plain.

A few of their adversaries had righted themselves and were levelling their weapons at the Asgardians. Thor instinctively began to confront them with sweeping blows of his hammer, while Loki paused for a beat to follow the line of the Hulk as he continued his destructive journey across the plain. The sorcerer smiled to himself with a sudden realization: the great green beast was heading more or less in the direction of the Titan’s headquarters, and he was leaving an unobstructed path in his wake.

The raven-haired sibling made a quick, sweeping gesture with his right hand, and a faint glow of greenish light surrounded the brothers. The advancing opponents tried to push past the wall of illumination, but it held them back like a solid barrier. However, the blonde warrior remained in
his battle-ready stance and stared down the line of adversaries with a glare of defiance.

“Brother!” Loki called out, gripping his shoulder in an attempt to bring him around. “We have to go!” When Thor still did not immediately turn to follow him, the dark-haired man hooked a finger into the rear collar of the other man’s armor and gave a forceful tug. This motion caused the other to finally glance toward the open route that lead nearly to the compound, and, this time, he was swift to pursue.

Following the trail left by the Hulk allowed them to make far better time as they advanced toward their destination, deflecting the occasional small numbers of enemy troops that happened to fall into their way. When they had crossed half of the overall distance, Loki peered back over one shoulder -- and then immediately regretted the move. Behind them, he could see the line of enemies reforming, filling in the open path that the behemoth had created and pursuing the pair of Asgardians at full speed. The view ahead was not much of an improvement as the Hulk was beginning to outpace them, and the way to the compound was gradually closing in on both sides behind him, threatening to close off their pathway to Thanos.

“Thor!” Loki cried out, hoping that his brother would hear him over the bedlam. “We need to move faster!” He was unsure precisely what he was hoping to accomplish by this revelation, as they both were already moving as swiftly as their legs could carry them. He could hear the sound of Mjölnir side-swiping a number of foes as they travelled, and he could also sense that there was at least two creatures running right on his heels at this point. All the while, the width of the cleared ground ahead of them continued to shrink, until it became quite obvious that they would not have time to reach their target before they were consumed by the hordes around them. Options raced fleetingly through his mind: stand and fight, veer off to one side and try to lose the ones directly behind him, throw up an illusion that might baffle them and buy some time . . .

Suddenly, Loki saw the bodies of his close pursuers thrown to either side, and he felt an arm encircle his waist, lifting him upwards as he flailed in shock. He felt his feet leave the ground, and then he was rocketing toward the compound as he struggled with the hard, metallic creature that had abducted him.

“I, uh, wouldn’t try so hard to get loose, if I were you,” the digitally-enhanced voice of Tony Stark warned him. “It’s a long drop straight down, and those guys down there don’t like you very much.”

He did lessen his attempts to wriggle free after this suggestion, but he could not help but squirm with occasional vexation. He was not comfortable with flying -- it was not really within his zone of familiarity. Plus, it was not advantageous that he detested the lack of control involved in having to be carried anywhere at the best of times.

Thor was now flying alongside them, and this was at least some relief to him. They reached the perimeter of the courtyard, and Tony swooped low behind a line of Kodabaks who had been stationed to guard the main complex. He released Loki without fanfare, and the Asgardian rolled forcefully into the wall of a guardhouse, the impact pushing an irritable grunt from him. Stark was now facing down the line of wardens, blasting his repulsors continuously as they fired back with their laser weapons.

“Come, brother!” Thor urged as he righted him, picking him up and standing Loki on his feet as if he were no more than a child’s doll. This action furthered his already prominent annoyance, but he knew there was no time for bickering at the moment. “Where is the door?” the blond asked him, as he simultaneously checked him over for obvious damage.

“Just over that ridge,” Loki indicated with a nod of his head. He stormed off in the general
direction he had indicated merely to stop his brother from fussing over him. *No matter. This ordeal would all be over soon enough.*

The entrance to the compound was curiously unguarded -- or, at least, anyone who did not know what was about to transpire would likely have found it curious. Thor, however, praised their good fortune and rushed headlong into the opening as soon as Loki had opened it with the code. The sorcerer scrambled to overtake him, for it would be a shame if all of this careful planning went amiss simply because his brother was overly eager. Before the door behind them had closed completely, however, they heard the charring sounds of several shots bouncing off of the armor of Tony’s suit, and then they heard the billionaire cry out in abject pain. At the very last, Loki almost thought he could hear the crackling burst of a high-energy blast -- like the kind that Maelstrom might unleash if he were repulsing a large number of enemies -- but the perfection of that idea was almost too much to hope for . . .

As the pair continued to race through the intake corridor toward the interior doors, a distinct hum and a vague vibration began in the walls around them. The apprehension was plainly readable on Thor’s face as they dashed along, but Loki was careful not to allow his sibling to see any expression written upon his own. The sound and motion around them intensified, and suddenly the doors towards which they were running seemed to pull further away, leaving a gap between the corridor and the entrance beyond.

“What is happening?” asked Thor loudly, the distress clear in his words.

“The compound is going on lockdown! They’re raising the dome!” Loki replied, suddenly increasing his speed. He managed to reach the distant doorway a few steps ahead of Thor, and then ducked inside hastily with his brother almost on his heels.

A few steps inside, and a violent torrent of sound not unlike a strong blast of wind swept up between the two of them, after which Thor collided with a solid, invisible barrier. Loki halted in his tracks and turned slowly to see the look of absolute panic upon the blond man’s face.

The protective dome around the compound had been raised. And each brother was on an opposite side of it.

The Thunderer had raised the hand without the hammer as if he would try to break through the unseen wall. He did not, instead asking his brother with a raised voice, “Is there a way around it? Can it be breached?” Thor’s voice was muffled but intelligible.

Loki crept purposefully back toward the enclosure, studying the faintly visible stranding of its surface carefully. He brushed it tentatively with the tips of his fingers, and it glowed faintly at the points where he made contact. He shook his head wistfully. “I am afraid it is impenetrable.”

Thor brought Mjölnir down hard against the barricade, but it only caused a violent ripple of sound, and the recoil caused the warrior to fall backwards ungracefully, his cape trailing out behind him with the force of his fall. As he stood and returned to the wall of the dome, he placed an outstretched hand to the smooth face of the barrier, finding absolutely no trace of damage from the blow that he had delivered.

Loki allowed a breathy laugh of disbelief to leave his lips as the truth of their situation settled upon him. Thor had come to the realization of what these circumstances meant, as well, and his eyes were sad -- so sorrowful and tinged with grief that Loki felt the need to comfort him, if only he could have reached him at that moment.

“You know what this means?” the elder man said, his voice cracking just a bit at the ending.
“Yes,” the younger man nodded, his eyes filling with the faintest hint of tears. “I am trapped in here with Thanos and all of those who serve him.”

“I cannot help you now,” Thor replied weakly, the tears also beginning to pool in his sightline. “You must go on from here alone, whatever fate awaits you within.”

“Yes, I suppose I must.” Loki stared apprehensively along the corridor behind him.

“Aye,” Thor replied. “You must continue on alone.”

“I guess this is goodbye, brother.”

A sound like the rush of a strong wind could be heard in the labyrinth of hallways at Loki’s back, and the dark-haired man turned toward it. There was a burst of light in the distance that accompanied the unwelcome sound -- like a faroff surge of flame. “I cannot linger here,” he announced, his eyes still wet and his voice unsteady. “They have closed off the interior to their enemies, and they are flushing out any who might have managed to make it inside.” Yet, even as his words professed his urgency to flee, he still hesitated by the outer boundary. Finally, he said, “Farewell, Thor,” and began to turn away, his eyes cast down at the floor beneath his feet.

“Wait!” Thor implored him, and the desperation in his voice betrayed his fear. This show of weakness made him pause for a few moments while he considered what his next words should be. “If this is the end . . .” he spoke shakily, and then he stopped to think upon his speech once more before continuing. “Would you -- indulge me with one last request? For the sake of all we have shared?” The final word had been choked out with such sorrow that it was nearly a squeak at the last. He sounded so utterly lost that Loki could hardly deny him, particularly after such a pathetic entreaty.

“Perhaps,” the sorcerer answered with a pensive smile. “But only if you hurry up about it.”

The brothers each laughed apprehensively, their smiles portraying a camaraderie that seemed truly genuine.

Finally, Thor ceased in his levity and met his kinsman’s eyes with pained regard. “Loki--” he stammered, struggling with the weight of his petition “Would you . . . perform one last illusion? For me?”

The mage brought his hand to his chin and stroked the flesh there for a long moment, simply considering. “What manner of illusion would you have?” Loki inquired, puzzled. His brother had not requested an image from him since they were on the cusp of adolescence, and it was not at all what he anticipated from him in this instance.

The blond shrugged weakly. “You may choose.”

The raven-haired man stood for a protracted instance in further contemplation. He could hear the sounds of the threat behind him moving closer, and yet he was so intrigued by the simplicity of this request that he defied his instinct to flee and stood silently, openly deliberating. After a long moment, Loki lifted his head and walked slowly and purposefully back toward the wall of the dome. As he did so, his visage shifted with flawless congruence from the current face of the Trickster sibling -- drawn, gaunt and world-weary -- to the soft, untainted countenance that he had worn so guilelessly before Thor’s coronation. He was meticulously dressed: his close-fitting attire unblemished, the metallic pieces of his armor buffed to a spotless shine, and his hair smooth and clipped fastidiously close to his neck. This was his brother, Thor lamented, the image of the brother that he had lost years ago and had never recognized it, the man that Thor had been
mourning even when he had thought him to be alive.

Was this meant to be a kindness or a cruelty? The answer to this was not readily apparent to the warrior as he studied the details of the illusion that had been rendered to such perfection before his eyes, but the details were so crisp and fine that he felt the need to extend his hand to touch the image lest it reveal itself to be false -- which, of course, it was. Even as he did so, he knew that he would only connect with the surface of the dome and not his brother’s form, and yet he was mesmerized by the need to confront the guise of the spirit that had been haunting him from the inside out since Loki’s plunge from the Bifrost. His unscrupulous brother’s eyes were sad then, and almost kind, as he gazed pityingly at the one who reached for him as if to say the farewell that he could not convey before Loki’s madness had parted them. The raven-haired man stepped cautiously toward the barrier between them, pressing the crown of his forehead to the facade and extending the tips of his fingers to meet those of his brother. As he did so, Thor let the tiniest plaintive sob escape from his lips, and Loki smiled -- a warm and genuine expression the like of which he had not manifested for centuries.

At that moment, Thor caught sight of the beast that was approaching from the corridor at his brother’s back, the nozzle of his weapon leveled squarely at Loki. The elder man opened his mouth to cry out a warning, but before he could begin to yell, the entire breadth of the wall before him was flooded with a cloud of radiant fire, the sound of the force that projected it harshly filling his ears. As the blaze engulfed the form of his brother, Thor saw the edges of the illusion ripple and then fade, leaving only flame for a moment and then . . . emptiness. Nothing.

Loki was gone.

The masked creature who wielded the flamethrower loosed another burst of consuming heat at where Thor was standing, but he was thankfully shielded by the protective shell of the dome. After this second attempt, the creature moved on heedlessly, and the Asgardian was left to ponder the meaning of all that had just transpired. Loki had departed, presumably to confront Thanos and complete the mission. However, the sour cramping in Thor’s stomach betrayed that this may not be true. Had the illusion been a distraction while his deceitful brother had slipped away for a more nefarious purpose? The blond man realized that he was still leaning against the barrier, but his outstretched hand had closed into a fist.

‘Thor?’

The voice of Phil Coulson was suddenly addressing him through the earpiece that had been placed upon him for communication during battle. The Asgardian was suddenly pleased that Rogers had insisted upon him wearing it; the familiarity of a friend’s words made him feel far less alone on hostile ground.

‘Is Loki still with you?’ Phil continued over the sound of what was likely heavy enemy fire.

“I fear that he is not.” His voice was steady but strained.

“So, I suppose that I can freely speak what is on my mind at this point,’ Coulson stated. More detonations could be heard, and this time they appeared to be much closer to Phil’s position. When he spoke again, he sounded a little breathless. ‘It has suddenly come to mind that I may have lost sight of a very important detail during this whole scenario.’

“Indeed?”

‘Yes. I, um, guess this might be a bad time to mention that Loki is probably still in possession of the Tesseract?’ A large explosion was heard from Coulson’s side of the conversation, followed by
a loud thump and then a muffled grunt of pain from the agent.

“Director Coulson?” Thor replied. “Are you alright?”

‘Affirmative,’ Phil choked out through what sounded like a lungful of dust. ‘It’s just that we’re getting creamed out here, so if you happen to be planning to do something foolish but heroic in order to save us all, then now would be the time to do it.’

“I fear not,” the Asgardian sighed. After a burst of static, the opposite end of the conversation went disturbingly silent. “May the Norns watch over you,” Thor whispered as a final prayer before removing the earpiece. He dangled it hopelessly between his fingers as he rehashed Coulson’s misgivings about Loki. It was true that Kaal had been in possession of the Tesseract when he had departed the Raft, and that this criminal’s identity was later revealed to be that of his wayward sibling. It was also true that there had never been any suitable resolution regarding the whereabouts of the weapon thereafter, save for what came from Loki’s own lips; in light of this information, he was inclined to believe that his sibling had played him for a fool once more. Would it not be the ultimate deception for Loki to dupe them all into bringing him to Titan and conveying him to Thanos’ doorstep? To make the Avengers complicit by hand-delivering Thanos the ultimate weapon? And then to mock Thor openly by showing him the visage of the brother to whom he had once given his absolute trust? It was a callous act, meant to humiliate and infuriate him. It was heartless, inexcusably wicked . . .

It was precisely what Loki would do.

The Thunder god’s doubt progressed quickly from shame to irritation and then seamlessly to full-on rage. He raised Mjölnir and brought it down onto the surface of the dome repeatedly, the deflected energy echoing back painfully through his bicep until he cried out as much in emotional distress as physical agony. There was no sign of any rift in the material of the dome, and yet he continued to pummel the facade a dozen more times before he collapsed at the foot of it, half growling, half sobbing.

“Loki!” he screamed out in both anger and despair.

This supplication was loud enough that the mage could hear it as he rounded the corner of the hall, striding hurriedly toward the Assembly Room. As he moved, he rubbed absently at the corners of his eyes, where a thin layer of moisture had formed despite his efforts to prevent it. He had not anticipated that he would be so affected by their final encounter, and yet Loki found his pace failing as he approached his destination. The sound of that terminal, wounded howl from his brother had actually caused a harsh ache in his chest -- the heartbreak in his cry had been palpable. Yet there was no retreating beyond this point. Now was the time for inexorable reserve.

Loki summoned the Tesseract from its celestial hiding place, his hands moving in a spherical motion around the air where the luminous cube appeared. He tightened his clutch on the object as he continued to hasten toward the room, and he could feel the faint pulse of its enormous power threading between his fingers, begging for release. He smiled knowingly and with artful conviction as he straightened his posture and added more confidence to his step. There was no room for error here, he knew, and so he allowed the mask of fearlessness to envelop him from his head downwards, as if slipping into a familiar coat. He marched up to the entrance of the Hall, his eyes blazing with resolution.

Awaiting him at the entrance was the reclining figure of Mephisto, a close-fitting but well-tailored suit showing beneath his sweeping cloak. He was using one elongated claw to stir the flames that he had conjured within his palm, and he was gazing into them with one eyebrow tellingly crooked. For a hopeful moment, the sorcerer thought that he would be allowed to pass without the demon
accosting him, but at the last minute, the devil’s arm extended to bar his path. Without looking up from his view of the flames, he stated simply, “Well . . . this is interesting.” His tongue traced the outline of his visible fangs as he continued to search the fire in his hand.

“Oh?” Loki retorted, his attempt at sounding perfectly casual probably failing.

“Yes, quite interesting indeed.”

“Would that I had time to stay and discuss this further, but . . .” The sorcerer tried to force his way past Mephisto’s blockade, but the demon merely adjusted his limb until he could grip the other man’s forearm, his pointed nails digging just far enough into the flesh to cause discomfort.

“I have seen your intentions, Asgardian. Have you no concern for those to whom you may owe a debt?” the demon seethed accusingly.

Well, he did owe Mephisto some recompense from a matter quite some time ago. Perhaps he had picked an unfortunate moment to collect his remuneration, but the circumstances of the universe were not his to either question or control.

“Before this little . . . gathering gets underway,” the demon inquired further with fiendish intention, “Would it behoove me in any way to, perhaps, excuse myself for a period of time? Hmmm?” The pressure of the talons in the flesh of Loki’s arm increased, causing the mage to grimace from the sting.

“Five minutes,” the Asgardian instructed him staunchly. “Do not look back.”

“Most obliged,” Mephisto purred, extinguishing the flames in his palm by closing his fist. “I shall not forget this courtesy.” He stepped aside and released his hold on the other man’s appendage.

With a slight nod of acknowledgment, Loki proceeded to disappear into the chamber beyond.
Okay, so this won't be the last chapter quite yet. As I was writing, I found that not only was I coming up with a chapter that was so long it was becoming unwieldy, but I was also abbreviating scenes that deserved to have more flesh to them in order to be true to the work. Therefore, I am deviating from my "four chapters per part" scheme in order to do the story justice. Thus, there will be a 5th chapter in the "Vengeance" section (which I already have two-thirds done, yay!), followed by the epilogue. I hope that doesn't make things too strange.

Praxidicae

---4---

Steve Rogers was engaged in fierce battle with two Skrulls, three Badoons, and some manner of creature that stood a head taller than him, with hands bigger than his head. He had suffered a number of superficial wounds during the skirmish and had just taken a spear-like weapon to the upper thigh when he heard the high-pitched whine of a large amount of energy being summoned to a point just behind and above him. He pivoted somewhat clumsily on his bad leg to position his shield between him and the imminent blast, and he immediately saw a brilliant flash of light that blinded him for a moment. He swung out randomly to try to deflect any enemies who might be taking advantage of his vulnerable state to mount an attack, but he felt only empty air. As his sight gradually returned, he could see that the circle of enemies he had been facing were now lying lifeless, their bodies arranged in a wheel-like pattern around him. Keeping his shield between himself and the unknown threat, Steve peered out above the edge of the vibranium to see what had caused the blast.

Hovering an arm’s length above him was a supernatural being -- a man, seemingly -- whose eyes throbbed with luminous power. The Captain noted that the hairs on his own arms felt like they were raising below the fabric of his uniform, responding to the waves of energy that were radiating from the being that floated placidly above him.

“Who are you?” Rogers challenged him. “Do you serve Thanos?”

The man hanging above offered a coy smile, but he did not speak.

‘I think they’re friendlies,’ Natasha stated over his earpiece. ‘They seem to be eliminating our enemies, anyway, so that’s promising.’

“That’s . . . nice, I guess,” Steve replied skeptically. “Wait - - did you say ‘they’? You have more of these near your position?”

‘I have a blue woman who is going absolutely berserk on a bunch of Skrulls about fifty feet to my
left,’ Romanov revealed. ‘Plus, there is some little black, creepy thing with a lot of teeth that keeps consuming Badoons, which is really, really unpleasant to watch.’

During this snippet of conversation, Rogers noticed that the being that had vanquished his enemies had moved on but that he was still flying upright, his progress slow and deliberate. Whenever a blast connected with his form, it seemed to disappear -- passing into him but not through. If Steve was not mistaken, the being’s eyes grew more incandescent with every shot that he absorbed, and when he had collected so much energy that the surface of his skin was arcing with white-hot ropes of electricity, he would discharge a wall of power that would eliminate all opponents within a carefully controlled radius.

“Well, I have a guy who can absorb energy and then throw it back at anyone who attacks him,” the Captain stated over his communicator. “Thank god he seems to be on our side, because I wouldn’t know where to begin to fight something like that.” When he had turned back to the stranger’s position, he was surprised to see that the man was once again at his side, this time on terra firma.

“I am Maelstrom,” the man announced. “Of the Inhumans,” he clarified when he read no recognition in the other man’s face. When there was still no acknowledgment from the Captain, Maelstrom shrugged. “Suffice it to say that we are currently fighting for a common cause,” he said dismissively. ‘I am looking for the one known as ‘Loki,’ or sometimes ‘Kaal.’”

They were joined at that moment by the blue woman to whom Natasha had referred. She appeared both breathless and angered in equal parts. “Juggernaut says Loki is heading for the compound,” she spoke through ragged breaths.

“Good. If possible, I plan to be waiting for him.” The Inhuman then took to the air again, moving swiftly toward Thanos’ headquarters.

The blue woman looked affronted at being left behind with only Rogers for companionship. Steve tried to soften the tension by extending a hand in introduction. “Steve Rogers,” he said with feigned confidence. “They call me ‘Captain America.’” When he heard the words out loud, they immediately sounded a little pathetic, and he offered a charming grin to try to salvage his pride.

The woman glared at his hand but did not accept it. “Nebula,” she stated indifferently. He noticed an electronic quality to her voice as she spoke. “You’re bleeding, Mr. America,” she continued just as coldly, nodding to indicate the wound in his thigh. “You might want to have someone look at that.”

“It’s ‘Captain’ . . .” he began to say, but he was soon speaking to her back as she retreated from him.

***.***

The interior doors opened before Loki completely approached them, and what was revealed to him was overwhelmingly intimidating: there were dozens of powerful beings from across the universe lined up along either side of a very generous aisle, with Thanos and his most trusted lieutenants seated at its head. When the throng caught sight of the faintly glowing shape grasped in the sorcerer’s plainly visible hands, all speech and motion among them ceased. There were loud gasps from several members of the gathering, and there were others who could not restrain sated grins from crossing their features. Undeniably, however, every eye in the room was on him.
The sorcerer hesitated at the foot of the walkway and simply willed himself to breathe normally -- or at all, as the case may be. He was surrounded by some of the mightiest (and moodiest) of villains in the cosmos, and he was about to walk among them as if he were one of their own. He lifted his chin and straightened his posture, willing a sly but uncaring grin onto his lips as he propelled himself forward, and he concentrated on every step even as he strained to look unaffected. As he walked, Loki could hear the pleased murmurings of the others, although their specific words of praise were not clear to him. It also seemed to him that the others were leaning towards him as he approached the front of the room, and the path before him was being swallowed up in much the same manner as it had been on his journey to the compound, the ranks alongside him closing in until the open ground would eventually be totally consumed. He could nearly feel the eager hands of those around him gravitating towards him, their greedy clutches preparing to swipe out to claim the prize that he now held . . .

“Let him pass!” instructed the Titan in his deep, scolding tone.

The spectators along the aisle receded back into their appointed seats, although the hunger still lingered in their leering gazes.

“If any one of you attempted to use it, you would be consumed before you could draw a wisp of its power,” Thanos chuckled, his eyes smoldering with the intensity of his amusement.

And likely his thirst for the power that was now within his reach.

“My Lord,” Loki exclaimed in a steady, clear voice that effortlessly filled the room. He fell to one knee just steps from the foot of the Titan’s throne and bowed his head in reverence. “I have come to bestow upon you the entity known as the ‘Tesseract.’ May it accord you with victory proportionate to the glory of which you are worthy.”

Wow, that sounded like a poor bit of prose even to his own ears. Surely, no one could be buying this charade!

The Titan rose leisurely from his esteemed seat at the fore of the room and bent to hold the sorcerer’s chin gently in his hands (which, incidentally, were each the size of the supplicant’s entire skull). “I am most appreciative, Kaal,” he rumbled, and Loki winced just shy of perceptibly at the use of his prison moniker; it was a blatant reminder of his inferior position within his current company. “You have served me admirably, and you will be rewarded.” There was a cagy smirk at the end of this declaration that prophesied the events to come.

Thanos did not move to collect the Tesseract but rather moved aside with a bow, sweeping his gargantuan arm behind him to indicate the platform at his back. It was constructed from a shimmering, glass-like material with a deep indentation pressed into its center, and from this center issued a force field, presumably to dampen and contain the restless energy of the Cube that Loki currently had in his possession. The mage stepped forward and placed the Tesseract into the hollow within as if he were gently releasing the form of a newborn child. As the Cube separated from his grip, it let a few threads of energy linger near his hand as if it were reluctant to be parted from him -- as though it were grieving over being abandoned. Loki then backed away from the platform, his head hanging in deference and his hands folded before him.

“My esteemed colleagues!” the Titan began. His rich voice conducted the attention of all those present, even those among their number who themselves had fearsome reputations across most of the cosmos. “I have gathered you here today to witness the rebirth of our universe! My devoted servant has risked all that he holds dear -- his name and reputation, in addition to his life -- in order to bestow upon us this weapon, which possesses the energy to gain its bearer anything he desires!”

There was an exultant outburst at these words, but all chatter ceased when it was apparent that the
Titan intended to speak again.

“Kaal . . . if you would do the honors.” Thanos stepped aside with more grace than his bulk should have allowed him to possess.

Loki nodded solemnly and proceeded to train his concentration exclusively on the object before him. He closed his eyes and called out to the Cube, and it immediately answered by emitting a faint glow. After several seconds, the illumination from deep within the Tesseract intensified, and tendrils of energy snaked across its surface in violent waves. As this spectacle began, the platform began to raise as if anchored on invisible tethers far above the vast hall. When it was almost at its peak -- mere hands lengths from the ceiling and perched high above the admiring crowd -- Loki conducted an extra burst of energy into the object’s center, causing a surge of sapphire-tinted force to ripple along the ceiling, and then . . . nothing. The cube pulsed with light but released no further energy.

The Asgardian could feel the vitality draining from him with every passing moment as the Titan continued to extend the silence in a vain effort to heighten the drama of the moment. Please . . . just get on with it!

“The Tesseract contains an almost infinite potential for destruction,” Thanos taunted, his gargantuan fingers forming into an emphatic fist. “Its might will sunder entire worlds and effortlessly reform galaxies into realms that will serve my purposes.” After a few more strained moments, he finished the sentiment with a wicked grin:

“It’s too bad that none of you will be around to witness it.”

At last!

Loki finally unleashed the power of the Tesseract as if expelling a long-held breath. In order to prevent the wall of power from travelling outwards from its source unchecked, he needed to thread it among the pillars of the room, as well as past the Titan and his attendants at the head of the stage. The precise control that this endeavor required caused an immediate drain on his own power to the point that he felt a wave of vertigo, and he nearly needed to balance himself against a nearby surface to keep from collapsing outright. Determined not to show that level of weakness in front of this particular crowd, he stiffened his posture defiantly before performing the final mental manipulation that discharged the sum of the energy into finely honed streams of light, the shafts of which then sought out every member of the crowd behind him. Each one barely had time to cry out in horror before its physical form was reduced to a scorch mark along the polished floor.

“It worked!” the Titan exclaimed, the shock in his voice betraying that he was impressed with the thoroughness of the devastation that had been displayed. His triumphant laughter then rebounded off every corner of the virtually empty hall.

***.**.***

With the aid of their curious new allies, the Avengers were able to secure a path to the compound in relatively little time. Steps from the entrance, they found Blackout cradling the deceased body of Vermin, staring mournfully down into his widely open eyes. “He died for me,” Blackout whispered, his eerie red eyes tearing over as he spoke. “He placed himself between me and the blast that killed him.” Steve Rogers stepped cautiously toward the pair and laid a gentle hand on the Lilin’s shoulder, kneeling beside him to show his sympathy. Blackout did not respond to the presence of the other man, continuing to rock Vermin softly in his arms for a time and whispering
apologies that were unintelligible to the others. Finally, his movement ceased and both of their bodies stilled. The Lilin then used the pads of two of his cruelly-spiked fingers to gently close the eyes of his friend and ally for the last time. Afterwards, he slowly stood, gradually releasing the other man’s body from his grip as he lowered it to the ground. He still looked pensive at the death of his friend, but his chin was protruding in an obstinate gesture. “I want to find Loki,” he stated somewhat flatly, and yet there was a finely-honed layer of venom beneath this statement that was being restrained only by his grief.

At that moment, several laser blasts erupted around them, and the group ducked swiftly toward the cover of the nearby bunker. Maelstrom lingered at the exterior of the entryway, hovering above their line of sight. “I’ll keep them occupied,” he said to the others as he fired a spray of white voltage into the crowd of Skrulls that had been tailing them. “If I do not rejoin you before you find Loki, make certain that he suffers according to his treachery.” These final directives were addressed to Blackout and Nebula.

The team made their way down the corridor as swiftly as their injuries and exhaustion would allow them. Surprisingly, Stark was able to keep up with the bulk of the group, although he had been badly injured in his clash with the Kodabaks. There was a clear breach in the armor on the left side of his torso, and he gripped it futilely with his right gauntlet as he struggled to maintain pace with the others. There was some visible blood and, although it did not appear to be flowing freely, Tony continued to grunt and gasp with almost every other step. When they made it to the end of the exterior corridor, they came upon the form of the God of Thunder, one hand tangled in his perspiration-soaked locks. He was pacing back and forth with his hammer gripped desperately in one hand, every visible muscle in his body clenched with fulminant anger.

“Thor!” Phil hailed him as the group approached.

The Asgardian continued to tread back and forth over the same span of ground, his mouth moving occasionally as if he were mumbling to himself. When Phil repeated his name again, there was still no response. Natasha stepped toward the large man cautiously, eventually creeping into his line of sight, and her presence was finally obvious to him evidenced by the way he stopped and made eye contact with the female agent. Despite how enraged he appeared from a distance, she could see that his eyes were brimming with tears. “Hey, Thor,” she said gently, moving towards him more boldly than she likely should have. “What’s going on? Where’s Loki?”

“Loki--” he began, but then his voice began to boil with anger once more so he pressed his lips together and then drifted back to merely distraught. The erratic nature of this emotional turn worried Natasha deeply. Then he surprised her even further by barking out a short, almost manic laugh, the force of which drove the wetness around his eyelids to roll down his cheeks in two brief but distinct rivulets. “Loki has played us all for fools,” he said and then laughed again. “He is within the compound, behind an impenetrable barrier . . . ” He gave the mentioned dome another exasperated blow with his hammer, and the awful clamor caused Natasha to take several steps back. “He has the Tesseract, and I can only assume that he is taking it to Thanos.”

Natasha suddenly noticed Tony at her elbow, still panting and holding his side.

“So, this is it, eh? The end of all things” he wheezed. “Hmmm. Somehow I thought it would be -- livelier, somehow.”

“‘Not with a bang but a whimper’, ” Banner quoted. He was still trembling slightly from his transformation into his monstrous alter-ego, but his words were steady. “Are we certain that he’s taking it to Thanos?”

“When we were on Midgard, Loki revealed to me that Thanos desired the Tesseract in order to
eliminate all of his direct competition, leaving him the undisputed King of all the known universe,” Thor confessed, grasping the handle of Mjölnir so tightly he seemed to be considering using it on himself as penance for his gullibility. “I aided him in delivering it to the Titan’s door!”

“Are we sure that this thing is impenetrable?” Tony asked as he flung himself limply onto a chair in an adjoining alcove. “I mean, perhaps it can’t be breached with force, but maybe if we analyze its structure, somehow we could . . .”

“It is finished!” Thor growled impatiently. “Thanos has the Tesseract, and he can move his forces toward your world at any moment he chooses. We are powerless to stop him!” The resignation in his words was obvious despite the volume of his declaration.

A terrible rumbling began suddenly within the structure, and the team could see the slight shifting of the walls as a wave of sound advanced towards them, along with a visible ripple in the ground that knocked some of them off balance as it passed. The disturbance was followed by a rush of bluish-white light that hurtled down the corridor and collided violently with the dome wall. It then crawled up the surface of the barrier before disappearing somewhere above.

“What in the hell was that?” Coulson gasped, righting himself.

“Whatever it was,” Steve replied, “I’m willing to bet it wasn’t good.”

“I’ve felt that manner of tremor before,” Blackout said. “When Loki used the Cube to collapse the Raft.”

At that moment, Maelstrom swooped in from the corridor and landed gracefully upright at the center of the group. “The entrance is secure, for a time,” he announced. “There are still squadrons about, but they are not an immediate threat.” He was speaking only to his own colleagues, essentially ignoring all others in the room. When he finally did make a cursory review of the others around him, he raised an eyebrow as his sight passed over the form of Tony Stark, who was still holding desperately to his seatback and breathing forcefully. “Is he going to be alright?” the Inhuman asked with a hint of revulsion. “He looks . . . ill.”

“Him?” Rogers smirked. “Nah, he’s fine. He’s just tired from all the fighting he did before you arrived.” This last statement was almost accusatory in its nature, and the Inhuman’s eyes narrowed. However, he was interrupted before he could respond.

“None of this matters,” Juggernaut interjected. He had weathered the recent shaking extraordinarily well and remained standing proudly at the rear of the group. “The entire cosmos is about to fall to Thanos, and, regardless of what we attempt, the ending will be the same. I, for one, intend to at least get what I came for: vengeance against that infernal Asgardian!”

In that moment, Tony detected a presence at his back, and the hairs at the nape of his neck stood at attention. He slowly rotated his head until he met the gaze of the absolutely enormous creature that had somehow appeared behind him. “I believe I can convince you otherwise,” the gigantic being said. The ominous depth of the its voice rattled the viscera of all of those who were present, leaving each of them feeling both ruffled and somewhat desecrated.

“Wow,” Stark declared, shaking off the sense of agitation the sound had caused him. “That was intense. You know, I would totally move several light years to the left if I felt like I could get up right now. You have got to get that vocal rampage of yours under control, my friend.”

“You have done quite enough convincing for my tastes already,” Nebula spat at the giant. “You knew about his plan to betray us from the beginning, did you not? And you led us all along, the
“Yes, I have been culpable in deceiving you to serve his purposes,” Apocalypse said. “However, it is not in the manner in which I have presented it to you.”

“Come again?” replied Maelstrom, his face slack with surprise. “Do you mean that you have lied to us again?”

The ancient mutant stood completely composed, his arms folded and his eyes bright with amusement. “I do,” he stated calmly.

“I do not see where this has any relevance right now,” Juggernaut boomed. “We need to find a way through that wall so I can break that traitorous sorcerer’s neck before the world ends!”

Beside the chair where Tony sat, there was a small workstation with a minimal screen and a keypad that glowed faintly in the near darkness of the alcove. Apocalypse crossed over to this area now, typing in a series of codes and then waiting patiently while a cone of red laser-like lights scanned his eye. A computer-generated voice then spoke several stilted sentences in a language that none present other than the mutant could comprehend, and then he said two words that were similarly incomprehensible. The computer answered him shortly, and then the sound like rushing air that Thor had heard when the dome lifted repeated itself -- only in reverse. Tentatively, the Asgardian reached out a hand to where the dome had been, only to find that this hand passed through it freely.

“The dome -- it has been lowered!” he gasped in surprise.

“Alright, Apocalypse, I have had enough!” Nebula snarled. She drew the sword-like weapon at her back and stalked over to him as if she were preparing to attack. “Tell us what is going here!”

“Yes,” Maelstrom added, joining her just steps in front of the leviathan, and his eyes began to glow faintly, revealing that he was preparing to tap the energy he was holding within him. “No need to hold back. This is the end of the known universe, after all.” His strained tone belied that he was struggling to stay within the boundaries of politeness.

“Yes, it is,” Apocalypse responded. “But only for some.”

***.***

The world before him was swimming violently, and for a moment Loki was convinced he would lose consciousness. Fortunately, the faintness passed, but it left an abject weakness in its wake. He struggled to focus, his mind clouded with the fatigue that was nearly overpowering him, and yet he could still perceive the figure of the Mad Titan sitting before him, laughing in pleasure and in triumph. The Tesseract continued to hover above the room, the intensity of its light waxing and waning as it awaited further instruction from its Master. Just a few more moments and he would have the clarity to finish this undertaking, he thought as he fought back the bile in his throat and the overwhelming desire to wretch. Instead, he used his mind to reach out to his strongest ally, whom he could sense was nearly within the perimeter of the compound.

‘Nur,’ he communicated to the mutant. ‘I need the others in position.’

‘It is nearly so,’ came the reply almost instantly.
‘Now, Nur,’ Loki emphasized as he steadied himself on a nearby bench. His surroundings faded ominously in and out of his vision. ‘I do not have much time.’

‘I will inform you as soon as they are in place,’ was the only answer he received.

Thanos stood proudly at the head of the room, a grin of assured victory on his furrowed countenance. He turned unassumingly to his chief lieutenant: “Corvus, it is time to launch the fleet.”

At that moment, the Cube on the platform above began to increase in illumination. The change went undetected by those below it until a layer of perfectly smooth energy came bursting out of it, covering the room from end-to-end.

“What is this?” Thanos asked to no one in particular.

Loki receded within himself to the core of his magic, concentrating only on the source of the power inside him. He had never attempted anything of this kind before in his life, but he knew the basic approach; he called all of the forces within himself to a centralized location and then sought out the Tesseract with his thoughts. It answered without hesitation, as if it had been lying in wait to garner his attention once again, and a flow of energy began between the object and the sorcerer.

“What is going on here!” the Titan roared, his words sounding almost a little worried. “Kaal! Stop this immediately!”

There was no response from Loki, but the Cube did provide an answer of sorts: the blanket of energy above the room began to turn. The circular motion was sluggish at first, but its pace quickly increased until it was twisting overhead like a tempest, the mantle of energy undulating restlessly as it moved.

***.***

“Please, just please -- stop talking, I beg you.” Tony looked pale and possibly a little delirious. “That voice of yours is killing me faster than the wound in my side.” He spun his chair back towards the other members of the team. “Look, I think I can clear this up in a much faster and much less disturbing fashion.”

“Really?” Natasha challenged him. “Are you sure this isn’t the blood loss talking?”

“I’m pretty sure,” he replied, although his eyebrows creased as if he were harboring some doubt. “When we were downloading the plans for the compound into my suit there were several extra files present. That was what was taking so long, remember?”

The ones who had been in attendance during the incident nodded in agreement.

“Well, what we were downloading were files that Loki intended us to find when his plan was completed -- if it was successful, of course.”

“What kinds of files?” Bruce inquired, immediately concerned.

“His entire profile from when he was in prison, among other things. Everything he endured and what they did to him after he was released to the custody of Thanos’ lieutenants. Ugly, ugly stuff --
worse than you could imagine.”

“Get to the point, Iron Human,” Nebula said impatiently. “I can hear the sounds of Thanos’ fleet preparing for deployment.”

It was true: the high-pitched moans of starship engines whirring to life was audible within the corridor.

“Well, the last file was a video that Loki made himself, outlining the strategy for his plan. The short version is that he is inside the main assembly hall right now preparing to create a singularity of biblical proportions, which will destroy Thanos, plus his compound and all of his merry men along with him.”

“Is that right?” Blackout grunted.

The others all looked to Apocalypse for some hint of confirmation. He nodded wordlessly.

“Wait -- wait just a second,” Bruce stammered as he tried desperately to get a handle on the situation as he knew it. “He’s going to use the Tesseract to create a black hole? Inside the compound? Won’t that kill us all?”

“There is no time for a full explanation,” Apocalypse said. He pointed one enormous finger toward Maelstrom. “You must come with me.” He then indicated Blackout who was lingering skeptically at the back of the group. “You must come as well.”

The Lilin scoffed at the mutant’s declaration. “Why me?”

“Come, now,” the mutant demanded, his voice sounding far more impatient than it had in the first instance, “Or the entire universe will die.”

***.**.***

Within the Hall, things were rapidly falling into a state of chaos. Several of Thanos’ lieutenants had tried to approach Loki but were repelled by the intense flood of energy that he was channeling from the Cube. The revolution of the energy layer had now accelerated to the point that it was creating a violent tempest, which was beginning to draw everything to its center.

“No matter what you are trying to accomplish with this little rebellion, you will fail!” Thanos roared over the rush of the developing cyclone. He was using his large hands to grip various pillars within the room, steadily making his way toward the sorcerer. “My army is departing for Terra as we speak, and when it falls -- as it so easily shall -- I vow to you that our next destination will be Asgard!”

Asgard. That word should have meaning to him, but its implication was out of reach, in the world beyond to which he was no longer anchored.

Loki fed the last sizable stream of his magic into the heart of the Tesseract, holding back just enough for his last premeditated act. A blinding flash of radiance emanated from the heart of the Cube, followed immediately by a deafening rumble that shook the walls nearly to their breaking point. The layer’s rotation increased by another degree, and even the mighty Titan was forced to pause his advance and cling desperately to the column at his side. Then a voice could be heard
somewhere inside Loki’s consciousness: ‘They are in position. You must act now or all will be lost.’ It was a deep voice, almost malevolent, and more than a little unsettling. *But what did it mean?* He was losing all touch with his corporeality at this point, his mind grasping at small tendrils of his identity but unable to weave them into anything useful. ‘Loki!’ the voice said again, this time in exasperation. ‘You must direct the energy toward Maelstrom immediately or all will be lost!’

‘Loki’ . . .

Yes, this word had some meaning to him, and it brought him around, albeit briefly. He pulled his consciousness out of the quickly draining core and toward the surface, where he had a faint sense of his body still in place around him. The pull of the savage rotation above was beginning to draw him toward it slowly, and he could feel the friction of his boots on the ground beneath him as he moved gradually inward. He thought over the bodiless voice’s instructions once more: ‘direct the energy toward Maelstrom’ . . .

***.**.***

“I cannot keep this up for much longer,” Blackout insisted. His face plainly showed the strain of maintaining a shadow over the entire fleet of starships. Their engines were still activated, but they were paralyzed without the ability to read the instruments or see the controls. Twice they had even heard ships drift into one another’s paths and forcibly collide.

“Is this going to work?” Tony asked. He was leaning heavily on Steve as his strength continued to wane.

“Just be sure to remain behind me,” Maelstrom instructed. “That level of energy could cause my powers to become . . . . erratic.” The Inhuman seemed more than a little apprehensive about the prospect himself.

There were still several battalions of enemies roaming about the moon, and one of them was suddenly noticed to be closing in on them.

“What now?” Natasha asked Steve. “Do we engage them?”

“I think I’m out,” Tony breathed, perspiration running in beads along his sideburns. “My part in this is over. I’ve got nothing left.”

“Fair enough,” Steve said, understanding. “Natasha, you and I will cut across --”

“No,” stated Juggernaut. “I will deal with them.”

The others stared at him in silent questioning.

“My friend,” Maelstrom informed him. “If you are not behind me then I cannot vouch for your safety. You might be killed.”

“I am *Juggernaut,*” he decreed, thumping a hand against his massive chest. “I cannot be stopped, and I cannot be defeated.”

“For your sake, I hope you are correct,” Maelstrom sighed. The mutant lingered there, watching
the Inhuman’s face to seek his permission. “Just go, if you must,” he said and waved Juggernaut away wistfully with his hand. The mutant threw one satisfied glance back over his shoulder as he thundered in the direction of the line of opponents, his speed increasing as he crossed the open ground. When he was nearly to the enemy squadron, an incredibly bright beam of light broke through the outer wall of the compound and struck Maelstrom from the rear. He continued to hover in the air above the team, but he twisted and struggled brutally as the energy invaded his form. Within seconds, his eyes were so luminous that the humans could not even look upon him without risking damage to their own sight.

When the flow of energy ceased, Maelstrom remained contorted like an abandoned marionette suspended in the air above. Gradually, he smoothed out the lines of his limbs until he resembled his previous form. He looked down at the Lilin. As he opened his mouth to speak, it was filled with the same brilliant illumination as his eyes. Strangely, the quality of his voice was somewhat altered; it flowed out in waves, striking the eardrums of the others with cascades of sound.

“Blackout!” he shouted. “Now!”

The Lilin rescinded the darkness around the fleet and then collapsed to his knees. He was heaving as if he had been lifting impossibly heavy objects, and he went limp with his loss of vitality. Simultaneously, Maelstrom unleashed the unfathomable energy that he had gathered in an unrestrained flood of light and sound that barrelled straight at the line of ships, causing them first to ignite and then to explode in blinding succession, the fire and glow increasing in a rapid deluge across the otherwise blackened sky. A second spatter of force then fanned out haphazardly along the rocky surface of the moon, and, although it was obviously a mere fraction of what had been discharged the first time, it managed to scorch the ground and eliminate all beings in its path, effectively destroying whatever remained of Thanos’ mighty armies. After the mayhem subsided, Nebula ran forward to scan the surface of the moon for signs of remaining life.

There was no detectable trace of the Juggernaut.
Through the haze of azure energy, Thanos could see the systematic elimination of his entire armada of spacecraft, its remnants illuminating the sky with a blistering light. His jaw hung slack for several moments afterward, but he did not cry out -- rather his features remained unreadable for several beats before twisting into a mask of absolute rage. “So, Kaal,” he snarled above the fierce winds, “you had your own plan all along! I cannot say I entirely blame you, seeing how I was not a very kind host to you on Algorant!”

The mage stood limply, his hair masking his countenance and his hands drooping at his sides. The Titan began to try to maneuver himself closer again, reaching out for the next pillar and nearly crushing it with the force of his grasp.

“You were always so very clever, weren’t you, Asgardian?” Thanos accused him. “You have always endured when others have faltered, and I do admire you for that! However, there are some details that even you, with your superior intellect, have neglected to consider!”

Loki’s body did not so much as twitch in acknowledgement.

“First, you -- and your friends and allies, for that matter -- will meet the same fate as I will!” he seethed. “The singularity you are creating will consume you and then rip you to shreds! All of you, including the dear brother you have been trying so hard to protect!”

Still, there was no response.

“And then there is the unfortunate fact that I am deathless, an Eternal! You cannot destroy me, no matter how you try! There is no force of energy in the entire universe that will kill me -- so, you see, I have triumphed even if it does not seem so right now. I will come back -- if it takes me centuries! I can rebuild whatever I have lost, and even with your long life you will have been dead for eons!”

Just then, Thanos caught sight of a dark shadow creeping along the floor in the background behind the sorcerer. His gaze flitted to it momentarily, but then his attention was drawn again by the growing intensity of the force within the cloud above him, which had begun to pull at him more violently. He could see that the Asgardian was affected as well, and that he was also being drawn
toward it at an increased pace, even if his body remained in a corpse-like torpor. The Titan then watched as a long, thin strand of blackness attached itself to Loki’s right ankle and tethered him securely to the column at his side.

***.**.***

Loki’s consciousness had lingered at the surface just long enough to fulfill its final purpose by funnelling the energy to Maelstrom and destroying the fleet, and then it had receded, slipping heavily back towards the center of his being, which was in an ever-weakening state. He could hear the venomous threats of the Mad Titan with some clarity, but his words were distant, as if coming to him through the wall of a neighboring room. Now there was a darkness near the source of his being that was reaching out for him, drawing him toward itself with a warm, accepting solace. Its embrace was so soothing, like floating in warm liquid, and he swam further into it, while also fighting the urge to retreat and confront the Titan’s rantings with some malice of his own before he was fully consumed by the tempest. Eventually, his efforts to join with the shadow before him became much like battling against an upstream current; there was an opposing force, he now realized, something that was beckoning him back . . . back to the roar of the wind, to the ache of his muscles as he fought the pull of the vortex, to the blind, venomous need for retribution and the shame of how far he had been forced to descend in order to truly recognize his failures . . .

Suddenly, there was the presence of another, an intelligence that spoke in a throaty, distressing manner.

‘Kaaaaaalllll,’ it hissed, pleadingly. ‘You musssst not go yet . . . He neeeeed to know . . .’

‘Kaal?’ Was the voice addressing him? Loki hesitated before he fully reached the calming darkness. ‘Who needs to know?’

‘Thannnoss . . .’ the voice replied. ‘Thannnoss needs to know . . .’

‘*That was not part of the arrangement,*’ Loki’s consciousness disputed. He was simply going to trigger the singularity and then fade gently, weakly into the nothingness -- into the darkness where it would be so peaceful. Even now the blackness was there before him, so tantalizingly near, welcoming him with a familiar scent and its sweet, lilting voice, so intimate, so loving . . .

‘He neeeds to know how it feels before he is gonnnnne . . .’ the intruder continued in his hoarse, desperate tone.

The darkness was reaching out for him, elongating into shadowy fingers that attempted to entwine with his own, the softness of its touch known to him so completely. *There is no time for that now. Nothing matters but the presence that is calling out to me.*

*Calling me home.*

‘Fearrrrr . . .’ the voice implored him at the last. ‘He needs to knooow for himself the fearrrrr that he has caused in us allllllll . . .’

 Fear . . .

There was a torrent of images that followed this word, and Loki was unable to keep them at bay by any means he tried. He was lost again in the cages on Algorant, and his senses were inundated with surge after surge of sights, sounds, smells, horrors, pain, rage, guilt, shame, humiliation, as if he were reliving every moment he had suffered in that hellish dungeon in an undammable wave of
emotions. Through it all, there ran a thread that was woven from the most degrading of his torments: his own fear. It had been omnipresent in his gut, a nauseating weight that had never wavered. True, it had saved his life on many occasions, but it had also drained his spirit dry of whatever honor he might have had left. He had always been afraid -- every moment since he had released his grip on the spear that connected him to his brother on the Bifröst and plunged into the void.

Damn it all to Hel.

Loki allowed the strands of the waiting darkness to slip from his fingers, and he thought perhaps that it made a tiny moan of despair as he disentangled its form from his own. He then strained to rejoin his physical embodiment at the surface of this water-like expanse, trying to focus only on the task before him. The voice was correct, he had surmised: there was one final, verbal equivalent of an obscene gesture that he needed to give to Thanos before he crossed into the next realm. After all, it was the least he deserved.

***.***

In the center of the hall, the Titan was still clinging defiantly to his pillar, even as it began to crumble along the section where he had weakened it in his anger. He growled obstinately as he continued to clutch futilely to the stone. “I cannot die, Kaal!” he reiterated in what he knew to be his last sentiment before he was consumed by the singularity above. As if in response, the shadow-like entity at Loki’s feet slithered up the length of his form and attached itself abhorrently to his neck. Thanos then watched with suspicion as an inky blackness surrounded Loki’s neck and shoulders completely, and his head suddenly snapped to attention, a strange, intangible glow fading in behind his vacant eyes even though there was still no true awareness in his gaze.

‘I know.’ Loki’s voice was as clear in the Titan’s head as if he were next to him. ‘I am counting on it, actually. You see, you will be pulled through the heart of the singularity -- to be either ripped apart or crushed into a mass of infinite density, I am not certain -- but, either way, it will be excruciating. And, I assure you, you will survive it.’

Thanos’ eyes grew very wide as he realized that Loki was correct.

‘Plus, you will be spat out into another dimension from which you can never return. But that is just a bonus, really,’ the mage’s voice leered inside his skull. ‘So, rebuild all you like. You will be the scourge of whatever dimension you happen to inhabit, I’m sure. One thing you will not be any longer, however, is my problem. You see, I will not survive the journey.’ His tone grew unmistakingly taunting at the end. ‘Too bad,’ he teased while clicking his tongue derisively. ‘As for my friends, I am sorry to inform you that they will endure. You see, the Tesseract has the potential for unlimited energy, and thus I will be using its power to secure the singularity, limiting the force of its destruction to this room alone. Therefore, you repulsive, bloodthirsty tyrant, I fear you will not be getting a single thing that you wished for in this little scenario. I am afraid this is farewell -- my Lord.’ This last word was hissed with palpable contempt.

A film of white-hot rage blanketed Thanos’ vision, and the remaining structure of the column crumbled in his grip as he howled in unrestrained wrath. His last tether broken, the Mad Titan was sucked into the savage whirlwind above, his final cry deliciously suffused with a mix of both rage and terror.

As the form of the enormous monster receded into the turbulence above, the blue layer of energy began descending along the walls, preparing to enclose the room. The sorcerer’s eyes still emitted
a haunting yellow glow, and then his jaw began to work open and closed as if he were learning to work an unfamiliar joint. Then, remarkably, his limbs began to move, wrenching his form backwards in laborious steps against the intensifying wind, his extremities working like lead as they defied the force of the storm. As his body approached the descending line of energy that was closing off the rest of the compound from the Hall, his legs began to move more frantically, appearing jerky in their haste as they defied the pull of the vacuum. At the last, there was a distinct grunt as Loki was dragged through the door through which he had entered, the veil of blue light closing off the space in front of him just as he passed through the opening.

***.***

The remaining members of the team were approaching the Hall at various rates of speed: Blackout, Nebula, Maelstrom, Phil, and Natasha came upon Loki in the corridor first, followed by Bruce who seemed a little dazed and overwhelmed by all that had occurred in the last twenty-four hours. Steve brought up the rear along with Tony, who was now leaning heavily on the soldier, one arm slung loosely around the other man’s neck. At the sound of their approach, Loki seemed to raise his head somewhat mechanically, his eyes still emitting a golden radiance but with no discernible irises and his limbs still dangling lifelessly about him as if suspended on invisible strings. No one in the group dared to advance toward him in light of this eerie demeanor. As they stared at his seemingly inanimate form, Loki’s mouth moved haltingly, and words began to fall from his lips in a raspy, strangling voice:

“He is spennnnnt . . . all his power . . . drainnnnnned . . . he will not survivvvvve.”

“Of whom do you speak?” Thor demanded, and he took a few bold steps forward. “Is it Thanos?”

The sorcerer’s head pivoted like that of a clockwork toy. “No…. the macabre voice replied, “Kaaaallllll.” The name came out in a choked whisper. “I felllllt him fading . . . when I asssimilated himmm.”

As they watched, a black shape peeled itself from the back of Loki’s torso where it had been connected, and a mouth overrun with pointed, unsettling teeth was now visible within the darkness that was separating from him, a long, flexible tongue protruding from between its jaws. As the dark shape continued to detach itself from the sorcerer’s body, his exterior became completely lax, and the absence of additional support caused him to crumple to the floor, motionless.

Venom remained beside him after their detachment, sitting back on his haunches and sniffing at his hair as if to confirm his identity. “Kaaallll….” he gurgled forlornly.

Thor moved to go to him, but Natasha took his arm, knowing she could never prevent him if he defied her, but nonetheless hoping that he would heed her plea. Mercifully, he stopped when he met the resistance from her grasp. Maelstrom came forward instead, passing a hand cautiously over the plane of Loki’s frame, hesitating as if trying to talk himself out of what he was going to do next. He then laid a tentative hand on the fallen man’s back along the line of his shoulder blades and pressed it gently against him for several seconds, his eyes closed in supreme concentration. Eventually, his brow creased and his mouth turned downwards in an intense frown.

“The Symbiote is correct,” Maelstrom sighed mournfully. “I can recover no energy from him. He is . . . deceased.”
It was a long, agonizing walk back to the spacecraft.

Although it was likely less than an hour before they reached the ship, the whole ordeal seemed much longer. Thor and Blackout were weighed down by the lifeless remains of Loki and Vermin, respectively, whose bodies they had insisted on carrying themselves. As they made their sluggish journey, Natasha noted that Venom and the Inhuman walked alongside Thor almost as if they were providing Loki a personal escort back to their vessel. The strange, blue woman -- Nebula, if she remembered correctly -- looked stoic, but even she cast several careful glances at the sorcerer’s body that she thought were unobserved. Natasha, however, was still keeping a wary eye on their surroundings, and there was not much that she missed. She even noted the sympathetic looks that crossed Stark’s face whenever he glanced back, in spite of the pain of his own injuries.

When they had reached their destination, Thor unburdened himself of his brother’s body, arranging it carefully on the dark, rocky surface of the moon while he opened the hatch to the ship. When inside, he utilized the communications capabilities to send a message back to Asgard. He slumped gracelessly in the pilot’s chair, awaiting a response that he knew would be minutes in coming, his brow creased as he considered all that had occurred since their landing. He shielded his eyes from the glow of the control panel and focused only on his breathing -- in and out, slowly and evenly. His brother might be dead this time, truly, but he had survived impossible odds not once but twice before. It was not out of the realm of possibility for this to be another near-death experience. However, he had carried Loki all the way back from the main compound, and he had felt no pulse and sensed no warmth that would indicate the presence of life. Yet the hope remained due to past experience: his frustrating, manipulative sibling was practiced at evading the jaws of death. It was the only consistency in his otherwise chaotic existence, and so surely he would appear any moment at his back and taunt him in that smooth, infuriating voice of his. Thor listened intently, tensing his upper body so that he could react instantly to the sound of his brother’s ridicule.

There was only silence.

After what seemed to be a lifetime of emptiness, a light began to flash on the console before him: an incoming message. Thor tapped the touch screen to acknowledge the signal, and he was greeted with the sound of the voice of Asgard’s gatekeeper, who informed him that the coordinates back to his home world were being transferred into the spaceship’s main computer. The blonde man sighed in response.

“Thank you, good Heimdall,” he replied, sullen. “We shall return presently.”

Thor switched off the display in order to soak up the delicious darkness for a few more moments before returning to the others. His treasured repose was cleaved, however, by the sounds of blatant shock from the others outside the vessel. Thor sprang up, fully prepared to step out onto the surface and have to convey both inner joy and outward indifference at seeing Loki alive. As he lowered his head to pass through the hatchway, he began to form a derisive quip in order to demonstrate to his brother that he had not been fooled this time by his supposed demise --and yet the sentiment died on his lips as he saw that the others were gathered not around the reincarnation of his sibling but rather the badly burned but still living body of the Juggernaut.

Bruce quickly retrieved some medical supplies from the interior of the craft and began to work on the enormous man who had fallen prone onto the clay-like earth. His eyes rolled back into the
cover of his eyelids, and he groaned out a breath that was as powerful as it was pitiful. Banner surveyed the mutant’s exposed flesh for a point which might be most suitable to inject the medication he had drawn up for both pain and sedation -- an enormous dose by the sight of it, but this was likely fitting for a being of Juggernaut’s size -- and the doctor finally settled upon a blackened but non-blistering area on his left bicep. Fortunately, there was enough time before the injection began to work for them to help him inside the craft under some of his own power or they might not have been able to move him into the ship at all; as it was, they were only able to advance him in slow, incremental steps. Eventually, however, he was settled into the bed of the sleeping quarters under the close watch of Phil Coulson.

Once the drugs had taken effect, the giant slept, although fitfully. Lying beside him on a flat surface and covered by two sterile, white cloths from head to foot were the bodies of Vermin and Loki. Thor chose not accompany the remains of his brother in the cargo area but rather sat at the navigation controls, lost in his thoughts while Nebula piloted the craft toward the Realm Eternal. Upon their arrival, they would each be treated to a warrior’s feast and a hero’s welcome.

Well, at least those who had survived.

Rather than spending the journey in silent grief, Tony suggested that Thor might find a more productive way to spend his time. “After all, ” Stark wheedled, “your brother did go to an awful lot of trouble to plant that secret message for you.”

“For me?” the Asgardian huffed. “I doubt it was all for my benefit.”

“Well, he mostly addresses you,” Tony shrugged. Bruce and Steve were helping him to remove the damaged plates of his suit, and they were sitting them aside so they could better assess his wounds. “You know, I could hook the relevant drive into the ship’s video feed if you’d like.” At that moment, Bruce forced a ball of gauze up into a gash under his ribcage, and the billionaire groaned like a cow giving birth. “Wait,” he gasped, “maybe I’ll have Bruce here do it, if I can tear him away from stuffing me like a Thanksgiving turkey! Ouchy-wow-wow, Dr. Mengele!” Tony slapped Bruce’s hands away and laid flat on the row of chairs behind the pilots’ seats, one arm draped over his forehead and his chest heaving. “I want morphine with a whisky back, and make it snappy!” he wheezed.

Bruce handed him a white pill and a paper cup of amber liquid.

“What’s this?” Tony challenged.

“Vicodin,” Bruce replied.

Stark swallowed the pill and then asked, “And this?” as he held up the liquid for closer inspection. He then proceeded to chug it down without waiting for an answer.

“Apple juice,” Bruce stated smugly.

“You bitch,” Tony berated him, crumpling up the cup and tossing it in Banner’s direction. It landed about three feet to the left of its intended target. “Here,” he whimpered melodramatically, holding out a small memory device with his left hand. “Play this message for the poor bastard before I am too weak to remember why it matters.”

“There, there, Scarlett,” Bruce ribbed him further. “Don’t despair! ‘Tomorra’ is anotha’ day!” he teased, cooling his face with an imaginary hand fan and imitating a thick, southern drawl.

“I’m so glad that things are back to normal,” Steve groaned sarcastically. He added an eye roll to
punctuate his displeasure.

Banner crossed over to the navigator’s control panel, the data drive pinched neatly between two of his fingers. “Are you sure you want to see this now?” He asked Thor forthrightly. “There is no reason that this can’t wait.”

Thor merely nodded and moved aside so that Bruce could plug in the drive.

“What file is it?” the physicist asked as he adjusted his glasses to accommodate the proximity of the screen.

“The last one,” Tony instructed without looking up.

As the file opened, an image of Thor’s erstwhile brother faded in on the screen. It was obvious that the video had been recorded quite recently as his skin was taut, the hollows of his cheeks were quite prominent, and the tone of his flesh was sickly yellow.

“This is my last communication,” the image said solemnly. ‘I have only these few proclamations.’ He centered the camera absently and then continued. ‘I, Loki of Asgard, intend to sacrifice my life in order to end the reign of Thanos. I hope that by the time you view this feeble confession that I have succeeded. Let it be known that what I am doing is not for the good of the universe or for my own redemption -- rather, what I do, I do for retribution. I seek my own vengeance against the being who has tormented, desecrated, and humiliated me, and I seek no reward other than my own satisfaction. From my brother, I seek no forgiveness, for I know that there is none that I deserve.”

The sibling in question was sitting silently during this soliloquy, but he did look up at the mention of himself.

“However, I am certain that you must have questions, Thor, and I am more than willing to give you the answers you desire. You have earned that much from me, at the very least.” Loki paused in his declaration to clear his throat and steady his hands. “It is true that I impersonated Odin to abscond with the Tesseract. I then used this object of power to lure Blackout from amongst the incarcerated on Midgard, where I knew him to be imprisoned. I was aware that I would need his assistance, regardless of our unhappy history, in order to delay the launch of Thanos’ armies with his talents. I also trust that when I share with him the coordinates of Algorant, which I have included with the various pieces of data herein, that he will be willing to return there for one final purpose.”

The Lilin was watching the playback impartially from a far corner of the room, but he had harkened to the sound of his name in the audio.

‘I wish for him to free those who remain in that deplorable place, if any, and then to destroy all the infrastructure that might remain upon it.’

Blackout seemed pleased but restrained regarding this appointment.

‘As for you, brother . . . well, I have indeed deceived you and your friends, but only in the pursuit of my own revenge. I hope that they may . . . well, not forgive me, exactly, but -- understand my point of view, as it were.’ He paused and then brought a hand to his chin in consideration. ‘I do not seek vindication for my crimes. The things that I have done have been seldom justified, sometimes terrible, and often beyond forgiveness. I only pray that you can exonerate me of my minor trespasses, even if you cannot absolve me of my more compelling crimes. You see, Thor, I have loved and hated you in equal measure since I have had the ability to understand the meanings of these words. My greatest failure, perhaps, is that I never told you this until the damage was
irreparable.

‘However, I find that I am not rife with apologies for most of what I have done. I am not overwhelmed with guilt and shame over my misdeeds, even the ones that have ended in the deaths of innocents. I simply do not feel in that capacity any longer. Suffice it to say that I am not sorry for the monster that I became. That would be a waste of sentiment, to be honest, because I had very little hand in that affair. I am remorseful, however, that this whole business could not have been simpler . . . neater, perhaps. Less agonizing for you, I suppose. I only have one request of you, if I you should deem me worthy of it: when all of this is over . . .’ Loki hesitated and looked down at his hands, which were folded neatly in his lap. He did not look up as he stated, ‘Please . . . take me home.’ He seemed more ashamed of this show of affection for the place where he had lived for most of life than of any of the evils of which he had been accused. With this final plea accomplished, the footage abruptly ended.

Very little conversation passed between members of the team during the remainder of their return. Tony eventually succumbed to the somnolent effects of his pain medication and snored softly, still draped over the row of seating. Several of the others also caught up on some well-needed rest, finding that their bodies were utterly exhausted as they came down from their adrenaline highs. Thor, however, was not one of them. He turned down the volume of the video so that Loki’s words were nearly a whisper, but he watched the footage at least twice more before they made a graceful landing back in Asgard.
Having falsely mourned his brother twice in the last few years, Thor found that he was having difficulty uncovering new depths of sorrow to mine now that the moment had actually come. He spent an entire night keeping a vigil over the ashen, lifeless body of his sibling, almost daring it to move in some way. It had not. The following night, he had carefully searched Loki’s form for any signs that it might be a rendered illusion -- a wavering of the edges, or perhaps a scar or freckle out of place. Again, there was nothing. By the third night, his supernatural stamina was beginning to fade, and the weariness became absolutely debilitating.

In light of his unhealthy fascination, Thor had even gone so far as to approach his father in search of irreputable confirmation of his brother’s demise. The request was most likely born of a false hope that perhaps his brother had slipped through the grip of death once more, that somehow he had overcome the loss of life force that utilizing the Tesseract had cost him. However, it was not to be. After a day’s journey, Odin had come to him and substantiated that which he had both hoped and feared: “I have been to see Hela, Queen of the Realm Beyond, and she has shown me proof. Loki’s name is written in the Book of the Dead.”

Returning to his sibling for one final time, the warrior slumped down into the velvet-covered cushion of the chair at Loki’s bedside. He surveyed the form of the man he had once known almost as an extension of himself: his always pale flesh was more blanched and the skin was just barely slack, making its surface seem smoother. His arms lay directly to each side of his torso, the long, delicate fingers curled slightly inward but still graceful in their repose, and his hair was fanned out simply around the crown of his head. It was the same position in which he had lain the previous day, and the one before that. And the one before that.

“Forgive me . . . brother,” Thor murmured. He settled on the familial term rather than his proper
name when that word stuck haltingly in his throat. His voice was rough from lack of use, but he knew that there were things that he needed to say, even if they were never to be directly heard. Loki had made his confessions, and now Thor would reply in kind. “I know that there is little about your fate that was born directly of my own deeds, and yet I still feel as if you are owed some amends. I have never been able to fully explain to myself why you tried to take my life. The only acceptable argument that I can summon is madness, that your mind was fractured by the trauma of learning you were the offspring of your family’s greatest enemy, and that this line of reasoning then led you to distort your past into a series of ugly, self-told untruths. You have always been possessed of a brilliant mind, which, when turned against yourself, must have been a formidable enemy. I believe it drove you mad. My sorrow stems from my inability to see your pain until it had hollowed you out and changed you irreparably.

“However, I cannot begin to express the torment that I feel over what you had to endure afterwards. Although I was deeply tormented by the transgressions you had done me, I would never have wished upon you the evils that you subsequently weathered. Loki --” The name slipped out before he was even aware, and it caused several tears to loose themselves from the swells within his eyes. “What you suffered was unimaginable. Such cruelty . . . to think that you had to survive amongst such darkness, such depravity is beyond anything that I could have contrived in my own imagination.” Thor reached out and grasped the closest hand of his brother’s lifeless body; it was cold and unyielding in his grip, and he had to call upon all of his emotional strength to prevent himself from dropping it in horror.

“I have only two thoughts which give me some comfort: first, that you have acquired your vengeance so your soul is at peace. Secondly -- and this thought is as soothing as it is absurd -- that in that place of horrors you finally achieved the one ambition upon which you had rested the entirety of your self-worth. In that place, for a time, you were King.” He laughed, but the sound was shallow and insincere. “Of a sort, at least,” he finished in a mournful whisper.

Thor squeezed the cool, pallid hand one last time, and, as he did, a single tear fell upon the rigid flesh. He brushed it away absently with his thumb, his throat constricting nearly completely as he choked back an unbidden sob. “You once told me that you were never my brother,” he finished, the tears flowing freely now. “I assure you that you are mistaken. You were my brother -- whether estranged, despised, admired, missed, or beloved -- every single day. Without fail. I never lost hope that you would see reason; not even when reason had deserted you.”

He summoned the nerve to press his brother’s hand one final time. After he did so, he straightened an edge of Loki’s collar that had been slightly askew, knowing that the sorcerer would have been displeased to be seen in such an unkempt state. Then he took his leave with one final, parting sentiment.

“I love you, brother,” Thor whispered. “Farewell.”

The silence that followed was the emptiest moment he had ever known.

***.*.***

On the fifth morning, Loki was laid to rest. It was a privilege for which Thor had to beseech the Allfather repeatedly, countering Odin’s argument that his brother had made himself an enemy of the realm with the case that he had, in fact, saved the universe. His father had agreed to a ceremony -- albeit grudgingly -- but he refused to make it a public commemoration. So, in the
misty hour before the Asgardian dawn, the god of Thunder had sailed his brother’s corpse out into the sacred pools surrounding Asgard. There were few in attendance from the city itself -- Lady Sif and the Warriors Three were present, although likely only in support of their close friend and comrade rather than the deceased himself. Steve, Phil, and Natasha stood apart from the Asgardians, entertaining their own internal dialogues during the service, although outwardly they were both reverent and silent. Further still in the background were Venom, Maelstrom, and Nebula, their faces solemn but proud as they surveyed the proceedings.

While Tony was not in attendance (he still remained in the healing rooms due to the seriousness of injuries) he did send a handwritten missive with Bruce, which the physicist read in his studious, calming tone:

“'I did not have either the pleasure or the displeasure of knowing Loki myself. I am familiar with some of his deeds, the sum total of which made up just a terribly small fraction of his exploits. Therefore, I am in no position to judge him, truthfully, since I cannot weigh the entirety of his merits against his mistakes. What I can say for certain is this: without all of his faults, his insecurities, and his petty grievances, the circumstances which led to his position as savior of our entire universe would never have occurred. For that, I am grateful.

'As I lie in this unbelievably comfortable bed (I mean it is like a little white, fluffy slice of heaven here, guys) . . .’” Bruce paused to give a pensive chuckle at Tony’s aside. “’ . . . I keep thinking about all that I have to return to, and how much I love and appreciate all that awaits me there. Without Loki, this would no longer be possible. The only gifts that I can offer to honor him are both my gratitude and a fitting sendoff.

‘On my planet, there was a great warrior who battled most of life to protect his culture and his home from being obliterated by invaders. He courageously tried to unite the native inhabitants of his land to rise up and resist those who tried to tame and subdue them. In the end, he failed. Sometimes nobility is not enough, you see -- instead, as I’m sure Loki would attest if he were here, you have to be not just passionate but also sneaky as hell.’” (Another small chuckle from Bruce).

“However, this warrior had an incredible talent that he shares with the man that we have assembled here to honor today: the gift of eloquent speech. I would like to dignify his memory with these words from Tecumseh, which I believe celebrate the last moments -- and the greatest achievement -- of Loki’s life:

*When your time comes to die, be not like those* 
 whose hearts are filled with fear of death, 
 so that when their time comes they weep and pray 
 for a little more time to live their lives over 
 again in a different way. 

*Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home.’”

Bruce paused to reseat his spectacles upon the bridge of his nose and then said humbly, “And then he scribbled down here at the bottom, ‘What? Am I not allowed to be sensitive?’”

The others snickered softly at this remark -- even the Asgardians.
There were grateful tears welling in Thor’s eyes as he watched the skiff that contained his brother’s body travel over the eternal falls beyond.

***.***.***

With Loki safely delivered into eternity, Thor had then approached Venom for any final thoughts or sentiments that Loki may have expressed in his last moments, but the Symbiote assured him that there were none that he could detect save for his final testimonial to Thanos. The Thunder god had thanked him solemnly and turned to depart, but, at the last minute, Venom had spoken to him in that raw, unsettling voice of his, telling him that he had heard no further words from Loki but that there had been a second entity with him in the twilight between the living and the hereafter. When pressed for what it might have said to him, the Symbiote confessed that it had said nothing. Rather that it had sang to the Asgardian -- a somewhat plaintive but beautiful tune, and that Loki’s spirit had followed it into the ‘worlds beyond.’

“It sang to him?” Thor snorted. It seemed an odd recourse for a spirit to use to welcome one such as Loki, one who had fallen out of favor with most of the Nine Realms and whose fate in the afterlife was far from certain.

The Symbiote nodded and closed his strange, pale eyes. It began rocking its head side-to-side in silence as if it heard a tune that was inaudible to the Asgardian. Perplexed, the warrior began to turn away once more, but then he heard a dry, rattling melody coming from the oily black being, its identity at first too rough to be recognizable. However, after several more bars of the tune met his ears, Thor’s hand subconsciously covered his mouth, and his eyes were replete with tears. He shook his head deliriously, fraught with disbelief.

The song had been their mother’s favorite.

***.***.***

Later, on the cool, nighttime sands of New Mexico, Nebula, the Inhuman and the Symbiote said their brief and unemotional farewells, taking the starship as their payment for services rendered as had been negotiated with the Allfather, but the Juggernaut, being of Earth, was left in the custody of S.H.I.E.L.D. His hearty constitution was making fast work of his wounds, but he was still almost docile as he was turned over to the agency for processing. Bruce had to be thoroughly assured that the mutant’s cooperation, along with his heroism on Titan, would be given appropriate consideration before he would agree to release him to their custody.

As for the mutant known as “Apocalypse,” he had not been seen since the final confrontation on Titan. There were no whispers of him even among the network of informants known to Blackout, who seemed to have one foot firmly in the world of intergalactic malfeasance. The mutant had receded into whatever dark corner of the universe he chose to spend his time, presumably to surface again at a moment of his own selection.

Tony Stark continued to be healed on Asgard for a time, and, afterwards he still sported a residual limp from which he might never completely recover. As for the other Avengers, they were emotionally shaken and a little worse for wear but still mostly in one piece. Once home, they were treated to yet another hero’s welcome, but, collectively, their minds were still on all through which
they had lived.

Agent May was the first to greet both Director Coulson and Natasha Romanov as they re-entered the Hub. She recounted the events that had occurred while they were away and was just beginning to tell them about the fate of the ‘Titanic’ when the loud rumble of a throat clearing interrupted her.

“That’s a great story, Agent May,” Clint Barton interjected from his position against a nearby wall. “But could you skip to the part where the agency gets baffled by the existence of ‘autopilot?’

The red-haired agent charged over to him and shamelessly wrapped him in a vise-like embrace, one hand cheekily mussing his short-cropped hair. “I see you have your mind back. Such as it is,” she tacked on, playfully punching him in the bicep.

His hands lingered just a little too long at her waist, and they both blushed as they parted. They turned to see that Phil and Melinda were sharing a knowing look. “We’ll let you two get reacquainted,” Phil said, his eyebrows wagging suggestively. “Agent May and I have one hell of a debriefing to conduct.”

“Thanks, boss,” Clint replied sheepishly. “And, uh, sorry about that multi-million dollar spaceship I destroyed!” He yelled after the pair.

“You’ll make it up to me,” Phil assured him without looking back. “We’ll need to have a very extensive door-to-door cookie sale in order to make up for our losses, and I’m sure you’ll look really cute in the outfit.”

Once they were more or less alone, Barton and Romanov found that they were suddenly out of things to discuss. “I, uh, assume that Lo—” (Clint still struggled with the name, it seemed.) “. . . Loki is . . . uh, no longer among the living.”

She nodded wearily. “I’m surprised to say that I’m a little sad about it, actually.”

Clint gazed at her wordlessly, but he seemed shockingly nonjudgmental about her revelation.

“But, now, seeing how your mind is your own again? It’s totally worth it.”

“I think Loki might disagree,” Barton smirked.

“No,” she stated, shaking her head. “I don’t think he would.”

Clint’s eyebrows rose questioningly.

“He did what he thought he had to do,” Natasha explained. “In the end, I think he was at peace with that decision.”

Barton did not reply, but instead wrapped her in another firm embrace. This time, however, its length had more propriety. “Well, I’m just glad you’re home.”

“Me, too,” she breathed into the comforting ridge of his shoulder. “Now,” she said teasingly as she released him. “Tell me all about those three days you spent hiding in the air ducts. That must be quite a ripping yarn.” She took his arm as they began to walk toward the barracks. Clint only laughed in response to her jest.

At that moment, it was the most perfect sound in the world.
The whole of existence was going to be a lot less interesting, the devil thought to himself as he popped a cluster of pomegranate seeds into his mouth. He chewed listlessly, sucking aimlessly at the juice of the fruity buds on his tongue as he contemplated the implications of the situation. Loki was dead -- had died, in fact, ridding the known universe of Mephisto’s former Lord and Master -- and yet, he was feeling downright mournful about the whole turn of events. In truth, the way things had gone had been mostly to his benefit, since he was freed of his contracted servitude to that graceless Titan who always believed that the best way to beat your enemy was literally to beat your enemy. It was so boorish to use blunt force to overcome the competition -- so graceless and unrefined. Loki, on the other hand, had perfectly understood the gentlemanly sport of a classic battle of wits, where the winner simply walks away smug and the loser loses mostly just his dignity.

Eternity had just become something dangerously close to dull.

Mephisto shifted his position on the large chair in which he was reclining, this time throwing his legs over one of the armrests and drooping his neck over the other, hands folded on his chest in exasperation. It wasn’t even a fair ending, really, he continued in his head, because Loki had allowed him his life in return for what was a much less proportionate amount of debt. Yes, that business with the Fire Giants had been ugly, but it had really not been that much of a chore to contain them in the end. If it were not for the Asgardian’s warning, however, he would be dead -- or possibly even reduced to an impossibly dense clump of sentient matter in a neighboring universe. Either thought made him shiver with abhorrence. Instead, he was lounging in Hela’s throne room, waiting for her to deign him worthy of her presence. He secretly hoped that when she drifted in and found him draped indifferently over her favorite chair that she at least showed him a little of her legendary temper to help replace the vacancy left by his favorite troublemaker.

When dozens more minutes had passed (and he could feel his left leg losing circulation from the thigh down, by the way), he sat up again and stood slowly, stepping lightly on the numb leg as he paced the room, contemplating some of the art pieces with which the Guardian of the Dead had decorated her audience chamber. Most were abstract with a disturbingly vibrant color pallette, the swirls of various hues almost dizzying in their boldness, and the demon found that studying the works too closely was only causing him a nauseating headache. As he stepped back from the canvas that he was currently examining, he nearly collided with a polished marble lectern; its surface contained some decorative carving without being ostentatious, the glassy, pearlescent surface simple but breathtaking. Lying open upon its face was a thick, leather-bound book with a well-worn cover, and it was open to a page near its end.

Mephisto studied the volume carefully, sweeping a curious hand over its wordless front before further surveying its contents. He moved aside the black silk marker that delineated the page, only to find that it contained a list of names, each one written boldly in a large, ornate script.

“The Book of the Dead,” he breathed, awestruck, as he scanned the words hastily. He took only one crafty glance over his shoulder to check for any observers before he waved his fingers over one of the last names in the record. The writing unwound, and a trail of ink wormed lazily from the paper until it formed a tangled orb between his first two fingers. As he pressed the digits together, the line of ink disappeared in a puff of earthy smoke.

“Well, well,” he murmured to himself. “The future just became interesting again.”
Chapter End Notes

So, there it is. Well over a year's worth of work finally concluded. Drop me a line and let me know what you thought of it, or ask me questions about the parts that were unclear, if you'd like. I have worked so, so hard on this, and I'm rather proud of it, actually, so I would love to get some feedback on what others think of it. If you think there were parts that could have been better or more robust, I am open to those comments as well, although I'm not sure that I will go back and revise anything now that it's out there. It doesn't seem fair to those who read it as it developed. But, who knows? Anything can happen. I am also not seriously developing any sequels at this time, although I have a vague idea that I may explore somewhere down the road. For the near future, I think I might focus on a story about Asgard that would not take place in the same universe as this one (i.e., nothing in this story would affect the characters in that story). Not sure how quickly I will begin work on that.

Thanks for reading.

Praxidicae
Tag additions, no new content

I did just a few tag adjustments on this fic as I am gearing up for a Thor and Loki heavy prequel (somewhat) focusing on the lead up to Ragnorok. It will likely reframe the relationship between them, although I cannot say by how much currently. Needless to say, these two are like halves of a whole and shall be treated as such.

Praxidicae

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!